

“ When I was younger, more free, and less frantic, I used to admire movie scenes where the teenage character wakes up, feeling happy and energized to start a new day. Oh, well, mine usually starts with a bombing alarm, and I’m only 16.”

– From “City Scars” (see Morgan 2018a), in the online platform *Fasila*, by Tamader Morgan (pen name of Tamader Issa)



Tamader Issa standing outside her language school, Master School Center

Tamader Issa calls herself a creative educator. At 24, Ms. Issa is a prolific author, writing for *Fasila*, an online platform for digital storytelling, and for her own blog, *TamaderReads*. In fact, creative writing is so important to her that she says it saved her life—literally. A desire as a youth to escape her own reality in war-torn Libya led her to find her voice by writing poetry and fiction in English. However, her passion for the English language started much earlier.

As far back as she can remember, Ms. Issa has been fascinated with American and British popular culture. She admits that her English reflects what is often referred to as “Disney language,” acquired from watching movies on the Disney Channel and the Arabic language channel MBC 3. She also reminisces about the joy she felt singing songs and playing games in her primary-school English classes that complemented her learning. Yet she confesses that, in middle school, when the focus of her classes turned to grammar, she lost interest for a while, at least academically.

“I hated the idea of watching someone explaining things to me on a whiteboard. I wanted to immerse myself in the language,” she said during a recent virtual interview.

Fortunately, young-adult literature was in its heyday when Ms. Issa was in high school, with series like *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* filling the shelves of international bookstores and local libraries. Her mother, a librarian, took notice of her keen interest in this genre and bought her the popular novels in the original English, rekindling her passion. And she could take refuge in these books when war broke out in earnest in 2011. In her *Fasila* post “How Libya Became My Muse,” she wrote, “. . . my bedroom became my asylum—a place where I began experiencing reading avidly for pleasure and witnessing art as I immersed myself in a world of my own through the magic of words” (Morgan 2018b).

It was also in the relative safety of her bedroom that she began to write in English as a creative outlet. She was trying to reproduce the voices, expressions, and grammar from the novels, movies, and vlogs (blogs with video content) of that time. “My voice wasn’t

clear at first,” she explained. “Most of my characters in my novels were American, not Libyan or Muslim. What am I trying to say? I was struggling with my identity because of the war. I got used to the clashes, but the fact that you don’t get to live a normal life and you can’t live in the present time is terrible.”

It was around this time that Ms. Issa decided to become an English teacher and entered the University of Tripoli in her hometown. Although she comes from a family of teachers, teaching wasn’t an obvious career choice for her, due to the relatively low pay and status. And creative writing was completely out of the question, other than as a hobby. She soon became a top student in her class and, eventually, the first English teacher in her family.

At university, she encountered professors who were published authors. She showed her writing to them; they encouraged her to continue writing, and she subsequently found her voice. She began to write poetry as well as fiction, recording everything that was happening in her life. She explained, “Having the war change my present, I decided to go into the past. It was difficult to express myself. My characters became Libyan, people who were lost, not knowing what to do with their lives, not necessarily because of war, but by different things. I identified with them.”

Upon graduation in May 2017, Ms. Issa volunteered to teach writing workshops at the English Speakers Club in Libya. She noticed the need for effective writing courses and offered up her talent. She said that many Libyan English teachers are not comfortable teaching writing and thus avoid it, making this a challenging skill for students to acquire. Despite this fact, or perhaps because of it, one hundred students attended her first workshop on how to write a structured essay. Many of her students were aspiring doctors and academics who needed a high score on their International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam in order to study abroad. “I helped them to improve in a very short amount of time,” she said. “I even had some students who want to be writers!”



Ms. Issa's special classroom wall with English literature and pop-culture references at Master School Center

In the fall of 2019, Ms. Issa and her father opened Master School Center, a language school where she teaches creative writing, speaking, general English, and IELTS-preparation classes to groups of about a dozen young adults and adults. At the center, she also runs an after-school program for children, ranging from 7 to 13 years of age, who spend an average of three hours every day getting homework and exam help from teachers and college students. She maintains that a successful classroom does not necessarily need to be equipped with the most recent technological devices. Often, a whiteboard and a marker are all she needs.

Like any other teacher in Tripoli, she finds that every day, teaching can be a struggle. It isn't easy to go to work with continuous power cuts due to the war and the bombing taking place almost everywhere. And yet the mission of maintaining high spirits while teaching is Ms. Issa's number-one priority. Regarding the bombing, she explained, "We got used to it; it's always in the back of our minds. When the windows are shaking or something breaks due to the force, we keep going."

She realized she had to be more positive in her class so that her students could concentrate on learning. "I need to use alternative ways to give my students the full learning experience. That's why I turned to creative writing to help them find their way, their voice," she said. "I help them use their creativity to speak their minds to help them cope with the war."

To encourage self-expression, Ms. Issa employs techniques such as brainstorming and critical thinking to stimulate discussions in which her students feel safe sharing their experiences. In addition to bringing her own published texts to class, she has her students look at and bring in inspiring Instagram and vlog posts, YouTube videos, and quotes. Then, they start the writing process, writing poetry and short stories for the first time. In addition, she prompts her students to write stories in creative ways, such as a "flash fiction" short story of less than a thousand words, and she publishes the stories on her blog.

Ms. Issa's blog has made waves around Tripoli since she started it in 2018. As a bibliophile, she wanted to let people know that reading books is not just an activity for bookworms, but can also be appealing for younger generations. Her message is that reading is the essence of life. In her posts, written under her pen name, Tamader Morgan, she reviews books that she is excited about and tells readers where they can find them.

She also writes for an online platform in Libya called *Fasila* (Arabic for "comma"). Her articles and short stories relate the challenge of maintaining high spirits and creativity in her writing classes amid circumstances of terror and danger. In a post called "Teaching English in a Warzone," she wrote, "Being in a small classroom with no running power or AC, breathing in nothing but humid and gunpowder-and-fuel flavored air is the finish line of one's positivity." She continued, "Every



A close-up of the classroom wall

chance I got to lighten up the mood was never taken for granted—even when a rocket bomb strikes [nearby], I make a joke and continue the lesson. . . . Thankfully, teaching English this summer has definitely saved the last bit of hope left in me; walking into a room full of ambitious and strong students is the best motivation any teacher could ask for. I always end up learning from their strength and patience” (Morgan 2019). At the time of this writing, she and other young writers for *Fasila* are doing a COVID-19 storytelling campaign to help Libyan youth through the pandemic.

“I take care of my students,” she said. “I nurture them to be the best they can be. That’s what education is about—helping them with their voice, helping them have more to say and to appreciate what they have. Most of my students feel free to talk about their depression or the inability to sleep or work because of a power cut. They aren’t afraid to tell me.”

When asked about the future of teaching in Libya, Ms. Issa said she foresees big changes in the next decade. She believes that being creative will be an important element and that, therefore, more focus on training new teachers in using creative teaching techniques is crucial. She also believes that learner autonomy will play a central role and advises members of the younger generation to invest in their own learning. When asked about teaching during the pandemic, she said that she is doing one-on-one online teaching and lectures.

In the meantime, Ms. Issa posts her own writing and shares helpful articles about writing skills on her blog to offer informative content to her followers. She thinks that teachers are models and that they should set a good example for their students. She wants her students to know that learning English can

be as fun as picking up a book or participating in their favorite English teacher’s class.

As this article was being completed, in September 2020, Ms. Issa was awarded a highly competitive Chevening Scholarship to study for a master’s degree in Creative Writing and Education at Goldsmiths, University of London, in the United Kingdom. This scholarship is awarded by the U.K. government through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to promote leadership around the world.

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Photos by Tamader Issa

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Wendy was a 2017–2018 English Language Fellow in Medellín, Colombia, and an English Language Specialist in Jordan and Tunisia, where she trained outstanding Libyan teachers such as Tasneem, and virtually in Mexico. She is a consultant who designs education programs for NGO development programs and creates EFL curriculum and teacher-training programs, specializing in teaching young learners, community-based education, and low-resource classrooms.