

Episode Transcript for 924. Walaa Mouma Returns (Part 1) PhD Studies in Wales & Teaching English for Refugees



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Hello listeners, welcome back to Luke's English Podcast. This is episode number 924, and it's the first part of a two-part episode.

Part two will arrive in just a few days, so you're getting two episodes in one week this time. Yes, I have decided to make two parts from this one instead of publishing one massive episode. In this particular instance, I've decided to divide it into two episodes.

So part one is this one, part two will arrive in a few days, so two episodes in a week for you this time. So let me tell you about this episode. So, okay, a bit of background context.

A few years ago, I think it was four years ago, 2021, beginning of 2021, I did a competition. The competition was called Why I Should Be on Luke's English Podcast, or WISPOLEP for short. Long-term listeners will remember that, I hope.

And in the competition, basically, I asked listeners to send in short recordings of themselves, talking for a minute or so, and explaining why they should be on Luke's English Podcast. I made a short list of recordings, played them in an episode, and listeners were able to vote for the person they thought should be interviewed in an

episode of the podcast, right? And I ended up with about, actually, how many people? I ended up with about six sort of finalists, really. But the overall winner, the one who got more votes than anyone else, was Wala from Syria.

And she came on the podcast in episode number 703. It is number 703, isn't it? Let me just be sure about that. Yes, it was episode number 703.

And if you haven't heard that episode, then it would be a good idea to go and listen to it because it's a really interesting one. Wala has an inspiring story, first of all, about how she improved her English to a really good level, largely on her own, with her own motivation, her own methods. She really focused her attention on her English, and the results were really good.

And she gives lots of tips and advice on how to do it in the way that she did it. But also, she talked about the different challenges that she faced at that time, when she was a student. And that was because it was during the period of the civil war in Syria.

It's generally called a civil war, although Wala has a different way of describing it. She says it was a revolution, a people's uprising in response to brutal treatment by the regime at the time. You must have heard all about it right in the news.

So while I was living in Syria, near Damascus, at that time, and she faced all sorts of challenges, she was displaced from her home, she had to move away, because it was far too dangerous to stay where she lived, she lost loved ones, she lived in almost constant fear of danger. And I mean, she talks about it in part two of this episode, she talks a lot more about it. But anyway, she gave some

details about the difficulty that she faced, and how she in the midst of all of that, managed to really double down on her studies, especially her English, get her English to a really good level, and get some academic success at university in Syria.

And then ultimately, she was able to apply for a scholarship to study in the UK through a government scholarship programme. And she applied as a refugee, that was the way that she was able to get out of that difficult, horrible situation. And she went to the UK and ended up studying in Coventry at Warwick University, which is where she was when I spoke to her about four years ago, in episode 703.

And almost exactly four years ago, in fact, to the time when I interviewed her again, just a few weeks ago. So yeah, she's back on the podcast, she's come back on the podcast four years later, to give us an update. And to talk about what she's been doing.

And so yes, two part, a two part episode. In this first part, we talk mainly about Wala's studies. She was doing a master's degree in TESOL, that's teaching English to speakers of other languages. So we talked about what happened with that and her progress with her master's course, and then how she wanted to do a PhD.

And she is doing a PhD now. But she talks about the process of applying for that PhD, and the fact that she realised that she needed a bit more experience before she could really focus on a PhD properly. So we talk about her academic journey from her master's degree, through to finding exactly what she wanted to do a PhD doctorate about.

And she's inspired by her own journey and inspired by the plight of her people, the Syrian people, and also the plight of people in similar situations, people who've been displaced from their homes, who have been welcomed in the UK, as part of the asylum seeking process, especially in Wales, where she now lives. She's moved from England from Warwick, where she was living, actually Coventry, which is very close to where I grew up in my younger days, which is kind of a nice coincidence. But she's moved now to Wales, in the UK.

And it's this is a country that does welcome asylum seekers, people seeking refuge, refugees. And she realised that this is what she's most passionate about. And this is what she wanted to focus her academic studies on.

So she talks about, yes, her academic journey, and the steps that she needed to take in order to secure funding, also to get the relevant kinds of work experience that you need in order to do further volunteer work, which informed her studies that she wanted to do for her PhD doctorate. All of it is based around her passion, which is helping asylum seekers to learn English and to integrate, and also helping the system, helping the academic system, helping the academic world to understand the best way to teach English to these people who have a very unique situation. So that's what you're going to get in this first part, all of the stuff about Walla's academic experiences and her journey towards studying for her PhD in the UK.

So plenty of details about the academic world in the UK, applying for scholarships, getting funding, getting work experience, and the specific challenges of teaching English to refugees. So that's part

one. Part two, which, as I mentioned, will be published in a few days, focusses on Syria.

And now that the regime has changed, because in December, Bashar al-Assad left Syria, and so that's the end of the regime, as you may have seen in the news. So things have changed in Syria now. And because of that, Walla feels that she's able to talk about what happened in Syria more freely.

Previously, when she was on the podcast in episode 703, she felt a bit guarded. She felt that she couldn't really talk about what was going on. She didn't want to endanger her family.

She didn't want to sort of reveal too much. It was a very tricky time, and she couldn't say too much. But now that that's over, I think Walla was very keen to come back on the podcast and talk about what really went on and what was really happening.

So that's going to be part two, which will, as I said, arrive in a few days. And you'll hear about her account of living in Syria during those difficult times. So that's going to be part two.

Right now, let's focus on Walla's continued journey, her life in the UK and her academic journey as well. So that's enough of an introduction from me. Let's now get into the conversation with Walla from Syria, back on the podcast again.

And here we go. Just to quickly let you know about how I moved first to Swansea. Like you said, I was studying at Warwick.

That was in 2020 until 2021. And then I was able to find a really good job opportunity there in my area, which is East Hall. But then I met my fiancé.

Back then, he was my fiancé, and he lives in Wales. But then I decided I'll move to Wales because it's better to stay closer to my fiancé. And now we got married.

So that's the reason why I moved from England to Wales. And it's just amazing to be in Wales. I first moved to Cardiff and now to Swansea.

And it's amazing, of course, you get to be in this bilingual country. So I can speak a little bit of Welsh. Dwi'n wala, dwi'n siarad Cymraeg.

Actually, dwi'n dysgu Cymraeg, which means I'm learning Welsh. So it's amazing to be in this country. You see bilingual signs everywhere you go.

People are really nice and lovely, of course, similar to people in England. Swansea is amazing because it's by the beach. You can have lovely walks around.

There's Mumbles, which is really close to my university campus, which is amazing. It's a rather small city, but it's really lovely, calm and peaceful. I think it's always lovely to be here in Swansea.

Of course, it was also beautiful to be in Cardiff, but Swansea is a lot calmer, more peaceful, smaller, which is what I really like. I feel it's similar to Coventry in terms of like being small and calm and it's just lovely to be here. What else? Yeah, I think that's great.

It's really cool that you're learning Welsh. And yeah, I don't know if everyone out there knows so much about Wales and the fact that, yeah, it is obviously a bilingual country and people speak Welsh. And as you say, street signs are written in Welsh and you see a lot of Welsh around you.

And you're actually, so you've been learning Welsh then. That's great. Yes, on Duolingo, just a little bit, really.

But now I'm encouraged to learn more. Maybe I can tell you about this more later when we speak about my PhD research, but now I'm more encouraged to learn it properly. I just speak little, you know, just a few words, really.

Something like boreda, prynhawnda, things like that. Do you find it very different to English? Yes, it is. But I like it because there are some sounds that are similar to my native language.

So for example, the ch sound, which I find it really easy to pronounce. It couldn't be the same for someone who's English, for example. Because I am able to pronounce it properly, I feel like I'm connected to this language.

So a word like dioch, for example, dioch yn fawr, thank you very much. It's really a lovely phrase that I like to say most often here when I'm on campus. And sometimes when I get on the bus and I'm about to get off the bus, I'd say, oh, dioch, dioch yn fawr to the driver.

And I feel like, you know, this sense of belonging that I am able to speak a few phrases or sentences in Welsh, which is nice. And

you've got really good pronunciation as far as I can tell. I mean, I don't speak Welsh myself, but you know, I've heard quite a lot of Welsh over the years.

I used to live with some Welsh people at university and I used to listen to them speaking Welsh to each other and speaking Welsh on the phone. And it is interesting linguistically that it's so different to English and that there's really no connection at all. Every now and then you hear little English words popping up when people speak Welsh, but Welsh itself has almost no connection to English, which I find so fascinating.

Yeah. Yeah. It's a Celtic language.

Okay. So, well, what, what's, what have you been doing over the last four years then? So you talked, you just mentioned how you'd moved. Congratulations on getting married, by the way.

I should say that as well. Did you, did you do that in, in, in Britain then? Did you get married over there? Yes. Yeah.

Okay. Here in Britain, we had our engagement in Cardiff and, well, well, actually the wedding was in Cardiff as well, but now we live in Swansea. We both study at Swansea University as well.

It's funny how I love the story because while I was doing my first master's, he was continuing his undergraduate studies. But when I started my second master's, he did his first master's and now we started our PhD together and both at Swansea University, which is interesting really. Lovely.

So last time we spoke, you had been living in England for four months and you were studying at Warwick University. You were doing a master's. What was your master's in at that time? In TESOL, teaching English to speakers of other languages.

Yeah, which I'm, I'm happy to say I completed that master's with a distinction. And then well, actually I think just six months or seven months after I started that master's course, I was able to get a volunteering opportunity with Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre. So I was doing some English tutoring to refugees and asylum seekers there.

And when I was about to finish my master's course, I was able to secure, actually I was planning to apply for a job opportunity that came up there. And it was almost guaranteed, not 100% guaranteed, but of course, when you have work, when you've worked there, it's very likely that you will get that job opportunity. But because I met my husband around that time, I decided to move outside England and just come here to Wales.

So if you remember, I told you my plan was to apply for a PhD at the time. And as I was filling out my application for the PhD, I realised that I didn't have, at the time, like a clear idea about what I wanted to do in my PhD. And I didn't want just to, you know, just do a PhD for the sake of getting that title of a doctor, you know, it doesn't mean anything to me.

I wanted to do something that's meaningful, that's going to help people. And because I sought asylum in the UK, and I became a refugee, and it was impossible for me at the time to go back home, it was difficult to do something connected to the Syrian context. So I was, it wasn't possible at all for me to do something like a PhD

idea focused on the Syrian context, when I was away, you know, thousands of miles away from Syria, and things were complicated.

So I decided to give myself some time to maybe gain some more work, some more relevant work experience, maybe experiment with the tools and methods that I gained from my master's course before thinking about a PhD project, which was like a more, like, it was a sound idea, I thought. Yeah. And when I moved to Wales, in Cardiff, of course, you know, in this country, you can't just like start working in some, and you're using your qualification or certificate, you need to gain some relevant work experience.

And to be able to get that work experience, I don't know, I don't know, it's like a vicious circle, really want to work in your area, but you're unable to do that unless you have relevant work experience. But how are you going to get that relevant work experience in the first place? It's difficult, isn't it? So that's why I decided I'll just get anything like a job on the side, so I'm able to secure myself financially. And in parallel with that, I started volunteering different and several charities in Cardiff, in terms of like ESOL.

So this way, I'll be able to get some relevant work experience, like volunteering experience, which will hopefully enable me from getting a job opportunity in that area. Yeah. So you got yourself a job, and you were volunteering.

And this is before you continued your studies. So you decided that you needed to kind of get this, as you say, relevant work experience. And you did it by volunteering, while also working.

So what was the job that you were doing? It was probably just some... Yeah, so it was a receptionist at a doctor's surgery in

Cardiff. And that was helpful, actually, because it kind of refreshed my vocabulary in the medical field. Of course, they were just like basic words, but that was helpful.

And I had this contact with patients almost on a daily basis, and people who worked in the surgery, doctors, nurses, etc. So that was helpful, at least in terms of keeping me active, in contact with people, practising the language on a daily basis. So that was helpful.

And like I said, alongside that, I volunteered with charities in Cardiff. And that was the Welsh Refugee Council and Oasis Cardiff. So in Oasis Cardiff, I was delivering face-to-face classes to ESOL refugees and asylum seekers.

And in the Welsh Refugee Council, I was delivering online sessions like ESOL tutoring to refugees and asylum seekers as well. And that was really, really interesting, because I got this first-hand experience of working with refugees and asylum seekers from Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre. And now that moved into different charities in Wales.

And this is really interesting, like exploring the asylum-seeking context in Wales. It's really unique and different from that in England. And when you work with this vulnerable group of people, and I was one of them because I am a refugee myself, it felt really interesting.

It's a combination of different feelings, being able to help this group of people and, you know, bring about a positive change in their life is something that I can't put into words. It's something really, you know, it gives a sense of purpose and, you know,

contributing a meaningful change in people's lives. So I did that for almost like a year.

And then I was able to get a job opportunity at Cardiff and Vale College. But that wasn't in ESOL, because like I said, it's really hard here, you need to make your way up the ladder really, really slowly in this country. So I first worked as a support learning assistant at Cardiff and Vale College.

And I was lucky because some of the students were Arabic native speakers, and they struggled with English. So I almost like went above and beyond my job thingy. So, yeah, my job description.

So instead of just like, you know, doing my job of assisting the students during the class, I told the tutor, oh my God, she's amazing, Lisa, I wish that she would be listening to this podcast. She would be very happy to hear this. She's amazing.

This is your tutor who you were supporting in that role? Yeah, okay. So I told Lisa, you know, for this, like one student who speaks Arabic as a first language, and he actually struggled in English because he was new in the country. I said, since we sometimes, like, you know, leave class one hour earlier before the end time of the whatever, the college time, I said, do you mind if I spend this one hour with this student offering extra support in English? And this is something outside my job description.

But you know, I just wanted to do it because I liked it. And she said, Yes, well, of course, you can do it. And that's why she kind of like, she gave me more support, because she could see that I was trying my best to go above and beyond.

And because of that, I think I gained like more experience than I was able to, in no time, I was able to build connections and network in the college. And I remember that, oh, actually, I forgot to tell you something, I was doing this job through an agency. So I wasn't contracted with the college.

And that's why when like, for example, there was like an open day in the college, and they needed support in other departments, I was able to secure some like one or two days of work with other departments within the college. And in that open day, I worked for two days for another department called the Skills Centre. And in this Skills Centre, they offer support, academic support to students across the entire college, in numeracy and literacy.

And when I met the manager of that department, I said, really interested in the job that you're doing here in the Skills Centre, and love to become part of this centre in the future in some sort of form, you know. And then he told me, well, actually, we need to employ and recruit people soon. So if you're interested, maybe we can have a chat about it and see how it goes.

And then he asked me about my qualifications, my work experience, etc. And he was able to give me the job through the agency. So I worked as a learning and skills coach.

So for me, that was the transition in the college. So I started as a learning assistant, and then I became a learning and skills coach. And that was like a bit higher than a support learning assistant, because as a coach, I was able to assist more learners from different departments.

And the brilliant thing was being able to support learners from the ESOL department, the department where there are learners who learn English as a second language, and they're refugees, asylum seekers, or people who came here through a spousal visa, for instance. So I was working with students across the entire college in different departments, offering not just like ESOL support, like I said, for the ESOL department, but also literacy, numeracy skills, and like writing, academic writing sessions for higher level students, things like that, which was really interesting, because I was able to develop to learn, because at Cardiff and Vale College, we have this opportunity of, you know, continuing professional development where you're given resources, training opportunities to attend conferences and things like that. I'm sorry.

You have so many things to say. It's, it's amazing. And it's great to listen to you talking so fluently.

Well, I mean, I mean, right, so, so you talked about that, that vicious circle of being stuck in a situation where you like, I need to find a job, but in order to get the job, I need the experience. But it's interesting the way you kind of worked your way out of that by essentially, as you said, kind of going above and beyond the basic job description each time you're, you're, yeah, the kind of the role that you had was sort of, sort of defined, but you decided to try and do extra work, which is very sort of, you know, that shows a lot of initiative to start doing those things. And, and also you're driven by just simply your, your kind of passion for the, for the work, which allowed you to get that extra experience, which then, you know, made it possible for you to, to progress and get other jobs and so on.

So can I just ask you about teaching English to, to, to refugees in Wales? What is it that's sort of unique about them as students? So from the point of view of the teacher, you've got them in your class. What is it that they sort of, how do you have to adapt your teaching for, for students like that? Yeah, that's a really interesting question. Just to clarify, like I said, I was a learning and skills coach.

So a coach, a coach's role is slightly different from that of a lecturer. So I wouldn't be teaching a class, rather we had like several, like several kinds of support that we offered. It's either called in-class, okay, so several types of support, like I said, one of them is in-class support.

So I go to a class where there's a teacher leading the class and I will be doing in-class support, but this one is specifically for ESOL students. Another service that we, oh, that's the word service, I forgot the word. Another service that we had was called drop-in, drop-in centre.

So basically students can drop in at any time and ask for support. So I had shifts during my day. So say, for example, I start from eight to five, I wouldn't be doing the same thing during the entire day, rather for two hours, I'm doing in-class support, for two hours, I'm doing drop-in centre, for two hours, I'm doing online support, for two hours, I'm coaching academic writing for higher level classes.

So in these classes, like you said, what's unique about these students? The unique thing about these students is their educational background. So some students, like say, for example, an ESOL classroom, some students in the same classroom maybe have had really high level of education in their first country, which

make them, you know, able to adapt to this new environment. So they're able, if you say, for example, you take this as homework, they know what homework is and what they need to do with it.

If you say, please take notes, they know what note-taking is and what they need to, you know, write or not write, something like that. But other students maybe had little or no literacy education in their first language. So they struggle with basic things of like, they don't know how a classroom runs, for example, they don't know what an interaction between the teacher and peers looks like, which is really difficult to know.

And actually, this group of learners is the group of learners that I got attached to the most. And they were the students who gave me this passion towards pursuing a PhD that focusses on them. So this group of learners is referred to as LESLA learners.

So LESLA is an organisation which is Literacy, Education and Second Language Learning for Adults. So that's the name of the organisation. But later, it has become more of a learner profile in the ESOL context, not just ESOL, because this is a term that you can use to describe a learner who's trying to learn a second language, and they have little or no literacy education in their first language.

So this could be a Syrian student trying to learn English or like a French student who hasn't got literacy education in his French and is trying to learn English, for example. So it's not just about English learners. When you say literacy, we're talking about reading and writing skills.

Yes. So usually, like this is a vulnerable group of learners who needs extra support. So you can imagine that refugees and asylum seekers, of course, have their own challenges and difficulties and problems.

LESLA learners have these challenges, in addition to other more challenges related to their literacy education and their first language, which is hindering their progress with their learning of a second language. To me, this has become something that I'm like fighting for now. And I'll tell you how actually how this passion developed towards this group of students.

Like I said, I was working as a learning and skills coach. So our department is like called a learning centre. So once we were contacted by an ESOL tutor saying they are developing a project that gives extra support to LESLA learners, but they wanted one coach from our centre to have this kind of like liaising between the two departments.

So when they refer LESLA learners to our department, they want to know the progress that these LESLA learners are making. And they also wanted to offer this coach who is willing to volunteer to be part of this project. They wanted to offer this coach more support, more training in knowing how to deal with LESLA learners.

So of course, as usual, I said, yes, please, please, I want to do this. So I volunteered to do that role, which is like an extra task that I had to do as a learning and skills coach. And that was the opportunity that gave me training in how to work with LESLA learners, gave me this firsthand experience of following up with all LESLA learners that get referred to the learning and skills centre.

So that project gave me this opportunity to work with LESLA learners more. And I became really passionate about working with this group of learners and helping them. To an extent that even, you know, to an extent that I even did a course called Politics in Sanctuary.

And at the end of that course, we were given this opportunity to do any project, whether it's a letter that we want to send to people in charge to talk about a policy that we need to be amended or a change that we want it to happen. Or it's either a letter or a video or a speech in the Parliament. So I actually opted in for a speech in the Parliament.

In Wales, it's called the Senedd. I prefer to say the Welsh word for it. So that's the Welsh Assembly in English.

Yes. Right. Yeah.

Yeah. Okay. In Welsh, it's the what, sorry? The Senedd.

So that's the S-E-N-E double D. Interesting. Sounds a bit like Senate. Yes.

But it's pronounced with the, like the T-H-E. Say it again for me. Senedd.

Senedd. Okay. Here we go.

You're speaking Welsh now. Yeah. And in English, that's known as the Welsh Assembly, right? Or the Parliament.

Welsh Parliament. Okay. So you chose to focus on a speech by a politician in the Welsh Parliament or the Senedd, right? Oh, yeah.

So for this politics course, this Sanctuary in Politics course, which is offered to refugees and asylum seekers, you take this course and at the end of the course, you need to do like a project so you pass that course. And you're given several possibilities of what project you want to do. It's either a letter that you can send to people in politics or a video that you want to create and send to people who can bring about a positive change related to asylum seekers or refugees in Wales.

Or they'll book us, they have a plan to book us a slot in the Parliament so we deliver speech in the Parliament. You actually go to Parliament and actually address the members of Parliament there? Yes. So I decided to do that one.

Really? It's not like a big speech. It's just a two minute speech, a very short one, because you can imagine there are so many other people on the course and they have to be booked in for that slot. So I decided to dedicate my speech to address this group of learners, Leszla, because they're a vulnerable group of people and they're those people who can't speak for themselves.

Because like I said, these are people who are trying to learn a second language, they haven't got literary skills in their first language, they're struggling. And usually Leszla learners who struggle the most are still at pre-entry level. So they can't speak for themselves, you know.

So it is important to speak for them. So in that speech, I spoke about them and I said, well, there's a brilliant initiative and a project

that was used and implemented at Cardiff and Vale College that I think is an example to be followed by other colleges in Wales. And I also sent that, actually, I also created like a presentation slides on the same topic and I sent it to different charities and a college here in Swansea, just hoping that they can, you know, think about this or, you know, at least you put this idea in their mind.

So, you know, that was the kind of the trigger that made me so passionate about ESOL, specifically for Leszla learners. Yeah. Yeah.

OK. So previously, when you were signing up for your PhD before, you stopped and you thought, hold on a minute, I feel like I need to take some other steps before I start doing this. You've just told us the story of the steps that you took before finally signing up for that PhD.

Right. I mean, it's pretty intense. Like the work that you did, the experience you got and the way that you apply yourself.

I mean, it's, you know, you've got so much initiative and confidence and so on. It's very impressive. But you gained all that experience and sort of saw firsthand what it's like dealing with the challenges of Leszla learners, as you say.

They deal with the social challenges of being refugees living in Wales and all the things that we can imagine that come along with that. But as you said, they also deal with the linguistic challenges of if they lack literacy, that means they struggle to read and write. And so it's much harder for them to learn English when perhaps their level of literacy in their first language is not that developed.

So this is what you kind of focused on. And yeah, I can see how that was so interesting for you, considering your own story and the fact that you felt a kind of kinship with the people who were going through these struggles and so on. So then you decided to start your PhD then.

Yeah. And I'm really sorry to interrupt you, Luke, but I just want to also add one thing. While I was doing my learning and skills coach role, an opportunity came up as a part-time ESOL lecturer in the same college in the ESOL department.

So I applied for that and I got it. So I was able to, oh, no, hold on. Sorry.

No, no, no. Because in that one, I got rejected. So they asked for people to volunteer to do extra evening classes so they can do an internal contract.

So it's not like a proper contract. They do an internal contract with people who are already employed in the college. So I signed up for that and I got it.

So alongside my learning and skills coach role, I was able to deliver ESOL evening classes to pre-entry ESOL students. So in these classes, I was leading the class, not supporting learners. So I had these two roles at the same time.

And after that, like you said, I got this idea that it's time now for me to apply for PhD. Now I've got a clear idea about what I want to do. I've worked with people.

I've worked with students who belong to this specific group of learners that I'm interested in working with and researching this area. So I started applying for scholarships. Okay.

We're talking about the academic context here. And I'm sort of talking to my listeners now. We're talking about the academic context.

So when you talk about things like lecturers, coaches and stuff, these are all different, essentially sort of different types of teacher or different types of staff who work with learners. A lecturer, in my mind, is someone who stands at the front of a lecture theatre with lots of students sitting down, and they're at a podium, maybe in front of a big PowerPoint presentation or something, kind of talking while the students take notes. And then you've got a coach, which I imagine is someone working with people on a more on a much closer basis, maybe on a one to one basis where you're sort of sitting with them, helping them, you know, deal with whatever issues they've got at that time.

And that sort of reflects something about the way that the education happens at university. So, you know, typically, you'd have lecturers who deliver their lectures, and the students take the notes, and then you'd have seminars, where maybe there is a lecturer in the seminar room, and there's a lot more interaction between the students and the lecturer. So when you said that you were a lecturer, an ESOL lecturer, what exactly were you doing? Were you lecturing? Or was it more like teaching in small groups? Yeah, I see what you mean.

The word lecturer, like you said, gives this impression that you're lecturing in a huge auditorium, and you have these PowerPoint

presentation slides, etc. Well, the job role is called really literally an ESOL lecturer, but it's more of a tutoring or teaching. So you're just teaching a classroom, you have a group of 20-25 students, and you're teaching these students, that's it.

Like you said, with a coach role, you're working with students on a closer basis. So it's like one to one, or you're doing in class support, but you're still focussing on one or two students in a class. So that's the difference really between these two roles.

But when I said an ESOL lecturer, like you said, it's more of a tutoring or teaching, despite having that title for the role. It's still leading a group of learners, the entire classroom. Okay, I just want to say another point as well, which is kind of a tangent, let's say, and that's I can't help noticing the fact that in, you know, since I spoke to you last time, four years ago, you've definitely picked up a Welsh accent.

There's no question. You know, actually, I think last year, I sent a voice recording to one of my lecturers at Warwick, and she said, well, you've picked a really lovely Welsh accent. So now you're saying this, it's just like, you know, resonating with what my lecturer said.

Yeah, I mean, I've been trying to think how can I pick up on specific things, because my audience might not know really what a Welsh accent in English sounds like. But you just said like resonating, but I'd say resonating. And you said it like resonating with that little rhotic R, right? Resonating, and other things like work, the word work.

So I say work, but with a Welsh accent. Do you know what it would sound like? I'm not sure now, maybe when I'm at the spot, I'm not saying it. A spot, you said spot, when I'm when I'm, you know, on the spot.

So on the spot, but on the spot, somehow. It's hard for me to explain what that is. But instead of it being spot, it's spot.

You know, yeah, yeah, yeah, I see. Work, work in my accent, and in a Welsh accent, work, something like that. The vowel sound, and that consonant sound at the end.

Yeah, you've definitely picked up a Welsh accent, for sure. I'm so happy about this, actually, I'll take this as a compliment. Driver, you said, sorry, you said earlier, you said driver, you were talking about the bus driver.

And I heard you say driver, driver, rather than driver. It's very subtle. Some of my listeners, you might think that's very subtle.

But when you start to become more familiar with it, you definitely are able to notice it. And that's, that's great. Yes.

Welsh accents are lovely. Yeah, yeah, you know, sometimes, like I said, a lecturer pointed out, and she said, well, I started to pick up a Welsh accent, a lovely Welsh accent. I asked my colleague, and I said, Dan, my lecturer is saying this and this and this and that.

And I was like, is there a particular word that you think I'm pronouncing in a Welsh accent? And it's difficult to put your finger on a specific word, like you said, but it's maybe the overall intonation of, oh, but I'm glad, I'm happy. Yeah, it's very

complicated thing. Obviously, you know, we get into the details of the phonetics of accents and stuff.

Obviously, that's a whole other avenue of linguistics. And it's very complicated and specific and stuff. But yeah, I guess, as an English native speaker who's grown up in England, then, you know, you just kind of get a natural sense of being able to identify it without perhaps being able to define what it is you can hear.

But yeah, okay, I just needed to point that out. Because, you know, I just kept noticing it. So anyway, we were talking about your PhD.

So you there you were on the cusp of signing up for your PhD, then finally. So what did you so tell us about a PhD and what it actually is and how you apply for it and what you have to do when you apply for it? Yeah, thank you. So PhD, like, if you want to do a doctoral study, people have different options.

Some people self fund themselves, which is an option, of course, but it wasn't an option for me. So I decided to apply for a scholarship that will fully fund me. So there's this website called find a PhD, it's really popular, you, you can search for any opportunity you're interested in a PhD in whatever field that you're interested in, and then you'll find loads of opportunities.

So I find this scholarship called ESRC, which stands for Economic and Social Research Council. So in the UK, I think there are seven research councils, each council is dedicated towards like specific field of study. So the one that my field comes under is Economic and Social Research Council.

So it's a fully funded scholarship, you apply, you need to, you know, you need to send some supporting documents, things like your CV, a motivation letter, and a research proposal, which is the most important thing of your application. Something that you're interested in researching, but of course, you need to show academic rigour and applying in your proposal. And what else like recommendation letters, so I'm lucky because I, I still, you know, keep in touch with my lecturers from Warwick.

So it was handy to just like email them and ask for a supporting letter from them. For me, the most challenging thing was the research proposal. So although I had a clear idea about what I wanted to do, when it comes to writing, it's challenging, you need to put everything in, I think it was 1000 words.

And this is the most challenging bit because you need to show what your idea is about, you need to show relevant recent literature in relation to that topic. And you want to give like, an idea about what methods you want to work with, what contributions you're going to make to the field by doing this research and, and what your data analysis methods are going to be. So it's, it's reviewing the literature, the thing that takes most time.

And when I say reviewing literature for people who study English language literature, I'm not talking about literature as in like literary subjects, prose, poetry, I use literature review to refer to any research studies that focus on anything, really. So you need to read relevant research, researcher studies on the area you're interested in, present that logically, in a way that shows that you're familiar with what has been done in the field in relation to that topic. So that took so much time.

So you can imagine I was doing a full time learning and skills coach, a part time ESOL lecturer role, ESOL tutoring role. And in addition to that, I'd come back home, sometimes when I have this evening teaching thing, I'd come back at eight or nine in the evening, but I'd still eat food really, really quickly, and then get at least at least I needed to spend two or three hours every day before I sleep to to work on, you know, these supporting documents. And especially my proposal, because it was so time consuming, but, but it was fruitful in the end.

So I applied, and they give this option actually to apply for either three years, a three year programme, or three plus one. So the three plus one is a three year PhD programme, in addition to a master's course. And this is where this is something that so many people ask me about, they say, well, you, you've already completed a master's in TESOL, why did you do a second master's? Well, this master's, the first master's was a master's in art, TESOL, but this one is an MSc, a master's in science in social research methods.

So this is very specific to research. It gives me those important research skills that will help me complete a PhD study in social research. Yeah.

So just, if I can just stop you there, you mentioned master of the arts and master of sciences. These are the two types of degree, right? You've got MA, MSc, same with bachelor level, BA and BSc. So it's kind of basically a way of defining two fields of study.

You've got the arts side and the sciences side. And so your first master's was an MA, which basically is kind of humanities or communication related things. And yeah, so teaching English as a,

as a second or other language to adults, this is in the MA, the arts side of things.

That's how it's kind of categorised. And like, you know, what I've done as well, all my, all my qualifications are on that side of things too. And, but then, yeah, so an MSc, master of sciences, this was a, it was a research, focused on research.

And so, yeah, that's considered to be in the science side of things. Sorry, you were saying? Zahra- Yes. So it was an MSc in social research methods.

So in this master's course, it wasn't like students who had a humanity background. It was actually students who completed bachelors in engineering or in medicine or in different criminology. So it was a really diverse group of learners with different backgrounds, you know.

And it's a really interesting master's because with every type of assignment that we had, it was open. So you would have like very broad, what's the word? Like broad... Toby Scope. Zahra- Scope.

Yeah, that's the word. A broad scope of like a specific assignment that you want to complete. And it's open for every student to take it into their perspective and angle and their field of speciality.

Toby Or your criteria were perhaps very broad as well. It was kind of like you can define the specifics, but the criteria for what you're supposed to achieve with this piece of assessment is quite, yeah, as you said, quite open. Yeah.

Yeah. So because it's about research methods, which is a sort of scientific thing, because it's all about how you collect different types of data. Zahra- Yes.

And the way that you have to make sure that your data collection is reliable and representative and all those things. Is that right?

Zahra- Yes. Yeah.

Toby Yeah. Okay. Zahra- And like you said, it's open.

So say, for example, we have an assignment about writing about two research methods, and like criticising these methods and talking about what's useful or not useful, their advantages and disadvantages in the specific research that we're interested in. For me, I'd talk about something that is relevant to what I'm interested in, in my research, say, teaching English to asylum seekers and refugees. But another student, on the other hand, could be writing about something that's related to medicine or engineering or criminology or whatever.

Toby Criminology just sort of grabs my attention, because that's things like researching crime and stuff like that. I'm imagining, what's the word for it? The scientific work in relation to crime detection. What's that called again? I can't remember.

Why can't I remember the word? Never mind, it'll come back to me. But anyway, okay, that's for forensics. Exactly.

Forensics. Well done. So that's interesting.

So you're kind of with students from these diverse academic backgrounds, you've got medicine, forensics, or criminology, as

you said, and, and these other things. So that's, that's interesting. Yeah.

The only student who was from applied linguistics background with me on the course was a student who actually got the same scholarship as myself. And actually, we were the only two people who got the scholarship in that cohort. So we were doing the master's and the PhD.

Now we're doing the PhD together. So anyway, I completed that master's course with distinction. The challenge for me was to do something in my master's that would complement my PhD, but doesn't repeat it.

That was the challenge for me. So that's why I eventually decided to focus on the challenges of refugees and asylum seekers learning English and Wales. But for my master's, I took that from the perspective of teachers.

So I interviewed teachers who teach ESOL to asylum seekers and refugees, and I asked them about the challenges they think their refugee and asylum seekers, learners face in terms of learning English as a second language in Wales. And for my PhD, now, I'll be taking this from the angle of from the perspective of learners themselves. So I'll be able to get this full picture of the context from both the teachers and the learners perspectives.

Of course, this doesn't mean that I'll not be interviewing teachers at this point, during this research, I will be. But that's what my, that's the distinction between my master's and my PhD. And of course, in a master's, you have only three months to complete your project.

So I didn't get, I didn't have enough time to do more than that, you know. Okay, where are you now that are you are you in the middle of your PhD at this point? Oh, actually, I started my PhD last October. So only a few months since I started.

So the three plus one, the plus one was the master degree course in research methods, and you did that first. And so it's actually one plus three. Three years of PhD, is it is it limited to three years? Because I know some people, some friends of mine who've done PhDs, they don't have a time limit, which is kind of good and bad, because it can drag on forever.

So it's limited to three years, is it? The funding is limited. The funding is limited. So three years after which you're able to say, for example, you still need one more year for the writing up fine, but you won't be funded for that year.

So you need to save up the money on the side. Otherwise, you will have to, you know, just do it. So it's better to actually finish it in three years.

And I think, actually, I had this meeting with my supervisor, and we have a plan. So hopefully, if everything goes well, and I am on track with everything, I should be able to finish within three years. Okay, great.

Good. And what do you actually have to deliver at the end of the three years or the end of the PhD? A PhD thesis, which I think, oh my god, I forgot. I think it's 85,000 words, if I'm not mistaken.

Oh, yeah. It's like writing a book. Yes.

Yeah. Okay. And do you actually have to present it as well? Do you have to go in front of a jury or a panel or something like that and present it and talk about it and stuff too? Yeah.

For a PhD thesis, there is a viva. And so many students don't pass first attempt. They're usually they're usually given some corrections to, you know, to do some changes to their work.

And if you're lucky, you pass first attempt. I'm hoping to be in that position, you know, hopefully, who knows? Yeah. Yeah.

But for my master's, I didn't have a viva. So I didn't need to discuss or have like this jury or anything like that. It's just a project that you complete and you submit.

But of course, you have these supervision, you have meetings with your supervisor while you're completing the project. So your supervisor is aware of your progress and what you're doing and, you know, etc. So can I just ask you about, you mentioned asking teachers what asylum seekers, what challenges they face when learning English, and you're going to be doing it from the point of view of the learners as well.

So to get this kind of global view of exactly what their experience is and what the challenges are. We've mentioned the fact they might have social, I'm just sort of defining it like this, they might have social challenges and linguistic challenges. In terms of the linguistic side of things, let's look at that.

What can you just give me a couple of specific examples of the sorts of problems that they would have when learning English, like

the grammar, the reading, you know, the skills, the language systems? Yeah, what sort of errors do they make? What challenges do they face? Yeah. Okay. You know, it's not related to specific errors, for example, they make.

It's related to things like writing, for example, if they're struggling with writing. Some students struggle with different types of sentences, punctuation marks, grammar, tenses. So there are specific problems related to writing, but that was not the focus of my Masters.

It was about the challenges in general, and specifically to Lesley learners. So teachers would talk, actually, because we're talking about refugees and asylum seekers, their struggles are sort of broader than any other ESOL learners or EFL learners. So EFL learners would, if you're talking about EFL learners, you would be focussing more on what grammatical mistakes they make, what errors they make, what specific patterns of things they make, because they're here in the UK on a holiday, for example, some wealthy people coming over for a few months to practise the language and then leave.

But when you're talking about asylum seekers and refugees, it's really difficult to just say, okay, let's discuss the linguistic aspect of it, because it's all in, you know, what's the word, interwoven? I've forgotten. Interwoven. Woven, yeah, they're all connected.

So sometimes a learner is not, for example, making progress in writing because they haven't got time to practise. They haven't got time to practise because they are locked in in the asylum process. And they're locked in in the asylum process because they're placed in an accommodation.

And they received this letter from the Home Office asking them to leave their placement because they received their refugee status. And now they need to leave within a few days on a short notice. So all those complicated things that are related to refugees and asylum seekers are all interconnected, that you can't just like, take one thing.

That's interesting. Just from my teaching experience is with sort of anyone really, but a lot of the time, yes, it's not asylum seekers. It's sort of people learning English in other contexts.

And so naturally, my approach is to look at them and think about what's their first language and how is that first language going to affect the way that they produce English. And that can often be the starting point. But yes, of course, the social side, as you say, is so dominant that you can't separate the social side.

You can't just focus on, for example, the influence of the first language on their grammar. You have to focus on the social aspects because these are so powerful in their life. Yeah, right.

Like, for example, like I said, in an EFL context, of course, there are individual differences in every classroom. There are individual differences, not just in ESOL. But in an ESOL class, specifically in an ESOL classroom, there are so many individual differences and interests.

So for example, if you have a Ukrainian young lady, she's very interested in doing exams and passing with high marks. But if you have an older man from Syria, for example, he just wants to, you know, he just wants to do basic things, fill out a form or things like

that. And there are challenges for the teachers because how are you able to motivate all students when you have an old lady with specific needs and she needs specific things to focus on, whereas you have another passionate, still young people who are happy to do exams and things like that.

And other students don't like exams because it just adds burden and pressure on them while they're locked in in that asylum process. So there are so many, so many things going on. Like you said, you can't separate things in an ESOL classroom.

And that's why I didn't just focus on the challenges learners face from their teachers' perspectives, but also on the challenges teachers face when teaching asylum seekers and refugees. Because, you know, there isn't a specific qualification in the UK that is just dedicated for teaching ESOL to asylum seekers and refugees, which is a challenge, isn't it? How are you dealing with students with diverse backgrounds and needs and so many things happening? You have students who have traumas in their lives and so many things and you are not even trained to do it. So you're in a position then to contribute quite a lot there to the sort of knowledge base of teaching, let's call it, in the UK, which is, you know, supposed to be equipped to deal with all different types of learners.

And so you can contribute a huge amount to strengthening our ability to teach English to everyone effectively. Yeah, I'm hopeful. There are so many people who are pioneers in this field.

So for example, there's Mike Chick. He's a professor at South Wales University. You know, he's brilliant.

He's done so much work in this area. And one thing that he really focusses on is called participatory approach. So in this approach, he says, why do we take this monolingual perspective in teaching students? I mean, when you're talking about a refugee and asylum seeker, at least they've got one language in their pocket.

Why don't we make use of that language instead of just like having, and especially in an ESOL classroom, you have students from different countries. So, for example, a Syrian student who speaks Arabic, a Ukrainian lady who speaks, what's the language in Ukraine? Ukrainian. Yeah.

So, I mean, there's some way where we can make people use a little bit of their languages. You can put people sometimes in groups. And if people are from the same country, you can put them in groups and they can discuss things in their first language.

Why not? Of course, I'm not saying we're turning classrooms into their first language classrooms, but they can make use of their languages because each student can contribute something using their own linguistic abilities that they already have in their first language. I really like this participatory approach. Of course, this is just like a narrow vision about what this approach is.

I didn't explain it in detail. But there are so many people contributing to this field. Like Micah Chick, like I said, and my supervisor, Dr. Gwenan Haim, she's focussing on this context in Wales.

She's more interested in the Welsh language, but she's also interested in this area. Anyway, one thing that I want to tell you, I'm lucky to be actually in Wales because Wales has given me the

inspiration for this, not only because I worked at Cardiff and Vale College, but also because of the unique context of Wales. Wales has this vision towards becoming a nation of sanctuary.

And this is not just like a title, it's something that is implemented in different cities, universities, policies, things on how to deal with refugees and asylum seekers and to offer them support. And to be honest with you, I wouldn't deny that we have this hostile environment towards refugees and asylum seekers. If you're looking at this from the Westminster's viewpoint, am I saying something that would politically put me in trouble? I mean, these days, anything you say can put you in trouble with someone, can't it really? But you're now talking about the fact that in Westminster, so yeah, by mentioning Westminster, you're referring to the predominant sort of politics of Westminster now.

So again, I need to maybe clarify something for my listeners, which is that obviously, Wales is part of the United Kingdom, which is made up of four countries that are united together. So you've got England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, of course, everybody. Westminster is where the British government is based, right, where you have the Prime Minister and so on.

But as we mentioned earlier, there's a parliament in Wales, there's a parliament in Scotland, there's a parliament in Northern Ireland. And so there's a certain amount of what's called devolved power, which means that those different countries in the union do have certain amounts of policymaking independence. But nevertheless, power is still centralised in London, in Westminster, in the Houses of Parliament, the House of Commons, and the House of Lords.

And so when you refer to Westminster, you're talking about, yeah, the centralised power system. And certainly over the last, well, nowadays, we've got a Labour government in Westminster. So that's slightly different.

But before that, we had, you know, the Conservatives and the sort of post Brexit government, which was very sort of, let's say, asylum seekers. And that was very much a part of their rhetoric, where they talked about being very, how do I put this? Hostile. Yeah, let's say that's also, you see that in the reactions of some people in the UK.

And we've seen some pretty shocking moments with riots and other kinds of social disruption, which, you know, are sort of people's responses to the treatment of asylum seekers. There's also a lot of fake news around the subject and so on. So it's, yeah, it's a tense topic in many ways.

Yeah. Yeah. So what were you about to say about that? Yes.

So I wanted to say, yeah, there is this hostile rhetoric in Westminster against refugees and asylum seekers. Of course, like, remember the Rwanda plan, it's just like something, okay, let me not say anything about it. But like in Wales, if I am just to focus on Wales, in Wales, it's not like that at all.

In Wales, we have this like, harmony, peaceful way of looking at asylum seekers and refugees. The concept of nation of sanctuary, there's actually an academic paper that talks about symbolic power for a nation of sanctuary. And in my master's dissertation, actually, one of the teachers I interviewed, he said, he might not

feel very comfortable in England, saying that he teaches English to refugees and asylum seekers.

But he'd say this, like, with pride in Wales, I teach English to asylum seekers and refugees. So maybe this concept of nation of sanctuary has got, it's like symbolic power, you know, using other people's words for this. Because it just makes people feel welcome in this environment.

And like I said, it's not just like a title, but it's related to how these people are treated. So for example, when you talk about England and the rhetoric about refugees and asylum seekers in Westminster, it's like, you learn English, you become a good citizen. If you don't learn English, you're not a good citizen, which is really harsh, you know? In Wales, we're kind of moving away from this monolingual perspective of being a citizen or of living here, because after all, what's the, what is like integration or what is a good citizen, you know? So in Wales, it's more about this multilingual perspective that you can actually benefit from what you've got.

You don't need to leave your identity and your language at the door before you come into an ESOL classroom. You know, you can have all of these present while you're learning a second language. And this is something that I really, really love about Wales, is this vision towards making ESOL going into that direction.

Yeah. Yeah. That's very interesting.

The kind of multilingual culture of Wales and how that is incorporated into this approach to the classroom. Yeah. Very interesting.

And I can see how appealing that is as well. Yeah. Wow.

Wales, you're really doing a great job of selling Wales at this point. It is a fantastic place. Have you managed to kind of visit any of the sort of natural spots in Wales? Have you been to Pembrokeshire or Snowdonia or anything like that by any chance? You're very busy, so you probably don't have time.

The only place I went to, I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing this correctly, is called Rossili Beach. Rossili. It's very, like, so many people come from different parts of the world to come and see this beach because it's really nice.

So that's the only place I've been to. As a child, we used to go, you know, when I was a kid with my family, we used to often have holidays in Pembrokeshire, which is sort of like south west Wales, you know, the coast down there. And there are some very, very beautiful coastlines.

So if you ever get a chance, if you ever get some time off, you could go down and visit some of the some of the coastline down there. That's it would be a nice thing to do. Okay, great.

So yeah, so you've got another couple of years of PhD work, and then you can start applying all the things that you've learned. You know, that's great. How do you see your future? Yeah, after the PhD? Yeah.

And, you know, I, I initially, of course, I have this idea after I finished my PhD, I want to give back to community to society to the research centre that offered me this opportunity, of course. So I

want to go back to Cardiff and Vale College or other charities in Wales, whether in Cardiff or Swansea, to work there and be able to implement some of the things that I'm hopeful will come up in my findings. Because I'm hoping to do some action research in my PhD.

So it's not just observing learners, I'm hopeful that I can bring about a positive change of doing something with the learners, not just like observing the learners. So I'm hopeful if things are fruitful, if things are good, as planned, I'm hopeful that I can implement some things when I go back to teaching at Cardiff and Vale College. But you know, things now have changed with because you know, the regime was toppled in Syria.

So now I have this opportunity to go back home. But no matter what, of course, for me, I'm doing something I'm really passionate about something that I love and adore. Just, you know, I love to help people back home in my country.

But I'm also happy with the things I'm doing here, because I'm also helping other vulnerable groups, like asylum seekers and refugees. So of course, for me, the first thing to do is to implement the things that I'm hopeful will come up in my research to implement them in different charities or colleges in Wales after I complete my PhD. And then my next step will be to return back home to give back to the people I love in my country as well.

So yeah. Okay, listeners, so that's where we're going to end part one of this two part episode. Thank you again to Wala.

It's very nice to be talking to her once again on the podcast, getting this update. And you can see how passionate she is about

her studies and about her aim to really help fellow refugees to be able to learn English and to give them a chance. So yeah, very interesting stuff.

We'll continue in part two, which will be available in a few days. And that's fascinating, and actually a very moving thing to listen to. During the conversation, Wala talked about what really happened in Syria and what it was really like.

And it was very revealing and fascinating for me to hear a sort of firsthand account of life in Syria during the fighting, and just what everyday life was like and what a nightmare it was. And Wala talks about how she felt when she heard the news that things had changed. And yeah, it's a really fascinating listen.

So that one is going to be available to you very soon. But that's the end of part one then now. Thanks again to Wala.

It was great to speak to her again, and you will enjoy part two when it's going to arrive soon. And also I should add that Wala is quite active on social media, particularly on Facebook and Instagram. And she has her channel called English with Wala, which is where she does little videos teaching English and helping, especially sort of people who have Arabic as their first language, helping them to learn English.

And so you could check out English with Wala. It's on Facebook and on Instagram. You could just search for that and you'll find it.

Otherwise, you'll probably find links for those things on the website page for this episode on my website, English with Wala, check it out. And of course, a reminder to go back and listen to episode

number 703 to get Wala's specific account of how she improved her English on her own. And she took very specific steps to do it and her tips and advice on how you can do it too.

And of course, part two. Yes. How many times have I said this? Millions of times now, maybe just four.

I don't know. But part two will be available for you in a couple of days. And that's where Wala is going to tell us the rest of her story that she couldn't talk about before.

OK, everybody, have a lovely rest of the day, morning, evening, afternoon, night or whatever time of day it is, wherever you are. And I will speak to you next time. But for now, it's time to say goodbye.

Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye.

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