

ESOL VOICES: Student Spotlight

Samia Ali



Africa

Samia is an ESOL student originally from Somalia. She came to the United States with her mother and brothers in 2013. Prior to immigrating to the U.S., they lived in Uganda for about seven years after fleeing Somalia. In Uganda, Samia was a volunteer multilingual interpreter and teacher; she hopes to be a teacher here as well. In this narrative piece, Samia writes several short vignettes about the universal connections of daily life.

Lugha Moja Haitoshi

One Language is Not Enough

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.” Nelson Mandela

It was 2006 when I reached Uganda, an interesting and friendly country, which is roughly the size of England. It is bordered by Kenya in the East, Congo-Kinshasa in the West, South Sudan in the North, Tanzania in the South and Rwanda in the South West which makes Uganda a landlocked country in East Africa.

When I arrived in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, for the first time, I was surprised by the bikes on the side of the road and the trucks on their way to market which were heaped high by the sheer amount of matooke; the matooke which



ultimately shaped hills that beautified both of them gorgeously. Matooke is one of the most

economically important crops that is grown in Uganda. It is a plantain—a type of banana—which is also known as the East African Highland banana. It is a staple food, in the true sense of

the word. Three-fourths of the people there eat it daily at least once a day because it is a plentiful, nutritious and delicious.

I wanted to know more and more about their national dish—the mashed steam-cooked matooke—so I started asking my Ugandan friends Alice and Sara with full curiosity. And since one of the official languages there is English, we were able to communicate easily.

“I have noticed that these bananas are always harvested green!”

“Yes dear Samia, that is true. And then we cook and mash them into a meal,” answered Alice.

“So, what is matooke typically eaten with?” I asked.

“Well, it is typically eaten with a sauce made of vegetables, ground peanuts, or some types of meats like lamb which is a sheep less than a year, old mutton which is an older sheep, beef or chicken,” answered Sara.

Another thing I noticed there was the most popular and widely spoken language: Kiswahili. Kiswahili is the “Swahili Language” which is the mother tongue of “Waswahili” the

Swahili people. The prefix “K” indicates that the stem that follows is a language. Thus, “Kiswahili” is the Swahili language, “Kisomali” is the Somali language and “Kiingereza” is the English language and so on. Swahili is an interesting, amazing, and easy language. However, I couldn’t learn it at the beginning, unfortunately, because I was depending all the time on Somali and English through my daily life routine.

At that moment, when I met the “old mamas” who were Swahili native speakers (and didn’t speak English because they were already multilingual), I decided to learn their language to communicate with them smoothly without any language barriers. Although trying to speak a new language in a short time was a challenge to me, I started learning by using very basic words and combining them later into sentences. Hearing the Swahili native speakers talking and talking was very helpful to me. At the beginning, I couldn’t understand anything. But the sound of the language was great, as birds were singing in harmony.

After a while, I met two beloved “mamas.” And then, we started

conversations regarding their traditional dresses.

"What types of fabric do you use for your dresses Mama Vani?" I asked.

"Well, cottons and the silk."

I liked the elegant bright colorful dresses she used to wear, red, rich orange, pink and golden yellow, with short and puffed sleeves, and a complementing headscarf. In addition, she was tying them with a long beautiful sash placed on her waist.

Mama Tony's dresses were also elegant. They were mix of striking prints and vibrant hues. And as usual she was wearing a complementing headscarf from the same material she used for the dresses.

"As I can see, you like the bright color combinations Mama Tony!" I said

"Oh yes! That's right my dear. We do like them. We do like the vibrant hues," said Mama Tony eagerly with glowing eyes and a smiling face.

Finally, I became able to use some basic, simple words and sentences to communicate with them while shopping, greeting, visiting our neighbors, and discussing some

issues. Everything is difficult at the beginning, but step by step, you can reach any goal you wish.

On another day, I decided to invite my friends and neighbors to enjoy the joy of cooking that we share.

"Now, let the girls and I prepare our "sufuria" (pot) and the ingredients, start measuring "mafuta" (the cooking oil), chopping "vitunguu" (the onions) and finely mincing "nyanya" (tomatoes).

"Ok, what else should you do Samia?" asked Mama Vani.

"Well, after that, we should roast and then finely grind all the types of the spices I've prepared previously."

I gathered the mamas and the girls around the traditional charcoal stove "jiko ya mkaa" in Mbarara, and



continued showing them the way that we usually cook our "suugo" (Somali sauce).

"What is the secret of this great aroma?" asked Mama Tony.

"First of all, as all of you saw, choosing good ingredients. Secondly, the longer you cook the sauce, the more aroma you will get," I replied with a deep smile.

I was proud of myself because I showed them a new idea of how they could make a new recipe by mixing our Somali sauce with their Ugandan plantain "matooke," and that created a unique special flavored dish.

"You are unbelievable! You brought a wondrous Horn of Africa flavor to our national dish! We are so glad you are here with us. Thank you so much Samia. We are all proud of you," said all of them full of enthusiasm and happiness.

To be honest, the mamas and the girls were so happy even when I was making some grammar mistakes because they knew that I tried to talk to them in their beloved language. And that is the great lesson and the priceless secret I have discovered and learned; the shortest way to people's hearts is by speaking to them in their mother tongues because the sound of the mother tongue in the ear, and its meaning in the heart, creates trust and confidence between the native speakers and us.

ESOL Voices a collection of stories written by ESOL students at Monroe Community College. This semester, we are highlighting students from African countries. Look for a new story in the Tribune each month. We hope you will find these stories interesting and inspiring.

Katie Leite & Pamela Fornieri, ESOL Program, December 2014
