BREAKING LANGUAGE BARRIERS

SIMPLIFYING ARABIC LEARNING

By Liz Kinane

Maria and her inspiration, Keya

Main screen

Jana recording voice overs

App icon

Keya recording voice overs

Maria Menezes was always aware of the challenges parents face teaching Arabic to their children. She scoured the market for an "interactive and fun method" to help her daughter Keya who was having difficulty learning Arabic in school but couldn't find anything suitable. So the Indian born Dubai based mum, decided to stop being an observer and instead decided to take an active role in her daughter's education.

Maria started by doing some research and soon realized that she was not alone in her plight. She discovered that many parents faced the same dilemma and that many shared her feeling of helplessness. So Maria gave up her day job as the Founder and Creative Director of The Caramel theory and threw herself into the challenge and worked with App Developers to create an iOS based application called "Something Fishy about Arabic" that can be downloaded from the Apple App Store and works on iPod, iPhone or iPad.

Maria describes her application as an engaging learning resource to help children and understand and absorb Arabic, and as a great teaching tool for non-Arabic speaking expats.

"The level 1 application is devised for 3-7 year olds. The first component teaches the letters. A universe is created where one can discover why each letter exists, along with its sound and its relation to other letters. This alternative method of teaching stimulates and actively engages the learner," she explained.

The next two modules comprise a series of games. Recognising that the "interest of young children is only sustained for a short time" she designed games to keep the user engaged for longer periods while simultaneously enhancing the learning experience. These games help to break down learning obstacles and allow the participant to connect to the language in an enjoyable way. There's also a two-person game that helps enrich the bonding experience between parent and child.

"Children are like sponges ready to soak in new information; however young children will often resist something if they believe it to be associated with education. So learning is disguised within this resource and the user acquires new information in a fun and stimulating way." She adds that the application can also be used by older and more experienced learners to refresh their knowledge.

As for the character in the game, Maria began a contest on Facebook to name the character and the educational octopus was finally named Tammy. Not knowing Arabic too well herself, Maria enlisted the help of an Arabic teacher Rania Abu Ghush- Hindiyeh. Having been a part of creating the Arabic curriculum for government kindergartens in Dubai, Rania was the perfect choice for this App. As for the voices of the character, well that fun job was left in the dutiful hands of Rania's 11 year old daughter Jana Hindiyeh for Arabic, and Maria's seven year old Keya Menezes for English.

Maria has already received a positive response for her product with considerable interest from parents, teachers and the KHDA (Knowledge and Human Development Authority). Her aim is that the application "will not be used as a one off but alongside school curricula" and already she looks forward to developing the next level solution, which will be aimed at higher age groups and a version that targets Arabic speakers.

While this app may have begun as her idea, Maria is fully aware that none of this would have happened without the support she received from family and friends. "They've have been hugely supportive and encouraging and, in fact, a lot of my friends and ex colleagues have pooled in their resources and talent to help me put the app together. Most importantly, I would not have been able to do this without my husband, Roen Menezes. He was and will always be the wind beneath my wings," said Menezes.

To find out more or to download the app, go to: **http://www. somethingfishyaboutarabic.com/**