Matt Bowles: My guest today is Hebah Nigm. She is a foreign language teacher, polyglot and world traveler. Born in Vienna, Austria to an Egyptian immigrant family, Hebah has a degree in translation and interpretation as well as a master's degree in teaching and education. She learned to speak six languages fluently by the age of 23; Arabic, Turkish, German, French, Spanish, and English, in which we'll be conducting this interview today. Hebah also works in a program which aims at redressing inequalities in education and creating a path towards equal educational opportunities for all children, regardless of their social status or family situation. Hebah has now traveled to over 20 countries and uses these experiences to encourage her students to be more courageous and go out and explore the world for themselves. On her YouTube channel, Hebah's Rollercoaster, she shares her insights from traveling the world as a practicing Muslim and hijabi. Her tips on language learning as well as her personal experiences growing up between cultures and her reflections on race, gender and her Muslim identity. Hebah, welcome to the show.

Hebah Nigm: Hi, Matt. Thank you so much for having me.

Matt Bowles: I am so excited to have you here. This is going to be an awesome conversation. Let's just start off though by setting the scene and talking about where we are recording this interview from today. I am actually based on the east coast of the United States. I am in Asheville, North Carolina. And where are you today?

Hebah Nigm: I am in Vienna, Austria. In the middle of Europe, small country, Central Europe, very beautiful.

Matt Bowles: You know, one of the things that I love about Vienna is that whenever I travel through Vienna, even if I'm just transiting, like I'm just have a layover in Vienna. If I have even so much as a four-hour layover in Vienna, Austria, they have it set up so that you can literally drop your luggage in a storage locker at the airport and take an express train right to the center of the old city and be sitting in a cafe, having a coffee, eating food and strolling around within 20 minutes and then shoot on the train right back to the airport and catch your flight. It's one of the most amazing cities to travel through in that respect.

Hebah Nigm: It's so beautiful. Right? What do you think of the history, though, the historical buildings and the streets? Have you seen all of that?

Matt Bowles: I mean, it's amazing. I haven't spent enough time in Vienna. I've been there probably twice, but both of them were really short visits. But it's amazing, right? And so that's why I love this opportunity. Even on a short layover, if I'm going through Vienna, I'm definitely going into the old city. I'm going to walk around on those cobblestone streets and just be in awe of the architecture in the old city, get some amazing food, some good coffee, and then back on my flight. So, it's a city that I really, really need to spend more extended time in. But I love it every time I come through.

Hebah Nigm: That's how it's done.

Matt Bowles: Well, you have obviously spent a lot of time there, growing up there, and so I want to ask you about that, and maybe we can just sort of start on your journey, because I would love to hear about your upbringing in Vienna and how that shaped your identity and your life path.

Hebah Nigm: Well, as you said in the intro, yes, I was born and raised in Vienna, Austria. I grew up here, but my parents are both from Egypt. So Egyptian culture always played a big role in our home, in our family. And it was kind of difficult to grow up between these two cultures. They both shaped me in so many ways.

Also, they had a big influence on me, on how I see myself, how I see the world. And, you know, this ongoing quest for finding my place of belonging, for finding out what kind of a self-image I have. And so that was always very interesting to grow up with these two cultures. And then I'm Muslim as well. So that also had a big influence on my identity and just how I see myself today.

Matt Bowles: So, let's talk a little bit more about that as well, because you also really started learning additional languages at a very early age. You were able to become fluent in six languages by age 23, which is amazing. Can you talk a little bit about how your interest in other cultures and other languages and world travel in general developed as you were growing up?

Hebah Nigm: So, I guess it's probably my bilingual upbringing. So, speaking German and Arabic as a child already, and then these questions of, you know, how Egyptian am I, how Austrian am I, just really started this interest in finding out about different languages, different cultures. So, I think that interest initially stems from my upbringing and this surrounding or these circumstances that I grow up in. And then later on, I remember when I first started learning English, it was so fascinating to me to realize that there is basically another way of speaking. So, you can say the same thing in a different language and express yourself differently, but still convey the same message. So, realizing that at the age of, I think I was maybe like 8 or 9 really shaped everything that came after. So, I realized, okay, that's something that's so fascinating. I want to find out, how is it in other languages? How can I say that in another language? How can people in different languages express the same thing? So, I'd say it started out pretty early already with me being bilingual, and then later on learning English and realizing, wow, there's another way of speaking. Before that, German and Arabic were kind of, you know, they came naturally to me because both were my first languages, but English was my first foreign language. And then that kind of shaped everything after as well.

Matt Bowles: So how did your interest in travel develop? And how did that dovetail with your language learning? What was sort of your world travel journey like?

Hebah Nigm: So, obviously, as a kid, you know how it is when you're an immigrant kid, you usually travel back home with your parents. So, traveling has always been a part of my life. Ever since I was a little child. We used to travel back to Egypt every year or twice a year, maybe even. And then when I started learning other languages, I wanted to see these places. I wanted to speak to people who speak those languages as their first language. So, at some point I was like, I don't just want to see Egypt and Austria and maybe like a few surrounding countries, and that's it. I want to explore. I want to see how other people live, how they talk, what kind of a lifestyle they have. And I think it all kind of tied into one another. You know, it started out with my upbringing, and then later on just became this addiction for finding out about different languages and cultures. I think it all kind of interlinked later on. And so, the journey started, basically.

Matt Bowles: And then how did that travel trajectory continue? How did your language learning trajectory continue? Because you mentioned you grew up bilingual. English was then your third language, which was really your first fully foreign language. And then from there, how did you choose which languages you wanted to become fluent in? Because you became fluent in an additional three languages. Can you talk about that process for you and what it was like to learn those additional languages and also how that Fit in with your travel priorities.

Hebah Nigm: So, the next foreign language after English was French. And similar to English, it was because of education. So, in my school, I had to choose whether or not I wanted to learn another language and then I could pick. So, I picked French just out of prestige, to be completely honest with you. And I was

just really interested because I knew that, you know, France not too far away. And I really wanted to find out how people speak in France, how French people speak. And so, I started learning French at school. But I remember back then, and it was the same for English and for French, the things I learned in school were not enough for me. I felt like I was learning about grammar and sentence structure and writing texts, but I wanted to learn the authentic language, the real language. And so, I remember back then, even my addiction with YouTube started and I started looking for, you know, music on YouTube in English, and later on, when YouTube started becoming more multilingual, also things in French, etc. So, it started out in education, but then it became a hobby. And even after finishing my homework, for example, I would still sit and study for hours just for myself. So English and French both I started learning in school, but that kind of turned into a hobby for myself and something that I even did in my free time voluntarily. So, it wasn't just about school for me.

Matt Bowles: And then from there, talk about your choice to learn and not just learn, but become fluent in Spanish and Turkish.

Hebah Nigm: So, I started learning French in school, but I felt like, as I said, French wasn't enough. And then later on, or the French that I learned in school wasn't enough. So later on, I decided to go spend a semester that was in university already. I went and spent a semester in Switzerland and Geneva. And I started becoming more fluent in French because French-speaking people all around me. So that was the best way to practice. And then I felt like, you know what, now I'm fluent in French already. I want the next challenge, basically. So, when I went back to Austria, I started looking into Spanish just because I felt like it was the closest to French. I thought it would be easier because it's also a Romance language. So, I started learning Spanish as a hobby as well. But then later on decided to make it my career basically and study it at university and become a Spanish teacher. So again, here the hobby was turned into an educational path. So, for me, I feel like there's a pattern here with my foreign languages where education and hobby or free time are always kind of interlinked. And then with Turkish, it was kind of different compared to all of the other languages. So, I live in Austria, and there is a really big Muslim community in Austria that is Turkish-speaking, that is originally from Turkey. And so, living in Austria, living in Vienna, I was always surrounded by Turkish-speaking people. I was always surrounded by the Turkish language. So, at some point, I just wanted to be part of the community in a way. I just wanted to be able to understand what people were saying. And so just randomly started picking up words and talking to friends of mine who are Turkish-speaking. And then after a while, it developed into an addiction and I had my next challenge and I decided to become fluent in Turkish.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. That's so awesome. And then I know you have traveled to Turkey as well, and maybe let's just. With your travel experiences, maybe let's just start there. How was your experience in Turkey, especially since you speak Turkish and were able to communicate in that language?

Hebah Nigm: So, in Turkey, the interesting thing was that I did not want to travel as a tourist. I actually have a friend who was born and raised in Austria as well, but her roots are in Turkey. So, when she was traveling back home with her family, I just joined them and we went back to Turkey to visit her family there. So that was already a very real and authentic experience for me, which was really important for me because I did not want to experience the country as just a tourist. I wanted to be part of the people. And so, I felt like that was my opportunity. I went there with my friend and I wear a hijab and, you know, I do look ethnically different, I would say. And I was walking around with my friend, so it was kind of funny to see how people were not really sure if I was Turkish or not. And I thought, why not try this out and just play with it? So, I tried

speak with the best possible accent and try to imitate native-like Turkish, and just experiment and see if people will actually realize that I'm not Turkish. If people will just think I'm a Turkish speaker or a Turkish person who lives outside of Turkey, or if people will realize that I am actually not Turkish and I only speak Turkish as a foreign language. So that was a lot of fun to play around with this and just find out if I can be mistaken for a native speaker or not.

Matt Bowles: And what was the result?

Hebah Nigm: Very different. So, a few people thought that I was actually Turkish, which was a huge accomplishment in my eyes and just a bit a big success. And sometimes people were kind of confused. They would be like, were you born, like outside of Turkey or you know, sometimes people thought that me and my friend, that we were sisters. So sometimes people would be like, well, your sister's accent is kind of different to yours. Why is that? So, people were confused. Sometimes they thought I was a native speaker. Sometimes they felt like there was something else, you know, getting in the way. I think it also depended on how long I was speaking to them. If it was just for a few sentences or just a short conversation, I think it was okay. But, you know, having a longer conversation, people did realize that there was something else going on.

Matt Bowles: That's awesome. Well, I also want to talk about your experiences in Egypt, as you and I have discussed. I've also spent a lot of time in Egypt, and I'm really interested, though, in terms of how that was for you, because you mentioned that you grew up between cultures. Both of your parents are from Egypt, so you grew up in an Egyptian home, speaking Egyptian Arabic at home. But that was in Vienna, Austria. So, can you talk about, for you, how was your experience going back and spending time in Egypt?

Hebah Nigm: So, going back to Egypt is always very interesting because just talking by appearance, I do look Egyptian, like, ethnically speaking, in terms of, like, you know, facial features and all that kind of stuff. I look Egyptian, I look North African. But as soon as I'm there, it's kind of like this situation between. I'm not really sure if I do belong or not, because in a way, yes, you do disappear in the crowd. You look like the people there. But then as soon as you walk somewhere, you do something, you interact with people, they see you do casual things, usually in a way you still stick out. And obviously, when it comes to identity and, you know, self-image, that has a big influence because you feel like, yes, these are people that I look like. These are the people that I originally come from. But at the same time, I'm still different. I still don't really fit in. But then again, in Austria, it's the same thing. I grew up in Austria, so I see myself as Austrian, obviously, and I went to school in Austria, and it has a big influence on who I am. But again, I'm never fully there because Egypt plays a big role in my life. I look Egyptian, I speak Egyptian Arabic, my parents are from Egypt. So that's what I mean when I say I'm torn between cultures. I never fully belong somewhere. But at the same time, I belong in both of these countries and both of these cultures. So, it's kind of like this duality that you're never really left without.

Matt Bowles: And can you also talk about your Muslim identity and the impact and importance of your Muslim identity, particularly as you are traveling to all of these different countries and what that means to you.

Hebah Nigm: Yeah, as I just said, being Egyptian and Austrian at the same time creates this duality and these struggles between two different identities, in a way. But the beautiful thing about all of this is that I feel like my Muslim identity ties everything together again. Because when it comes to Islam, when it comes to me being Muslim, it doesn't really matter how I see myself. It doesn't really matter if I'm Austrian or

Egyptian. It only matters that I'm Muslim. And so, when it comes to traveling, I feel like I can connect to people from all around the world, from all kinds of different cultures, in all kinds of different places, by the mere fact that we're all Muslim and that we all follow Islam. So, I think the beautiful thing about my Muslim identity is that it connects everything again. So as torn as I might feel between different cultures, as torn as I might feel between my Austrian and my Egyptian identity, my North African, my European identity, I feel like my Muslim identity creates a space where I can be all of those things at once.

Matt Bowles: I love that. You know, one of the things that I've always appreciated so much about Islam is this concept of the ummah, right? Which is exactly what you're describing, which is this transnational global community which is not separated by nation states and boundaries and borders and languages. It's this global concept of being part of a Muslim community, regardless of country or language or anything. And I think it's such a really beautiful and amazing concept. And I think actually that would be a great transition point to ask you about your trip to Saudi Arabia and the pilgrimage that you made there. Can you talk about that and your experience there as a Muslim?

Hebah Nigm: It's every Muslim's dream to go to Saudi Arabia at some point, to go to Mecca and Medina and have this experience and just explore your spirituality on a different level. And so, when I went the first time, I was super excited to experience that. But when I went there, it actually was much more beautiful than I thought it would be because of everything that I just mentioned. Basically, there were so many different people there from so many different countries and so many different cultures and languages. People dressed so differently, and even the food was so different, the snacks that people had. But when it came to prayer or the spiritual rituals, we all did the same thing, and we all stood there in one line, and it didn't matter where we were from; it didn't matter what languages we spoke or what we looked like, what our skin color was like. So that was such a beautiful experience to kind of like see all these feelings that I had in terms of my Muslim identity, tying everything together. To see that in such an image and to see that in real life with these people in that place.

Matt Bowles: That's so amazing. That's really awesome. Well, I want to ask you about some of your other travel experiences as well, because you've actually been to a lot of places that I have not been. And although I've been to Morocco a couple times, I have never been to Ceuta. And I know that you have not only been there, but you actually did your entire master's thesis on Ceuta. And I'm wondering if you can just start off very basically for people that have never heard of Ceuta, where is it? And you know, just sort of contextualize it. And then I would love for you to share about your experience there.

Hebah Nigm: So, Ceuta is basically a Spanish enclave which is on African territory. So geographically speaking, it's on the African continent, basically at the Moroccan border. It's part of Spain. It is Spain, Spanish land. And so that was really interesting for me because it's a very small city, not many people know about it, but going there was such an interesting experience to see how history is so visible in Ceuta's streets. You have so many different people who live in that place. For example, you have the Christian Caucasian community, but then you also have the North African Arabic-speaking community. And then you have a Jewish community, you have a Hindu community. And they all feel connected to that place by being from Ceuta, by being Spanish on Spanish land, basically. And it was just so fascinating to see these dynamics in such a small place.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, that's amazing. You and I were talking about Ceuta. I've never been there. It sounds like such a fascinating dynamic. And I asked you about the Hindu community that is there and how they got there. And you were explaining that, which is amazing, right? That, of course, when the British controlled

India, the Hindu community and I think most of the Hindus that are in Ceuta are actually from the area that is today Pakistan. And that they came over there in the way that folks distributed around the world to a lot of the other places that the British had colonies on, but Morocco was not a British colony. So, you were telling me that they came to Gibraltar, which is a British-controlled area in Spain, and then from there took the ferry over to Ceuta. And so now there is a Hindu community in Ceuta originally from modern-day Pakistan. So that is like unbelievable. What a fascinating place.

Hebah Nigm: It's so fascinating. And I even went to the temple there and spent time with the Hindu population. And it was just so fascinating to see that these are just, just a few numbers, a few families that live there. But they carry that history and they are proud of that history. And also, the fact that the population in Ceuta is mainly Christian and Spanish-speaking. And on the other side they have the North African Arabic-speaking community, but the Jewish and the Hindu community are actually very small in terms of percentage. But still, they always talk about the four communities. They put them all on the same level and say we are Ceuta and we have these four communities in our small city.

Matt Bowles: That's so amazing. I need to go there. I think that's one of the most interesting parts about travel. Is when I go to different places. A lot of the times I'm so pleasantly just surprised and interested in all of the different immigrant and diasporic types of history that exist in those places. I mean, I mean, just talking about the Indian diaspora in general, when I was traveling through sub-Saharan Africa and I was just in West Africa for about three months in 2019, I mean, the Indian communities in places like Nigeria and Ghana, I mean, it's just amazing, you know, the Indian restaurants and the Indian food and the culture. I mean, Kenya as well. Like substantial Indian community there and the way that they have connected with, you know, the country that they're in and the culture there, but also retained so much, you know, from their culture and originally. And it's just, it's an amazing, amazing thing to see. I think it's such an important part of travel is to understand those histories of how all those different groups got there and all the different variations on identity that they have.

Hebah Nigm: Absolutely. And I feel like learning about these different things and learning about these different cultures makes you understand yourself better as well. So, you are learning about different people, you are learning about different cultures. But also, because there are so many doors opening, there are so many new things that you're learning, I feel like you're also exploring yourself. So, traveling and just getting out of your comfort zone makes you understand yourself better and the places and the people that you meet along the way. So, I feel like that's so fascinating about traveling. It does so much to you in terms of your own self-understanding, your own self-image, also in terms of your perspective on the world and on different people, on different cultures and languages.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, for sure. I also want to ask you about another place that you've been that I've not been. And you have gone to Finland. And I wanted to ask you about how your experience was there.

Hebah Nigm: That was a very interesting experience because when we went to Finland, we were a group of girls who had all met somewhere else before that, and every one of us was from a different place. And there was only one girl who was actually from Finland, and she was the local, basically showing us around. And so, when it comes to Finland, I'm not sure if people know that, but they don't really have a big immigrant community. There are a few immigrants, yes, but not very much, but not very many. So, when I went to Finland, I knew that I was going to stick out. So, to be honest, before I went there, I was a bit worried. I did not know how people will react. I did not know how things were going to be. But in the end, it was such an interesting and beautiful experience to see a new place. People were super friendly. And my

friend's family, they had a cottage basically in the middle of the forest, with no supermarkets, no Internet, no anything, basically. So, it was just the four of us in the middle of the forest and in that small cottage with a beautiful lake and the trees and in the middle of the nature. And it was just so beautiful on so many different levels because again, I was shown that I had all these prejudices beforehand. And then I went there and I had one of the most beautiful experiences in my life. And I did not have to be afraid of going there because I felt like I was going to stick out or people were going to discriminate against me or, you know, not really know what to do with someone that looked so different. But in the end, it was such a beautiful experience and I'm so happy that I went. And I can only recommend that people should try out these different experiences and also choose locations that are maybe not as typical when it comes to traveling or visiting other places.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. I want to ask you to sort of expand on that a little bit, because one of the things that you and I have talked about and that you mentioned to me is that one of the drivers for you and a lot of what you do has been the global negative perception, stereotypes, representations of Muslim women. Can you talk about how that has influenced your life path and what you do and how you do it?

Hebah Nigm: I think the interesting part about being a Muslim woman that wants to travel is that there are two kind of powers that have to work against one another. So, on the one side you have the global Islamophobia, which is a fact, unfortunately, it is the truth, and it's something that you have to deal with. And on the other side you have the old traditions that kind of still have their influence. So even for many Arab/Turkish, Eastern Muslim families, it's still not a very natural thing that a Muslim female would travel that much. So, you have these two sides that are kind of, you know, fighting against one another and then you're stuck in the middle and you have to deal with these two powers having their influence. And so of course that has a big impact on my travel destinations, on how I travel, on the fact that I'm usually not a solo traveler. I usually travel either with a friend or with a group of friends, or even when I travel on my own, I make sure I meet someone on the other side, basically. So, for example, that's something that I would like to change at some point. I would like to travel more on my own as well. But so far, I did not really find the courage yet. And I'm sure that these two powers are one of the main reasons that I haven't really done that much yet.

Matt Bowles: But you have done a lot. And I want to ask you, I mean, you have traveled to a lot more countries than most people have and you aspire to travel to a lot more, of course, as we've discussed. So, what tips do you have for Muslim women travelers, let's say in particular, right, who relate to those two forces that you're describing in their life? What have you done and what advice can you give to other folks in similar situation as yourself for being able to pursue your dream lifestyle and all that? If that involves extended world travel.

Hebah Nigm: I think the first advice would be to not be afraid and just have the courage to do new things and to break out of the system and to get out of your comfort zone, even if it's difficult, even if it means that you have to withstand these two forces. But just get out and do whatever it is that you want to do. While still, and that would be my second advice, making sure that you do take your precautions, you are safe, you are doing everything you need to do in order to feel safe. So, I think it's also a sad truth that when you're traveling, you still have to plan many things that maybe other people don't have to plan. For example, I would never go to a place without knowing beforehand where I will be spending the night, because that's something that's very difficult, important to me. I need to know where I will be sleeping. I need to know where I will be staying for the time that I am in that country. So, yes, make sure that you have a plan. Make

sure that you know what you're doing, but at the same time, be courageous and go out and do it. Even if it's something that people haven't done before you. There's always someone that has to start and someone that has to take the first step.

Matt Bowles: And can you talk a little bit about your thoughts on those safety precautions? I think it's important for folks to understand, first of all, about the actual trepidation of doing certain things and going to certain places. Like you mentioned to me, for example, that when you were based in Canada, you wanted to visit the U.S. and you did. You came to New York, but you decided not to fly through the airports in the U.S. and instead you decided to take a bus from Canada to the United States. Can you talk about that decision and sort of the broader context there? Like the broader sort of safety precaution that informs that decision, but also that it doesn't paralyze you from doing things like how do you navigate that?

Hebah Nigm: As I mentioned, one point has to be accommodation. So that's one very important aspect. But then also, when it comes to your travel destination, you need to think about where you're going. And also, some destinations might give you stronger sense of safety and others might not. So, for me, for example, when I went to Canada, I was a bit worried. Yes, I had never been to North America before that. That was a very new experience for me as well. But then traveling to the U.S. was a whole different experience again, because before that, all I knew was the things that you hear from on media, basically. So, I knew that things aren't necessarily great, especially because I decided to travel to the U.S. during the Trump administration. So, I was scared. I was scared of the airport, of airport security. And so, because I was in Canada already, I thought, you know what, I do want to still travel to the U.S., but I'm so scared of the airport, I'm just going to take the bus. I have the possibility. So that influenced my decision, but does not mean that I had to stop myself from going to the U.S. at all. And so, I think this shows us that when you're traveling, you need to think about your travel destination, you need to think about how you're traveling, but at the same time, don't let these things stop you from doing what you want to do some places, I would never travel on my own. So, if that's the case for you as well, try to find a group with which you feel safe to travel. Try to find people that you trust and travel with these people. Try to find friends who have the same interest as you and travel with these people. So maybe these precautions can give you that sense of safety that you need Also, again, I feel like accommodation is such a big point and aspect. Some people feel very casual about just traveling somewhere and then randomly looking for a place to stay. For me, that's very different and I can imagine that that's the same for many other people. So, if that's how you feel, find appropriate accommodations beforehand, talk to locals, try to find out about different places and then make your decision.

Matt Bowles: That's awesome advice, Hebah. I love that. So let me ask you a broader macro question now. Of all of the places that you have been at this point in your life, that you've traveled to and that you've experienced, when you reflect back on that, why do you continue to travel? What do you get out of it at this point in your life? What does travel mean to you?

Hebah Nigm: It means so much to me. I feel like obviously I learned so much about different languages and cultures, but also it gives me so much self-growth and self-development. I feel like I grew so much just by traveling and seeing all these different places and also having to be independent in a way. You are leaving your home, you're leaving the things you know, you're leaving your comfort zone and you find yourself in situations where you basically, you have to find a way, you have to find out what to do, how to do it, and you're on your own in a different country. So, this gives you so much self-confidence as well. It teaches you to rely on yourself. It teaches you to believe in your abilities, to believe in your strength as well.

Because you know there you can't just call your family, you can't just call a friend that lives nearby and then they come save you. No, you have to find your own way. And I feel like that gives you so much in terms of self-growth, self-development, independence, self-confidence. Also, you get to learn so many interesting things about so many different people. You get to see different perspectives on life, you get to see different lifestyles and you can also take from these experiences and also adopt them into your own lifestyle.

Matt Bowles: That is an awesome answer. I love that, Hebah. I now want to dive into your area of professional expertise and talk a bit about language learning. You are super impressive. You learned six languages fluently by the age of 23. And I know you are not done yet. You're already starting to learn additional languages. And so, I want to talk about that. Can you start, I just want to get because you're also not only a polyglot, you are also a language teacher. So, let's start with that and talk a little bit about your tips for somebody that wants to start the language learning process. I know some of your videos talk about different types of language learners and the importance of self-assessing what type of language learner you are. So, can you just start at the very beginning? If somebody wants to be serious about learning a language and learning it to conversational fluency, what are the first steps? How should they approach that?

Hebah Nigm: So, when I talked about my own learning experiences, I mentioned to you that education was the starting point. But what I learned in school wasn't enough for me. And I think the reason was that in school, usually you have a book, you have a teacher, you have a lesson, and then you're all taught in the same way because it makes sense, right? That's how school should work. But at the same time, when you have a class of 20, 30 students, they are all different individuals, they all have different abilities and different needs. And so, I think what I realized pretty early on was that school was not enough for me because it wasn't really giving me what I needed for my own learning experience. And so back then I had no idea about learner types or all these kind of things. But I think I kind of realized for myself that I wanted to learn differently. I did not want to learn the way I was taught in school. I wanted to learn it a different way. Now that I am a language teacher and I am someone that works a lot with languages and just looks into language learning a lot, I know that there are different learner types and I feel like it's very important that you understand what learner type you are. So, we have four learner types that we usually distinguish. The auditory, learner type, visual, verbal, and kinesthetic. And so, all of these learner types have different abilities and also different needs. And I think it's important that you understand what abilities you have. And then when it comes to your language learning, you adapt the process to those abilities and needs. And so, I know as a language teacher that I have a class of students that I need to teach. I need to find a common ground on which I can teach them. But at the same time, I know that these are all individuals who are different in their abilities, in their needs. And so, I feel like it's also very important to teach people, especially young people, but people in general, to understand that they are different. They need to learn things differently to have the results that they want. And so, I think that's why it's so important to self-assess and to understand what abilities you have as an individual and then go out and find the materials or find the different learning strategies that help you with your individual learning process.

Matt Bowles: I think that's really important. And then once folks do that and they have a sense of what type of learner they are and what works best for them, what tips do you have for accelerating their language learning process, getting to that fluency level as swiftly and efficiently as possible?

Hebah Nigm: I think the most important thing is to try and expose yourself to the language as much as possible. If you have friends in your community that speak that language, if you live in a country where

people speak that language, etc. But just like that, you know, the Internet has so much to offer. Just go on YouTube, go on the Internet and just look for content in the languages that you want to work on. There are so many things out there. So, make sure you expose yourself to the language as much as possible. And again, by knowing which abilities you have and which needs you have, you will also know if you need visual input, if you need audio input, if you need videos, etc. So, it's really, really important that you expose yourself to the language and that you are in touch with the language consistently.

Matt Bowles: And then what tips do you have, Hebah for really refining your accent and pronunciation and speaking more like a native?

Hebah Nigm: I feel like listening is very important. If we think about how children learn a language, usually they just listen to their surroundings. You know, you don't sit down with a child with a book and tell them about grammar. No, the child just lives around people, listens to them, and at some point, starts to speak like them. So, I feel like when you want to learn a language and you want to speak like a certain people, you have to listen to them first. So, it's really important that you get that audio input that you listen to people. If you are someone that is very visual, you can even have a look at different software that show you where in the mouth certain sounds are produced. For example, you can find out how certain sounds are produced differently in different languages. So, I think it's really important to focus on the sounds, but also on the intonation and the melody. So that's also a point that many people kind of ignore or not really pay much attention to. But sometimes the intonation is much more important than the actual pronunciation. So, I would say these two are very important. And these two can only be defined and worked on with audio input. So, make sure you listen to as much as possible. I would say if it's music, if it's movies, whatever audio input you get, all of that is very valuable. So, make sure you get that input, and at some point, you will see the results. You will try to sound like these people, you can try and imitate them, and at some point, you will see the results. And I'm sure your pronunciation will be much, much better than before.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, I think that's really good advice, and I think it's really good too. Like, one of the things that I found over the years as I've studied different languages for shorter periods of time, I mean, I haven't gotten to the fluency levels that you have in these languages, but when I go and stay a place for a while, I want to at least learn some of the language so I can do basic communications with people. And, you know, when I was studying Arabic, for example, one of the first things that I noticed about the Arabic language is that it has probably about five sounds, meaning, like pronunciations of particular letters. Five sounds that we do not have in English.

Hebah Nigm: That's so true.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, they do not exist in English. And so, if you've only spoken English, right, Like, it's different learning Arabic than it is learning, say, a Romance language. Right? Because if you're learning Spanish, there are different ways that people pronounce things. But, you know, you might roll your Rs a little bit or learn how to kind of do some of that stuff. But that's different, I think, from learning a brand-new sound that is literally not in your language. So, for me, when I started learning Arabic, you know, a lot of it just breaks down a lot more simply than you think. Like at first, if you look at the Arabic script and you've never seen that before, you're like, wow, that looks really different from English letters. But then you realize, oh, it's just an Alphabet which has around the same number of letters as English, and you just put them together this way and this is how you write, and all of a sudden you can read and phonetically sound things out. And in all of that. But I think in terms of the speaking part, like, for me, I was like, okay, there's about five sounds in this language that we simply do not have in English. And I need to teach myself how to make

those sounds and to do them properly. So, I was like, that's literally the first thing that I'm doing. I'm just going to practice these five sounds and once I say them properly and I can put them into whatever it is that I'm saying, all of a sudden, I would get this. Even if I was just saying something super simple, like just like a one sentence thing, if I was saying it and I was pronouncing those particular sounds that we don't have in English properly, all of a sudden people would be just like, wow, your Arabic is amazing. I was like, it is. I hardly know any.

Hebah Nigm: But that's the trick, you know, that's how you trick people into thinking that you are actually awesome at the language. And by gaining that confidence, you actually become even better at the language. So, it's just a positive situation for all of you. So that's how it is with learning languages and pronunciation, I would say.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, that's awesome. Well, I want you to talk a little bit now, Hebah, about your YouTube channel, Hebah's Rollercoaster, and what type of content you're putting out there and what folks can expect when they come and check out your channel.

Hebah Nigm: So, as a teacher, it's obviously one of my main aims and goals to encourage my students to be courageous and try out different things and do different things. And after a while I realized that I don't want to have that impact only on my students in my classroom. And that's it. I wanted to reach out to a broader audience. I wanted to reach out to more people, find more people who can relate to me and my situation and give them hope and also motivation to try and learn different languages and travel the world and see different cultures. So that's my main goal with my YouTube channel, where I'm trying to talk about all these experiences that I've had so far. I talk about language, learning language, teaching cultures, identity, race, my Muslim identity, all these different aspects, hoping that obviously people can relate and feel motivated and encouraged to try and go out, explore these things about themselves, be more courageous and learn about themselves, but also about these different things that just exist around us in the world. There's so much to learn, there's so much to see. And basically, that was the main intention with this YouTube channel. I wanted people to relate. I wanted people to feel encouraged and motivated and I just wanted to create a positive space where we talk about languages and cultures and identity, where we learn from one another and where we just find out what is out there together on this platform.

Matt Bowles: Well, I think your YouTube channel is awesome. You have it broken out into playlists of different categories. So, if people want to go and learn languages and get your language learning tips, they can just go to that playlist and watch through that. If they want to hear your travel experiences, if they want to hear your social and political reflections and commentary and all that, there's a playlist for that. So, I love how you have it broken out. I've definitely learned a lot from checking out your YouTube channel and we're going to link it up in the show notes so that all the listeners can go and check it out and connect with you there as well. And Hebah, at this point, are you ready to move into *The Lightning Round*?

Hebah Nigm: I am ready.

Matt Bowles: Let's do it. What is one book that has significantly influenced you over the years that you'd most recommend people check out?

Hebah Nigm: It's so difficult to just pick one book, I would say. I'm usually someone that loves anything autobiographical, anything where people talk about their cultural identity and experiences. So, one book that I have been reading and enjoying a lot recently is the book Born A Crime by Trevor Noah. I love how

he's talking about apartheid South Africa and growing up in these dynamics. So, books like that, I would suggest that book to anyone that wants to read something very interesting about cultural identity and just how the societal situation can have such a big influence on people's self-image.

Matt Bowles: Awesome pick. All right, if you could have dinner with any one person who's currently alive today that you've never met, just dinner and conversation for an evening with that you and that person, who would you choose?

Hebah Nigm: Well, you know, having mentioned Trevor Noah's book, I have to say Trevor Noah, but I would also mention Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern. She's very impressive as well.

Matt Bowles: Nice. Those are really good picks. All right, Hebah, knowing everything that you know now, if you were able to go back in time and give one piece of advice to your 18-year-old self, which would not be very far back in time, but you have done a lot from 18 till now. So, what advice would you give to 18-year-old Hebah?

Hebah Nigm: Just do it. Be courageous. That would be my advice.

Matt Bowles: Awesome. All right, of all the places in the world that you have traveled up to this point, what are your top three favorite travel destinations you'd most recommend people to check out?

Hebah Nigm: This is such a difficult question because usually I would tell people to just go everywhere and anywhere, but I think definitely Egypt. I know I'm being biased because I'm originally Egyptian, but Egypt is a must. And then Morocco was very impressive as well. And then any place in Europe. I think there are just so many places in Europe that people have to see. Spain is very, very impressive. Lots of history, very beautiful.

Matt Bowles: Awesome. I agree. I've been to all three of those places multiple times because I keep going back because they are just as amazing as you described. So, I think that those are really, really good picks. All right, final question, Hebah. What are your top three bucket list destinations? These are places that you've never been. They're the highest on your list. You would most love to go.

Hebah Nigm: So, number one is Mexico. I think I'm super interested in seeing Mexico. I have never been to Latin America, so that's definitely on my bucket list. One of the very first destinations. Then I would say Mali. I'm very interested to see Mali. And, well, what's my number three? I would say maybe Japan. Japan would be very interesting too.

Matt Bowles: Those are awesome picks. I've been to Mexico and I've been to Japan. I've spent a bunch of time in those places. So, I can absolutely give you some tips when you're ready to start planning your trips there.

Hebah Nigm: I'd love that.

Matt Bowles: I've not been to Mali, though. Can you talk about your interest in and why that's so high on your list?

Hebah Nigm: Just like the culture and the stories that I heard about the people and the lifestyle and I've had a few friends travel there and the pictures are so beautiful and I've heard the best stories. So, I'm just

so excited to see what this place has to offer and I just want to meet the people and just experience the culture.

Matt Bowles: That's so amazing. That's really awesome. All right, Hebah, this was such an amazing conversation. I want you to let folks know how they can find you, how they can follow you on Instagram, how they can come and check out your YouTube channel. How do you want people to come into your universe and connect with you?

Hebah Nigm: Well, first of all, I want to thank you, Matt, so much. This was an awesome conversation. I loved it so, so much. And if people want to find me, so I have an Instagram page called Hebah's Rollercoaster as well on YouTube, obviously. My channel is called Hebah's Rollercoaster and you can also email me at hebasrollercoaster@gmail.com.

Matt Bowles: Amazing. We are going to link all of that up in the show notes so folks can just go to one place at TheMaverickShow.com. Just go to the show notes for this episode and there you will find all of Hebah's social media handles and the links to her channels as well as her email so you can connect with her. Hebah, this was amazing. Thank you so much for coming on the show.

Hebah Nigm: Thank you so much for having me. It was amazing.

Matt Bowles: All right, good night, everybody.