The Role of Age as a Motivating Factor in Iraqi Immigrants' English Learning in Australia

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Abstract
Iraqi families continue to migrate to Australia in significant numbers each year. These families need to learn the language of their new home. This is not an easy thing to do, even if they do have some understanding of English from their studies back home. In learning their new language there are many factors at play. It is important to understand these factors which are influencing their English learning, and age is one of them.

This qualitative case study examines the role of age in English learning motivation within Iraqi immigrant families in Australia. The study was conducted with twelve members of three newly arrived Iraqi immigrant families who had been in Australia for less than three years. The participant group comprised young children, teenagers and adults. Semi-structured interviews involving a questionnaire were used to gather numeric data to generate the findings of this study.

The findings show that the parents and their children's English learning motivation is not the same. The children were more motivated towards English learning than their parents. They also received more support in their learning compared to the adult learners. Another important finding is the positive correlation between the children's motivation to master English and both their time in Australia and the growth of their social networks.

Keywords: *English, Learning, Motivation, Iraqi, Immigrants, English, Learning*

I. INTRODUCTION

Living in Australia, English plays a key role in immigrants' social life and settlement. Iraqi immigrants in Australia, like other immigrants, are entitled to 510 hours of free English tuition offered by the Australian government to help them settle in Australia. The majority of the Iraqi immigrants join English classes soon after their arrival in the new land. Given that these immigrants typically arrive in Australia as part of a family unit, their backgrounds, skills and motivations in English learning are varied, particularly within the same family, due to sociocultural factors such as age, gender, religion, social networks and family relations (see Abdilah & Chowdhury, 2013;Bao, Abdilah & Chowdhury, 2012; Casimiro et al, 2007; De Courcy, 2007;Rida&Milton, 2001).This makes Iraqi immigrants' English learning and use as a whole a rather complex process, and there are many aspects to this.

The cultural background of both the children and their families has a great impact on the immigrant children's acquisition of a second language. Immigrant children, in general, have their own particular way of learning that is usually linked to their cultural background. Muslim immigrant children for example usually receive intensive support in their second language learning from their mothers. This is linked to the role of the Muslim woman in her family as the housekeeper who usually spends more time with children, and this includes inspecting or assisting with school homework. In multicultural countries such as Australia, the immigrant children's learning of the host language can often be different from that of the local students in regard to parental support. For example, immigrant students can be given more consistent support and encouragement from their families as their families see second language mastering as a key element in their children's future success (Bao, Abdilah & Chowdhury, 2012). Locally born families, on the other hand, do not pay such attention to their children's learning of the host country language, simply because they see that the children will acquire the language automatically at home or school, and that these children have been learning and practicing their native language from a very early age in their home and community (Bradshaw, 2009; Chiswick et al. 2005).

Although studies such as that of Mansouri and wood (2008) indicate that immigrant children may achieve greater parental support, this does not mean that immigrant students achieve better results than local students in their language learning. Cristensen and Stanat (2007) conducted a study based on a survey which gathered data from 15-year-old immigrant childrenin regard to their proficiency in the 'language of instruction'. The research was carried out at schools in14 countries. Even though the study reported that most of the participating countries had a gap in language proficiency between the local and immigrant children, findings indicate that in Australia there were "no significant differences between the performance of non-immigrant students

and immigrant students" (p. 2) in regard to English learning performance. The study concluded that these "similar achievement levels" stem from many factors including the support given to immigrant students during their study (Cristensen&Stanat, 2007, p. 6). This support clearly raised the learning levels of the immigrant students to the same levels as that achieved by the native speakers.

Chiswick et al (2005), in considering what factors are at play in childrens' learning of L2 state that learning takes place within the household. They also say it takes place during the intense exposure children have to English in childcare, kindergarten and school. Thus, the L2 learning of children is linked clearly to their age. The younger they are, the more their concerns lie with their unconscious (and sometimes conscious) need to learn the language in order to fit in.

There are other impacts on children's L2 learning, of course. These include the education of the parents, particularly in L2. Their (the parents) motivation and success in learning the L2 has an impact on the language learning achievement of their children. The more significant their education, the more likely the children are to learn L2 easily and effectively (Chiswick et al, 2005). Clearly this would be because the parent's attitudes would unconscious affect their actions, expectations and their demands on their children, and therefore influence their children to have higher expectations.

II. AGE AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISTION

Many L2 (second language) researchers agree that children, young children, and adults differ in their second language acquisition (Bialystok &Hakuta 1999; Hakuta& Bialystok, 2003; Bradshaw, 2009; Long, 1993). There are widespread beliefs that children are fast learners of a second language. In specific situations such as moving to a new community, children acquire the new language more easily than their parents do. The great amount of exposure they have to the second language – for example at school, playgrounds, sports clubs as well as their need to assimilate into their new community, helps children master the new language faster than adults (Bradshaw, 2009). Chiswick et al. (2005) also support this argument and note that immigrant children "acquire [L2] proficiency more rapidly than their parents" (p. 246) as they have greater exposure to the language and culture of the L2 country than do their parents.

Chiswick et al. point out that acquiring the L2 is not only a different process for parents and their children, but it also differs between children. They argue that older children learn the language faster than younger ones due to the amount of exposure these older children get in the host community in comparison to their youngest siblings who are usually at home interacting primarily with their parents and in their first language (Chiswick et al., 2005).

This argument was also supported by Long and Doughty (2003) who stated that older children pick up the new language faster than the younger ones as they (older children)generally acquire knowledge faster than younger children.

Parents on the other hand, are generally perceived as less successful L2 learners (with "less successful" means it is more difficult for them to learn an L2). This is for a number of reasons including their lesser exposure to the target language than their children have. However, when "motivated' they are better L2 learners in the areas of "morphological and syntactic measures" (Long, 1993, p. 197). Cummins (1981) furthermore supports this argument and states that adult L2 learners acquire L2 "syntax, morphology, and literacy skills more rapidly than younger learners because these aspects of language proficiency are closely related to cognitive skills" (p. 136) which are more advanced in adult learners.

Although it may be harder for adults to learn the L2, but when motivating factors are driving them, they can learn quite effectively. They may perceive the need for mastering an L2 and therefore consciously work very hard to learn it. Their need for learning their L2 may involve a desire to fit more successfully into their new community, or it may reflect the need to be better equipped to relate to others of a different first language in the workplace. It is clear that mastering the L2 is important for all adults, unless they are confined to their homes or to small communities of others who speak the same first language. Children on the other hand have different needs and therefore approach learning differently. In social settings, such as while playing at school or being involved in clubs or other groups, they have significant exposure to the target language. Although children are less efficient learners when compared with adult learners who have more needs and self-discipline in their second language learning (Bradshaw, 2009, p. 80) and greater cognitive abilities, they are nevertheless successful learners and their learning comes naturally due to their immersion in the target language.

Immigrant children's L2learning, especially in English-speaking countries such as the UK, USA, Canada and Australia, has been a field of inquiry for many decades. Studies in these countries have researched the immigrant children's English learning and the factors that affect it. De Courcy (2007) for example, researched Iraqi immigrants' English learning in a family context. He reported that child participants had higher English competency compared to the parent participants.

Bialystok and Hakuta (1999) conducted a study to analyse English proficiency and its relation to age among immigrants in the USA. 24,903 speakers of

Chinese and 38,787 speakers of Spanish participated in the study. The researchers documented that learners who had engaged in L2 learning from childhood and had longer formal education reported better proficiency than adults who started late or had less formal education. The researchers also reported that "children are better second language learners than adults because their brains are specially organized to learn languages" (p. 175).Thus Bialystok and others push children forward as better language learners because of innate properties of their brains, while others such as Bradshaw (2009) and Chiswick et al. (2005) assert that children are better language learners because of their greater exposure to the language.

Studying these differences, one question to be asked is: when should children start their second language learning? SLA (Second Language Acquisition) theorists agree that this depends on whether there is a critical period for second language learning. Long (1993) defines the critical period as "a time of heightened responsiveness to certain kinds of environmental stimuli, bounded on both sides by states of lesser responsiveness with abrupt or gradual increases or decreases in learning ability expected " (p. 196).

However, researchers (e.g. Bialstok&Hakurta 1999; Hakuta&Bialstok, 2003; Long, 1993) claim that there is no supportive evidence for the critical period. Moreover, they doubt the existence of a critical period in second language learning. Bialstok and Hakurta (1999) argue that if there is a critical period for learning a second language, there must be a critical period for acquiring the first language as well, and for everything we learn in general (e.g. music, baseball, and swimming).

Hakurta and Bialstok (2003) conducted a huge study to test the critical period hypothesis for second language acquisition on data from the 1990 US Census using responses from 2.3 million immigrants with Spanish or Chinese language backgrounds. They conclude that "the pattern of decline in second language acquisition failed to produce the necessary discontinuity that is an essential hallmark of a critical period" (p. 2).

Viewed in this light, whether or not there is a critical period, a person's learning of a second language is overwhelmed by his/her needs to learn that language. Immigrant children who learn English in English-speaking countries, for instance, are considered as successful learners because of their remarkable integration in the English-speaking culture and their need to sustain this integration. Adults on the other hand, have greater cognitive capacities: they can consciously structure their learning more effectively according to their needs.

Regardless of their being (or not being)a critical period for learning L2, Chiswick et al (2005) state that immigrant English language skills are greater the younger the age at migration. They continue in stating that llanguage proficiency declines with age (Chiswick et al, 2005) and this "is generally attributed to the greater difficulty that immigrants have acquiring language skills when they migrate at an older age" (p. 252).

This is consistent with findings reported in the literature to the effect that the young "have a far greater capacity to learn languages than the old, and hence immigrants who are children would be expected to acquire English language skills more rapidly than adult immigrants" (Chiswick et al, 2005, p. 255).

In 1981 Cummins contributed much to the related literature. Based on solid research of his own and studying many other authors and researchers, he stresses that "language proficiency is not a unitary construct" (p. 132). He states that "some aspects of language proficiency, such as reading skills, are strongly related to cognitive and academic development, whereas others involving such basic interpersonal communicative skills as oral fluency and phonology, are less related to cognitive and academic development" (p. 132). From this he argues that older children (and obviously adults) more easily learn cognitive and academic aspects of L2 because of their greater cognitive maturity. He then stresses that older learners do not have a learning advantage with aspects of L2 which "are unrelated to cognitive maturity" (p. 132).

Cognitive maturity refers to reading skills, academic development, understanding of syntax and morphology, a strong vocabulary, and reading comprehension skills (Cummins, 1981; Appel, 1979; Ekstrand, 1977; Genesee, 1979, and Skutnabb-Kangas &Toukomaa, 1976) which improves with age and therefore are aspects of L2 acquisition that are stronger in older children and adults.

Contrary to this, Cummins states that there is no clear age advantage with non-cognitive interpersonal communicative skills such as "oral fluency, phonology and listening comprehension" (Cummins, 1981; Ekstrand, 1977; Fathman, 1978: Snow & Hoefnagel, 1978 &Walburg&Pinzur, 1978).

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This current research is a qualitative case study. Two data collecting methods were used to generate data from the participants: a Likert-scale questionnaire that was based on the Attitudes Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) developed by Gardner (1985, 2004b) and a semi-structured interview technique using open-ended questions. The questionnaire consisted of 16 items divided into two sections. The first section (items 1-8) investigated the respondents' attitudes towards English learning and use in Australia. The second section (items 9-16)was directed to the child participants and used to measurethe parents' help or encouragement towards their children's English learning. (The word

"children" refers to both young children as well as teenagers.)

In this study, the AMTB was used to measure the Iraqi learners' (the parents and their children) Attitudes and Motivations towards English learning and use in Australia and the parents' encouragement and support in their children learning. The questions in the interviews were based on the participants' answers to the questionnaire items and were used to obtain more information about their perspectiveson the questionnaire topics. As in the questionnaire, the interview questions focused on three major components: the participants' attitudes towards English learning and use, their motivation for learning the language, and the parents' encouragement of their children's learning of English in Australia. (Questions regarding this topic were directed to the participants aged under 18).

The study was conducted with twelve members of newly arrived Iraqi immigrant families who had been in Australia for less than three years. Three families were chosen to take part in the research. Each family had participants from three different age groups: young children, teenagers and adults (parents). This variety of ages within the same family provided rich and authentic data that enabled a deep investigation of the correlation between age and L2 learning and use in Australia.

Almost all the participants had arrived in Australia with very poor English skills. They all joined English classes soon after their arrival. However, their English proficiency differed according to their age, gender and past level of education. The following section presents the findings with discussion of these findings in relation to the literature reviewed above.

IV. FINDINGS FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Five Likert-scale items were used in the questionnaire to measure the parents' encouragement of their children's English learning in Australia. Only the child participants were asked to complete the parents' encouragement section in the questionnaire. Six children completed this section.

Of the five items, only two were reported in the findings because of their commonality between participants. These items deal with parents' encouragement of their children to (1) learn more English, and (2) practise more English. The findings reveal that the children have strong support from their parents to learn and use English. All six of the children answered "Strongly Agree" to the statement about their parents encouraging them to learn more English. Similarly, four answered "Strongly Agree" and two answered "Agree" to the statement about their parents encouraging them to practise more English. The daily support the parents give to their children appeared to increase their motivation towards English learning to a level greater than the motivation of their parents, who lacked this support.

The findings show that the child participants have an advantage over their parents in regard to English learning. They have the parents' support and constant encouragement to learn and practise more English, which in turn improves their English competence. The parents on the other hand do not have such support as most of them do not have parents (or relatives) in Australia. It is worth pointing out that the research participants came to Australia with their immediate families only, so that the family unit was comprised of just parents and children.

Another interesting finding concerns "Attitude Towards English". Eleven out of the twelve participants answered "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" to the item which states that they enjoy learning English. Six of the answers were "Strongly Agree" while the remaining five were just "Agree". Unsurprisingly, five of these "Strongly Agree" answers were ticked by children. Since the ticked item was used to measure the learners' Attitudes Towards English, the children were perceived as having stronger positive attitudes than their parents.

V. FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

Questions in the interviews were based on the participants' answers to the items in the questionnaire. Children, for instance, who agreed to the statement that their parents encourage them to study more English, were asked open-ended questions to explore their ideas about this. Examples of the questions are: What kind of support do you get from your parents? How do your parents encourage you to practise more English?

For the parents, no questions were directed to them regarding their encouragement because the focus of this part of the study was to explore the effect the parents' encouragement had on their children's learning of English – through the words of the children. Nevertheless, the results obtained from interviewing the two groups reveal significant differences in their English learning motivation.

Almost all of the children stated that they received encouragement from their parents to study and use more English. The encouragement was in the form of direct support with their study, such as helping in doing the homework or assisting with the meanings of new words. It also was in the form of practising the language with their children in order to improve their speaking and listening skills. This encouragement in its varied forms motivated the children to study harder.

Akram (15, son), for example, reported that he received direct support from his father in his English learning and that this support provided him with more confidence to continue his learning:

> *My father helps me in doing my homework most of the time. He helps me write my reports and presentations and sometimes he gives me the meanings of the*

> *new words. His support makes me feel more confident in my study.*

Hawra (10, daughter) also stressed the role of her parents in motivating her to learn more English. She reported:

> *My parents always help me in my homework. When I have new words or when I want to write something in English, I go to my father and we work together to do it.*

Regarding the parents, they did not receive the same support in their study, even though they were also students just like their children. The parents, of course, are the adult figures with the role of providing support, not receiving it. Other relatives such as their own parents or siblings were typically still located overseas. None of them had extended families in Australia. It can be assumed that the support the children get from their family increases their motivation to study more English when compared to their parents who lack this motivator. However, parents did get motivation from their peers and teachers, just as children do.

The findings therefore reveal that age was a factor in the motivation of L2 learners. Three of the parent participants stated that they faced difficulties in learning English because of their age. Falah (56, father), for example, studied English for more than six months soon after his arrival in Australia. According to him, studying a new language demanded commitment to school and doing homework as well as the class work. He did all these things but complained that it was very difficult for him to do it well at his age. His health was another obstacle for him as he suffered from a severe back pain, after years in Iraq of driving a taxi which was in poor condition:

> *I like studying English because it will enable me to understand people here. Mmm, but at this ag, it is difficult for me as a sick old man to go every day to the school or to do my homework., I think I have had enough.*

Fatima (44, mother) also stated that she faced difficulties in her English study because of her age. She said she could not learn easily because of that, and that her learning was limited to basic English skills:

> *The course was 512 hours and lasted for two semesters;I could not learn much English because I was not interested [enough] to go to school every day… I quit school 35 years ago; it is very difficult for me now to commit to learn new things.*

The children, in contrast, did not have such "age" restrictions and therefore they did not have the same difficulties in their study. They enjoyed their English learning and particularly the activities and the fun they had throughout the process of learning.

VI. DICUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

So there are many factors affecting children's learning of L2. Age is one of these, but as can be seen from the examples above, the same factors influencing children to be motivated to learn, are possibly also influencing their parents to learn the L2.

Contrary to this, Whitaker (2010) in her research states that, "ifimmigrantswhospeakacommonlanguageotherthanEnglishareclusteredtogetherinanarea,itsuppressesthenee dtouseEnglish" (p. 3), adding also that this clustering in the native language takes away any incentive to learn English. This clustering is more likely to occur among older Iraqi English learners in Australia. The children are often in situations where they need to learn the language to assimilate (from school, kinder etc to clubs and groups and just relationships with other non-Iraqi children). Their parents, on the other hand, may be living in situations where they are relatively isolated from none Iraqis in the communities they are living in (for example, mothers at home, older girls feeling reluctant to mix because of cultural reasons, fathers in jobs that require little interaction with others).

However, nothing changes the fact that, "ThebetteranimmigrantisabletouseEnglish,thebetterhe /shecanintegrateintothehostsociety" (Whitaker, 2010, p. 2).Chiswick,Lee,andMiller(2005a) are just some of countless researchers who have found that many factors affect language proficiency. They stress that these factors include the characteristics of the individual, but they also find a relationship between the L2 skills of parents and that of their children (particularly in Australia). They further add that mothers have a greater positive affect on their children's language capital than fathers (Chiswick,etal.2005a).

The relationship between age and second language (L2) acquisition is twofold. Researchers (such as (Bialystok &Hakuta, 1999; Long, 2007, 1993) argue that children acquire L2 faster than adults. Bialystok &Hakuta (1999) for example, argue that a child's brain is "specially organized to learn languages" (p. 175). In contrast, Bradshaw (2009, p. 80) states that young children of school age have less exposure to the target language than adults do, which makes them "less effective learners"

The findings from the study reveal that parents and their children share many common thoughts and perspectives about English learning in Australia. However, a closer look at these findings shows that the children of the Iraqi Immigrants seem more motivated and have more exposure to English in both

educational and social settings when compared to their parents.

On the one hand, this seems to provide a strong support to Bialystok &Hakuta (1999) and Long (2007, 1993) argument about the effectiveness of child learners. On the other hand it seems to contradict Bradshaw's (2009) contention that the children are less effective learners. What is most apparent, however, is the positive attitudes these children have towards English and its target community, which drive them to learn and use more English.

The youngest children for example showed significant positive attitudes towards English because most of them need the language to "play with friends in the school playground" (Saif). In addition to needing English to play with peers, the child participants reported other factors which motivated them in their English learning, factors such as wanting to understand and speak with the teachers and wanting to be able to read story books.

The teenagers also showed strong positive attitudes towards English. Theyspoke about making friends from the "other sexgroup" (Akram) and mastering English to "talk with my friend in English without stopping" (Hazim).Such findings fall in line with Masgoret& Gardner's (2003) contention that the motivated learner has greater motivation to identify with the target second language society as well as favourable attitudes toward the learning situation.

The data obtained also shows that these children receive constant support from their parents in their English learning. This constant encouragement and daily support these children get serve to facilitate their learning and make it smoother and more comfortable. Parents, however, do get some support from their peers and teachers, but not to the same extent as their children.

Considering this, one can assume that the parents have less interest in learning and using English in Australia compared to their children. Despite their positive attitudes towards English, the parents' learning of English is usually limited to their basic daily necessary use whilst their children, on the other hand, are seen as keen learners who are always eager to learn more English as their stay in Australia lengthens and their social network grows.

This leads to the next significant difference in English learning between the child participants and their parents, their need to learn English. The need of the children to learn English grows in parallel with their settling time in Australia. That is, the longer they live in Australia, the more they need to master this language, to continue their study successfully and to communicate effectively with their peers. In contrast, the parents may reach a time in which they will stop learning the language due to their age, as they feel no need for more learning because they see their L1 language as being quite enough for their living in the new community. This can be seen clearly in their quotations above: see Falah(56, father) and Fatima (44, mother) in their thoughts on continuing English learning in Australia.

With more contact with others speaking the target language, which in this case is English the child participants of this study seem to be more motivated to learn and use English compared to their parents. While many Iraqi adult learners are both motivated and skilled (particularly with academic backgrounds), this motivation is not enough to outweigh the less conscious motivation of their children to learn the L2. Thus this could be a significant factor which allows the generalisation that with increasing age adults are less effective learners of L2 within the context of Iraqi migrants living in Australia.

Table1:
Differences in the English (L2) learning of children versus adults.

Children	Adults
• Receive parental encouragement to learn and practise English. • Receive their parents' help in doing homework and other learning activities. • Are highly motivated in order to fit in with their peers and understand the world around them. • The longer they are in Australia, the greater their motivation to learn English. • Have more time and opportunity to learn and practise English both at school and out in the community.	• Have little encouragement from their peers and teachers • Have little "at-school" help from peers and teachers. • Are less motivated (compared to their children) because they see their need to English is limited to their basic daily use. • Time and age generally diminished their motivation to learn English. • Have less time and opportunity to learn and practise English due to home and life duties including taking care of children.

The above figure summarises differences between the children and their parents' English learning, indicating that age is a relevant factor.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that age is a factor in the differences among Iraqi immigrant families' English learning in Australia. For instance, the parents' motivation towards English language learning may decrease after a period of time because of reaching the needed amount of English to survive in Australia, whilst the children's motivation may increase because of their increased needs for English in their future study or work. Another significant difference is the amount of support each age group is getting in regard to second language learning. On the one hand, the findings show that the child learners are getting a remarkable support from their parents in their English learning. On the other hand, the adult learners lack this kind of support because they have no extended families in Australia. They (the children) also have more time and less responsibilities, which makes their learning easier and faster than their parents. Adults, on the other hand, have many commitments such as attending work, maintaining their homes and taking care of the children. These activities affect their language learning negatively.To sum up, both the parents and their children have a need to learn and use English in the Australia. However, the findings reveal some major differences in the English learning in the two age groups (Figure 1).

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