Educational Background and Identity: Factors Influencing Arab Women Learning English as a Second Language

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Abstract

In the UK, being unable to communicate in English is a significant barrier to social inclusion. Each ESOL student brings a wealth of cultural experience and diversity to the country, but without sufficient proficiency in English to interact outside the home, migrants, refugees and settled communities struggle to integrate, can feel socially isolated and struggle to find employment.This is even more so for women, many of whom have childcare responsibilities. Arab women form a large proportion of the ESOL population, and often come from diverse backgrounds; some with high-level academic qualifications from their home countries and others who never attended school. Despite these stark differences, what commonly brings the ESOL class together is a genuine motivation to learn a language that is vital to living a more inclusive life in the UK.

Over the past few decades, numerous studies have investigated contrastive linguistics and the transfer errors of Arab students learning English (Scott and Tucker, 1974; Hanania and Gradman, 1977; Altakhaineh, 2010). Recent research, however, has hardly addressed the complex social, cultural and interactional influences on their learning processes. With a focus on ESOL students in South Yorkshire, the present study employs ethnographic methods, including questionnaires, lesson observations and focus groups, with ten female Arab learners of English, to shed light on the role of educational background and identity on language development. The findings reveal an interesting intersection of educational background and self-efficacy beliefs and highlight the significance of perceived identity in language learning. The study concludes with

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recommendations for practitioners to employ in the ESOL classroom and draws particular attention to the need for more one-to-one sessions between student and teacher at the start of courses and greater opportunities to work on practical individual learning plans. This is to allow teachers to thoroughly get to know their learners and ask the necessary questions that will enable them to prepare effective lessons, conduct beneficial formative assessments and support their students to become more productive learners of English, in turn unlocking their potential to converse more confidently and apply the acquired skills in wider society.

Keywords: ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), adult community learning, identity, motivation, L1 (First Language), L2 (Second Language), SLA (Second Language Acquisition), ILPs (Individual Learning Plans).

Introduction

For most immigrants, attending ESOL lessons at community centres, further education colleges and higher education institutions is the first step to learning English. With more than 180,000 students taking ESOL classes in England alone (a substantial reduction from 219,000 in 2010, due to funding cuts in the sector (NIACE, 2011)) - and a significant proportion of these being female Arabs- the need for research that examines the experiences of these learners and the strengths and challenges associated with their English language development has not been more pressing. The critical analysis of factors relating to educational background and perceived identity in this study aims to fill the evident gap in research and support teachers of ESOL, ESL and EFL to identify and address associated issues more effectively. This study is necessary for the promotion of integration and progression of this large group of learners.

Background of the Study

The development of a positive identity is regarded a prerequisite for successful learning (Lin, 2007). The link between language and identity has been acknowledged by anthropologists and social science researchers alike, with Holloway (1999) defining identity as the reference point from which an individual views him or herself and the world. Since individuals may be defined by the way they speak, language plays a central role in identity formation, and can subsequently have a notable effect on the promotion or inhibition of motivation for learning a second language. The theory of *psychology of place* (Fullilove, 1996) argues that it is through cultural association, or *familiarity*, that individuals develop knowledge and an identity connected to the sense of self, which ultimately emerges from one's intimate and immediate environment. Thus, since identity is the primary reference point for individuals, it is reasonable that the immediate cultural and educational background tied to a student's identity is valued.

According to Firth and Wagner (1997), research on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has typically been preoccupied with language learning as an individual cognitive process. Much recent research on language learners and multilinguals, however, has undergone a shift in emphasis from "the interface between language use and linguistic development to the interface between language use and identity" (Block, 2007: 867). This study adopts a constructivist view of learner identity, one that resists static categorisations, but rather views it as "fragmented and contested in nature" (Block, 2007: 864). In the same way that individuals can recognise themselves as professionals or, for example, members of a specific gender or ethnic group, they should also be able to identify themselves as learners (Falsafi, 2010). Thus, while the construction of social,

gender and ethnic identities has been addressed at large (Frable, 1997), research on the concept of learner identity and its influence on second language learning is less available, despite its potential for facilitating the accomplishment of wider societal goals and challenges.

Problem Statement

This study examines aspects of the ESOL experience in adult community learning institutions in South Yorkshire to reveal some of the challenges faced by female Arab students. Through qualitative and quantitative methods, this study attempts to examine two key research questions:

1. Does a link exist between individual and parental educational background, and the perceived progress of female Arab students on ESOL courses?

2. How can ESOL practitioners use information on learners' educational background and identity to effectively engage students and improve learner achievement?

In this investigation, a wealth of rich data was uncovered, including feelings, perspectives and responses to both open and closed questions, which should aid other practitioners in understanding the challenges faced by Arab women learning English. Social and cultural implications also became evident in the study as barriers to progress that even the learners had not previously acknowledged.

Hypothesis

1. Parental educational background has a positive effect on the second language learning aptitude of their offspring.

2. ILPs and one-to-one time with tutors can be utilised more effectively to improve understanding of students' backgrounds and facilitate tailoring of learning to individual needs.

Objectives

The objectives are to:

1. Explore the relationship between each of the factors of educational background and identity on perceived success in learning English as a second language.

2. Examine the expected and unexpected challenges of learning ESOL for Arab women.

3. Propose specific actions that practitioners can implement to enhance classroom dynamics and improve language learning efficiency.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study lies in its investigation of factors which contribute to the struggles, or clear successes, of Arab women learning English, with a desire to ascertain if, in

210

reality, challenges faced by these learners are solely related to their educational background and/or identity.

Methods
Data Collection

The paradigm that informed this research process was of an Interpretivist nature, defined by Burton and Bartlett (2009: 21) as "not viewing society as having a fixed structure […] because the social world is created by the interactions of individuals". This approach was adopted as it was the most appropriate for the research questions and the intention to "interpret the specific" by understanding the meanings behind the actions of the participants (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011: 35). The research was conducted through a mixed methods enquiry, where two of the data collection methods- observations and the focus group- were qualitative, and the questionnaire was quantitative. Ten participants completed the questionnaire, seven were observed in ESOL classes and six took part in the focus group. A demographic snapshot of the participants in the research is provided in Figure 1.

We decided to go with convenience sampling, as the sample was selected primarily on the basis of what we were able to access. Whilst this is an approach in small-scale pieces of research , one of the strongest rationales for this method is in this particular study is that the group under study are not generally easy to access but we were able to establish a sufficient degree of contact and trust with all the participants in order to be able to conduct a viable piece of research.

We focused our research on an in-depth study on a smaller number of participants to allow us to develop more complex insights. This meant studying people who are not representative of a wider population, but who are worth studying precisely because they represent exceptional, critical or intense examples of the phenomenon (learning English) which we are interested in. This particular source of data which we were able to access in a way that is unusually rich, and which could not be obtained in the same way by other researchers. Our findings are not, therefore, straightforwardly generalizable to a wider population, but nevertheless have the potential to generate valuable insights. The basic aim here, though, is to be able to say something theoretically about the findings from the particular sample we have studied in a way that generates insights about other cases or contexts. One implication of this is that our study is based on non-probability samples is designed in a way that is consciously informed by both existing theoretical debates and the development of new theories.

The mixed methods approach has openly been recognised as one which increases validity (Jick, 1979). Whilst it is acknowledged that all methods have limitations, a mixed methods approach allows biases inherent in any single method to neutralise or cancel those of others. As a result, triangulation was established as a means for seeking convergence across a number of data collection methods, and in this study, facilitated a more reliable assessment of the factors influencing Arab women's progress in ESOL as the data was approached from different vantage points. The objective of the methods employed in the present study was to probe, primarily, the female learners' thoughts, values, "prejudices perceptions, views and feelings" on the subjects of identity, interaction and second language learning progress (Wellington, 2008: 71). Whist the overarching purpose of the questionnaires and focus group was to elicit the unobservable, we were not looking to establish any inherent truth. Postmodernist theory has, after all, taught us that there is "no single or absolute truth in social situations" (Usher and Edwards, 1994: 19 cited in Wellington, 2008: 71).

Prior to data collection, all participants were clearly informed of the purpose of the research that their contributions would remain confidential and their true names not used. Voluntary informed consent was sought and confirmed through a Research Participant Consent Form (Appendix 1).

Figure 1: Profile of Participants

	Age (years)	Martial Status	Country of Origin	Length of Time in UK (years)	Number of Children	Employment Status
Ro'aa	24-29	Married	Libya	Less than 1	0	Unemployed
Fayrouz	24-29	Married	Iraq	4-6	2	Unemployed
Kadija	24-29	Married	Yemen	7-9	2	Unemployed
Amal	30-35	Married	Iraq	4-6	1	Unemployed
Anisa	30-35	Single	Libya	Less than 1	0	Employed (Teacher of Arabic)
Sanaa	30-35	Married	Libya	4-6	2	Unemployed
Abidah	36-41	Married	Yemen	10-12	3	Unemployed
Zeynah	36-41	Married	Yemen	10-12	3	Unemployed
Maysoon	42-47	Widowed	Sudan	20-22	6	Unemployed
Rinaad	48-53	Married	Saudi Arabia	20-22	4	Unemployed

The present study focused only on Arab women learners of English. For most immigrants, attending ESOL lessons at community centres and further education colleges is the first step to learning English. With over 114,000 students taking ESOL classes in England in 2016-17 alone (albeit a significant drop from 179,000 in 2009-10 due to funding cuts in the sector- BIS, 2013) and 70% of ESOL learners being women, of Asian and Arab ethnicities in particular (BIS, 2013), the need for research that examines the experiences of these women and the challenges associated with their English language development has never been more pressing. In January 2016, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, announced a "new £20 million community fund to teach English to isolated women." A parliamentary question response in October 2017 stated that 54,000 learners had been supported under the programmes since 2013; the classes were pre-entry level and focused on "women with no or very little English who are unlikely to access classes in more formal settings." (Parliament UK, 2017).

The response added that the Government had been reviewing the evidence on the cause of poor integration and would "bring forward plans for tackling these issues through a new integration strategy" (ibid).

The critical analysis of factors relating to educational background and identity in this study therefore aims to fill the evident gap in research and support teachers of English as a second language to identify and address such issues more effectively.

A randomized controlled trial to evaluate the impact of community-based English language classes was carried out by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in May 2016, and found that participants in the trial who attended an 11-week language course "scored significantly higher on both language proficiency and social integration outcomes than those who had not attended." (HM Government, 2018: 39).

A report on Dame Louise Casey's review into opportunity and integration stated that English language proficiency issues were particularly worrying because poor English language skills "have been shown to create a number of disadvantages" and stand out "strongly as a barrier to progress" in relation to integration and economic success (Dame Louise Casey, 2016: 94). The report further contended that the advantages of English proficiency extended beyond labour market outcomes to include 'soft' skills and wider social benefits.

Observations

Researchers in the field of motivation have increasingly come to realise the limitations of psychologically based approaches, i.e. those which rely on the individual student and their self-reports of agreement with broad statements about motivation. Gardner (2006: 243), for example, argues that motivation "definitely cannot be assessed by asking individuals to give reasons for why they think learning a language is important to them", as reasons need to be supplemented with and evidenced by observable behaviours. Since a motivated person "expends effort, persists in the activities, attends to the tasks, shows desire to achieve the goal, enjoys the activities, etc.", a purely survey-based study will simply not capture the data required to allow a judgement on motivation and perceived identity to be made (ibid). Furthermore, aspects of the learning situation, such as the influence of the teacher, the group and the course, in addition to factors related to the learner, such as the desire for self-confidence and achievement, have been identified by to Dörnyei (2003) as having a major impact on language learning motivation, and thus conducting observations of students in class was indispensable in this research, and was the first stage of data collection. Notes were taken and recorded on an observation schedule every ten minutes during two ESOL lessons.

The Questionnaire

After piloting and redrafting the questionnaire, a final version comprising 58 questions across four sections was devised (Appendix 2). These asked questions about the students and their family, their English classes, perceptions of their progress, their language learning confidence and identity. The questions proceeded from the factual to the behavioural and from the general to the specific, and were particularly effective for addressing notions of identity, which may have been considered too sensitive to express verbally.

The benefits of employing Likert Scales in the questionnaire lie in their accommodation of participants' neutral or undecided feelings- a situation which became evident at the outset of the study. Furthermore, whilst it can be common for Likert Scale respondents to avoid selecting the extreme options, such as "strongly agree" or "strongly disagree", for fear of negative implications associated with these extreme ends, the scales themselves serve an invaluable function in research as they do not require the participant to provide a concrete 'yes' or 'no' answer, and therefore do not force the participant to take a stance on a particular topic. Rather, the Likert Scales allow them

to respond in a degree of agreement, in turn also simplifying the process for the respondent- an appreciated factor in this study since participants' first language was not English.

The Focus Group

After implementation of the observations and questionnaires, a 45-minute timeslot was arranged to conduct a focus group with seven of the ten participants. The objectives of the focus group were to bring together the learners of English in a convivial setting and create an environment conducive to sharing their experiences of ESOL learning and the factors influencing this. Participation in the focus group itself appeared to empower the women as it essentially offered a platform where they could voice their opinions and be attentively listened to. The focus group was audio-recorded with participants' permission and notes were taken during and after the focus group. This research method proved the most beneficial to the study as it produced a substantial set of data in a relatively short period of time.

Results

Educational background and language learning

In response to the distributed questionnaire, seven of the ten participants stated that they attended school (to high school level) in their home country, and four of these were educated to degree level. Thomas and Collier's study (1997) indicated that the most significant variable determining the length of time taken to learn English as a second language was the amount of formal schooling students had received in their first language, and this was echoed in the questionnaire responses of the present study participants. Their confidence in English and ability to apply the language were, in their view, much to do with the fact that they had received a stable education in their home country, if not to degree-level, than at least to high school level.

List of Variables

1. Educational background:
    a. Number of years of formal schooling the participant had received in his first language. A key factor for all immigrants learning English in the UK is their level of education. Powell (2011) asserts that this can vary from illiteracy to degree level and can have a major bearing on how students learn in the classroom.
    b. Education level of participant's parents. Parental education has a considerable effect on language acquisition, over and above eventual effects on the offspring's educational achievements (Dustmann, 1997). The magnitude of the conditional effect of this parental variable is surprising and agrees with the findings of studies on inter-generational mobility (Solon, 1992; Borjas, 1992).
2. Identity: Self-efficacy beliefs, perceived identity in language learning, cultural background, cultural association.
3. Home country: Country of origin
4. Length of time in the UK: Date of arrival in UK

Only two participants' mothers were educated to degree level, whilst two were educated to high school level and the remaining six reached a maximum of primary schooling. Only one of the participants' fathers was educated to degree level and one was educated to high school level, whilst

214

the remaining eight had not received any form of formal schooling. Amal, who was herself educated to degree level, having graduated with a degree in Business Management from Iraq, was the daughter of an engineer who had instilled in his children a passion for academic excellence. Amal expressed greater confidence in English proficiency, both in person during data collection and, as expressed in her questionnaire, prior to enrolling on her ESOL course, than her peers whose fathers were not educated to degree level.

Identity and reputation in language learning

Participants responded to the 22 identity-based Likert scale questions in the questionnaire to indicate the significance of each statement to their sense of identity, the results of which are presented in the chart below (Figure 2):

Figure 2: Participants' ranking of identity concepts

STRONGLY AGREE
My personal values and moral standards
Being a wife and/or mother
Being a good friend to those we really care about
My occupational choice and career plans
My religion
My reputation (what others think of me)
My social class, the economic group we belong to whether lower, middle or upper class
My academic ability and performance (e.g. the grades we earn and comments we get from teachers)
AGREE
My ethnic background
My personal goals and hopes for the future
My feeling of belonging to my community
My physical appearance (my height, weight and the shape of my body)
My feeling of pride in my country, being proud to be a citizen
My social behaviour, such as the way we act when meeting people
NEUTRAL
My feeling of being a unique person (being different from others)
Where we live or where we were raised
My physical abilities, being coordinated and good at athletic activities
My first language, or my regional accent or dialect
DISAGREE
My political opinions or activities
Being an ESOL student as an adult
My age, belonging to my age group or being part of my generation
STRONGLY DISAGREE
The things we own (my possessions)

215

For eight of the participants, reputation was of notable importance to their sense of who they were. Although the participants did not elaborate on this during the focus group, however my observations of the ESOL classes gave me real insight into how this could have been affecting their learning of ESOL in particular. A common occurrence for the participants was to avoid asking questions in class about content that they believed they should have prior knowledge of. For example, my position as observer at the side of the classroom, seated just outside the learners' horseshoe seating arrangement, allowed me to witness two of the participant students debating who was going to ask the tutor to repeat the difference between the present continuous and the present perfect tense. Apprehension about making mistakes on "easy" topics in front of the rest of the class led a number of learners to avoid asking for clarification. In situations such as these, the students would be heard expressing the fact that they did not understand a particular concept, but the question would seldom reach the tutor. Other students would ask their peers for clarification and this evidently sufficed in many, if not most, cases.

When asked about the use of their first language, Arabic, in ESOL classes, participants explained that when the message communicated to them, implicitly or explicitly, in class or at the institution is "leave your language and culture at the classroom door", they also leave a central part of who they are- their identities- at the door. When they feel this rejection, their personal and conceptual foundation for learning is undermined and, in turn, they are much less likely to participate actively and confidently in classroom activities. The participants' responses implied that it is insufficient for students' linguistic and cultural diversity to be passively accepted in class. Whilst answering the questions on identity in the questionnaire, the learners proposed that teachers and organisations should be more proactive in responding to this issue, and take the initiative to affirm students' linguistic identity. Thomas and Collier's research (1997) in particular highlighted the potential for the use of learners' native languages in the classroom. to foster second language proficiency.

Variable no.1: Number of years of formal schooling participant received in her first language

Highest Level of Education Reached by Participant in Home Country	No. of participants
No formal schooling	3
End of primary school	0
End of high school	3
End of university bachelor degree	4

216

9

Variable no. 2: Education level of participant's parents

Highest Level of Education Reached by Mother	No. of Participants	Highest Level of Education Reached by Father	No. of Participants
No formal schooling	0	No formal schooling	8
End of primary school	6	End of primary school	0
End of high school	2	End of high school	1
End of university bachelor degree	2	End of university bachelor degree	1

Family Responsibilities and investment in language learning

From the observations, questionnaire responses and focus group contributions, it ultimately became evident that the participants viewed their attendance on ESOL courses as an investment- that which Norton (2000) refers to as a gradual form of identity construction. Norris (2007: 657) states that identity is "constantly interactively constructed on a micro-level, where an individual's identity is claimed, contested and re-constructed in interaction and in relation to the other participants". The women's commitment to learning English as a second language in pursuit of a better future, whether in the UK or abroad, and whether for the purpose of self-advancement or to adopt the skills and knowledge required to become effective sources of support for their children and families, was discernible, and clearly one of the motivating factors for their progression. The learners' investment in second language learning was therefore essentially an investment in identity construction, embarking on this journey in order to gain the cultural capital in each of the English-speaking communities in which they chose to participate, from formal appointments with professionals such as doctors, to their everyday recreation and leisure activities.

Table of Variables

Concept	Dimension	Variables	Operationalize indicators (procedures for measuring variables, questions to ask and response categories)
Educational Background and Identity: Factors Influencing Arab Women Learning English	**Educational background**	1.Number of years of formal schooling participant received in her first language	Participant is asked in questionnaire to state number of years of formal schooling received or highest level of education reached in home country.
	Educational background	2.Education level of participant's parents	Confirmed in the questionnaire by asking participant about level of formal schooling and/or further/higher education her parents received.
	Identity	3.Self-efficacy beliefs, perceived identity in language learning, cultural background, cultural association	Students asked to self-report in questionnaire by responding to a series of statements using Likert scales.
	Home country	4.Country of origin	Ascertained in the questionnaire by asking participant about her country of origin.
	Length of time in the UK	5.Amount of time spent in UK (in years)	Measured in the questionnaire by asking participant to confirm date of arrival in the UK.

Variable no. 3: Participants' self-efficacy beliefs, perceived identity in language learning, cultural background and cultural association

STRONGLY AGREE
My personal values and moral standards
Being a wife and/or mother
Being a good friend to those we really care about
My occupational choice and career plans
My religion
My reputation (what others think of me)
My social class, the economic group we belong to whether lower, middle or upper class
My academic ability and performance (e.g. the grades we earn and comments we get from teachers)

AGREE
My ethnic background
My personal goals and hopes for the future
My feeling of belonging to my community
My physical appearance (my height, weight and the shape of my body)
My feeling of pride in my country, being proud to be a citizen
My social behaviour, such as the way we act when meeting people

NEUTRAL
My feeling of being a unique person (being different from others)
Where we live or where we was raised
My physical abilities, being coordinated and good at athletic activities
My first language, or my regional accent or dialect

DISAGREE
My political opinions or activities
Being an ESOL student as an adult
My age, belonging to my age group or being part of my generation

STRONGLY DISAGREE
The things we own (my possessions)

Variable no. 4: Country of origin

Country of Origin	No. of Participants
Libya	3
Iraq	2
Yemen	3
Sudan	1
Saudi Arabia	1

Variable no. 5: Amount of time spent in UK (in years)

Length of Time in UK (years)	No. of Participants
< 1	2
4-6	3
7-9	1
10-12	2
20-22	2

Discussion

Educational background and language learning

Of the four participants who were themselves educated to degree level in the present study, it was found that only one of their fathers was a university graduate. The findings of Dustmann's (1997) study indicated that, conditional on the education achieved by the individual him/herself, the father's education level has a strikingly prominent effect on language proficiency. Of greater interest was the fact that the mothers of these four graduate participants were educated to at least high school level, with two having graduated with degrees.

Parental education clearly interacts with the offspring's education, and the magnitude of this conditional effect is surprising. Educated mothers in particular however, assuming they have a high socio-economic status, are more likely to be able to provide their children with direct assistance in learning their mother tongue, and subsequently, a second language. This could take the form of paying for private tutoring or creating a home environment that is considered educationally favourable, including the purchase of more books for study in the home. The schools that the participants of this study attended in their home countries, which are often determined by their parents' socio-economic status, may have also led to different levels of resource availability to teach English as a second language. Schools in affluent areas are more likely to have additional

resources for teaching the target language, including the most recent technological learning tools and better trained teachers with a stronger command of English. The students in those schools may also have had greater opportunities to use English as a second language.

Students' individual beliefs about their potential success in learning ESOL were particularly telling. Self-efficacy, which has been primarily approached as an individual's cognitive entity, may be much more socially oriented than has been considered the case thus far. Parents' beliefs about their children's ability to learn a second language, as well as learners' own beliefs about their competency, can be a predictor of their children's second language learning outcomes (Block and Cameron, 2002). Amal explained, for example, that great pressure was placed on her and her siblings to excel in education. She had grown up with the belief that it was simply unacceptable to fail, whether in the sciences or the arts, and argued that little emphasis was placed on the experience of learning itself. Further, she claimed that the education system in her home country did little to alleviate this stress, since curricula were overwhelmingly exam-based and target-driven.

Under this belief system, Amal undoubtedly achieved, as she graduated with an honours degree in Business Management and had an instilled confidence to achieve, which was evident in observations of the lessons. Nonetheless, she felt that she could have gained much more from her years in education than she did, although she did attribute the majority of her success to her mother. She explained that her mother's regard for education, her patience and her perseverance in the raising of her children to achieve their absolute potential, ultimately motivated and prepared her to succeed in learning English as a second language.

Language and Power Relations

The process of language learning in a foreign cultural environment during a period soon after arrival can be a confronting and challenging one (Norton, 2013). Since language learning is inevitably linked to the social and economic context in which the learning is placed- with factors such as immigration affecting English language learners (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006)- English language learning is integrally bound up in, and frequently defined by, the discourses of immigration controls and community cohesion (Rosenberg, 2007; Blackledge, 2006; Simpson and Whiteside, 2012). Bordieu (1977: 649) argued that effective communication will be established in a situation where "those who speak regard those who listen as worthy to listen, and [...] those who listen regard those who speak as worthy to speak". The findings of the present study, whereby Ro'aa and Anisa- both of whom had been in the UK for less than one year at the time of interviewing- expressed that they felt 'too shy' to ask questions in class (thus hindering their learning of English effectively) and that their voices were 'not heard' echo those of Norton-Pierce's (1995) study on immigrant women in Canada and second language learning.

Bourdieu's (1999: 67) notion that the value assigned to an utterance depends on the power relations established between both parties was echoed in observations of these students in class. In this study, seven of the participants initially viewed themselves as *"immigrants with little power to speak English"*, but after only five months of language learning, these women's identities had developed into those of citizens with greater confidence to speak English, and in turn, to be recognised in this language. This echoes Norton-Pierce's (1995: 23) study on immigrant women in Canada and second language learning, which found, "it was only over time that Eva's conception of herself as an immigrant — an 'illegitimate' speaker of English — changed to a conception of herself as a multicultural citizen with the power to impose reception". As this particular participant,

Eve, continued to develop as a multicultural citizen, she developed with it an "awareness of her right to speak" (ibid, 1995: 25).

Austin's (1999) theory that dialogue between individuals is more than a simple conversation could also be seen in practice in this study, as the students debating who was to pose the question to their tutor appeared to be in a contest with their tutor. Here, participants' utterances were evidently perceived by them to possess value, as though there was a pursuit of symbolic profit taking place (Bourdieu, 1999), and therefore the learners were dwelling on their linguistic competence to raise the value of their words.

It is common for issues of poor dialogue and communication to surface when individuals from different social and cultural contexts fail to correctly understand each other. Nordby (2003: 64) argues that, "even if a speaker is genuinely interested in communicating with another person, it is difficult to secure successful communication if the other person's beliefs about the world are very different from the speaker's beliefs". Nonetheless, the ESOL teacher merely possessing knowledge of his or her students' cultural and personal beliefs does not guarantee successful communication. A teacher may be aware that his or her students have particular beliefs and experiences shaped by a specific social and cultural history yet choose to ignore this fact. Alternatively, a tutor may attribute to his or her students' beliefs with no clear reason why they would hold them. In situations as these, the issue is not one of meaning (Bach 1994; Davidson, 1984), but rather one concerning an unsympathetic attitude. It could therefore be argued that being neither uninformed of nor prejudiced towards a learner's socio-cultural context and background is essential for successful communication when persons from different social and cultural contexts interact.

Family responsibilities and investment in language learning

The effects of family responsibility can have adverse effects on work effort, particularly for women (Lobel and St.Clair, 1992). This is because low effort in work or study can limit opportunities for positive performance outcomes and progress. In this study, nine of the ten participants were married and/or had children, and six of these believed that their educational and career goals were unachievable for as long as they had young children. The focus group and observations revealed that this had a direct impact on their participation in class, as the defined targets simply did not seem realistically accessible whilst they were not able to commit with time and focus outside of lessons, and, at times, during lessons. Concerns about their children's health, worries about how they were going to fare in a major assignments, thinking about when and what to begin cooking when the ESOL lesson ends and who was going to collect the youngest from nursery were but a few of the responsibilities held by these wives and mothers, and which would occupy much of their concentration in lessons. Participants admitted that greater investment was ultimately a pre-requisite to their success, and that this should take the form of an active, ongoing and context-sensitive commitment to learning English as a second language whereby they expend their resources effectively in pursuit of a better future.

Action Steps
Based on these findings, possible action steps for practitioners include:

1. Establishing a safe and comfortable environment where all learners feel recognized, valued and a part of the whole. Naturally, this may take time as students adjust to a new setting, but the desired standards can be identified and set from the beginning of the course through

222

ground rules. Students should be encouraged to devise the ground rules, whilst still approved by the tutor, in order to generate a sense of accountability and responsibility.

2. Dedicating time at the beginning of the course to conduct one-to-one sessions with the students for the purpose of getting to know them and their learning goals. Prior to this moment, students may not have thought about their goals, and therefore asking them encourages them to reflect on why they are actually learning English. They may come to realize that they are attending the ESOL course because they want to develop more independence, be able to help their children with schoolwork or become more confident conversing in English with friends. This knowledge of students' individual goals can then be used to plan and deliver lessons that will be of direct relevance and interest to them. The instructor can also use this opportunity to learn more about the learner's first language, which would help in understanding the linguistic difficulties faced by students in learning English as a second language. If the course has already begun and it is not feasible to assign an entire session for one-to-one discussions, individual learning plans (ILPs) can be used effectively to achieve a similar outcome. Encouraging learners to describe what they enjoyed or found challenging in lessons ultimately allows the teacher to keep a record of students' strengths and development needs and differentiate activities accordingly.

3. Catering to students' skills and exploiting their talents. Students who are artistically inclined, for example, could draw sketches of a story that can be read aloud to the class. Learners who enjoy cooking could bring in a dish and share the recipe to initiate a lesson on imperatives and instructions through recipe writing. The key for success in such an approach lies in getting to know the learners well so that their skills and experience are accurately identified. This eventually leads to the learners themselves to become the learning resources and can reduce the need for drawing out teaching materials from irrelevant contexts or outdated sources. Successful language learning is ultimately linked to the student's passion, and therefore an effective instructor should endeavour to find ways to connect to this passion.

4. Creating situations in which students will feel a sense of accomplishment. This can be achieved by building on learners' strengths. For example, if a learner constructs correct sentences in the present simple tense, this could be used as a starting point for the accomplishment of a wider goal, such as describing hobbies and interests on a CV. Offering positive feedback and reinforcement increases student satisfaction and encourages positive self-evaluation. Students who feel a sense of accomplishment will be better able to direct their own learning outcomes with a greater degree of self-confidence. Giving positive feedback should not, however, be mistaken for correcting mistakes without offering explanations. It is essential for the instructor to highlight the strengths in a student's work and to provide a clear explanation of their mistakes. Learners value their teachers' comments and ideas when they feel that their good work is acknowledged, and this encourages them to evaluate their work for further progression.

Conclusion

The notions of educational background and identity were examined to address how participants' multi-faceted lives and experiences affect them as learners of English. In investigating the ESOL experiences of adult women in South Yorkshire through observations, questionnaires and a focus group, this study highlights how profound connections between educational background and self-efficacy beliefs can influence these learners in ways even they are not always conscious of. Such factors may also be unknown to tutors and policymakers, thus highlighting the importance of realising how these may intersect with students' motivations to learn.

Motivation is clearly a critical factor for second language acquisition as it defines students' willingness to approach learning. Teachers of English as a second language who hope to provide meaningful instruction, however, must strive beyond considering how to raise the motivational levels of their students within the four walls of the classroom. They must endeavour to thoroughly get to know their learners in order to appreciate how their individual identities, cultural backgrounds and experiences of education might shape their engagement with the course, their interaction with other students and, ultimately, their achievement in learning English. Fillmore and Snow (2000: 3) similarly argue that "Too few teachers share or know about their students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds". In order to teach ESOL students effectively, therefore, instructors must be conversant with their students' educational experiences and the culture leading to the formation of their *selves* for educational success. This can be accomplished through designated time for one-to-one sessions with each student at the beginning of the course and through purposeful, actively worked individual learning plans where learners can routinely communicate their experiences or concerns and receive critical feedback.

Further research

Further research in this field may take the form of an investigation of teachers' experiences of teaching ESOL to Arabic L1 speakers. This may be achieved by conducting focus groups whereby teachers have the opportunity to offer their insight into the areas of difficulty, both for their Arab students and for themselves as practitioners, in learning and teaching English as a second language. However, the recursive and often iterative nature of qualitative research suggests that a research question may be refined or altered as new data and issues surface in the study. Further, classrooms are complex environments in which teachers can engage in as many as 1000 interpersonal situations in the space of 6 hours, with as many as 200 or 300 interpersonal exchanges in an hour (Jackson, 1991). In turn, an almost infinite number of research questions are inherent in the context of the classroom, the context of teaching, and the context of learning, and thus examining the direct experiences and insight of teachers through reflection, observation, conversation and focus groups has the potential to serve a more relevant contribution to the study of learner achievement and progression in the field of English language learning.

Appendix 1
Research Participant Consent Form

We would be grateful if you could read the information below and sign at the bottom.

Researcher names: A, B, C

Research title: Educational background and identity: factors influencing Arab women learning English

About the researchers and the project:
We interested in the learning experiences of Arab women studying English as a second language, and therefore the main purpose of my research is to explore how your educational background, and that of your parents, as well as your identity, shape your progress in learning English.

We are hoping to recruit 10 students whose first language is Arabic to take part in this research. In order to collect the data, we will firstly ask all participants to complete a questionnaire. We will then observe some English classes and organise a focus group with a small group of the participants. We will make notes throughout and may audio-record the focus with participants' permission. We will keep in touch with you about the progress of the study and we guarantee that your real name will not be used in the project.

- ✓ I have read the above information and we understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it. I agree to take part in the project.
- ✓ I understand that the researcher will do no harm by following ethical research guidelines and that her aim is to provide beneficial research for teachers of female Arab students.
- ✓ I understand that we may withdraw from the research project at any time, and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- ✓ I understand that my conversations and contributions may be audio-recorded during the focus group.
- ✓ I understand that notes will be taken during the focus group and observations.
- ✓ I understand that the information gathered in the research project may be published but that my personal information will remain confidential and we will not be identified in any published material without my prior consent.
- ✓ I understand that data will be stored in hard and electronic form by the researcher and by the university. This data will include any audiotapes and notes. we understand that we may have access to the data that concerns me if we give adequate notice (normally one week) to the researcher.
- ✓ I understand that we may contact the researcher by email or mobile if we need any more information about the research.

Name…………………………………………
Signature……..………..………………..…
Date………………..………………………

Appendix 2
QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: **Signature:**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research and complete this questionnaire. All responses will be confidential and your name will not be used in the project.

Section 1: you and your family
Please circle your response.

1. Are you …?

Male/Female

2. How old are you?

18-23   24-29   30-35   36-41   42-47   48-53   54+

3. Are you …?

Single   married   divorced   separated   widowed   other

Please state: _____

4. Do you have children?
                                                              Yes   No
How many?
_____

5. Do you work?   Yes   No

5.1 What is your job?
_____

5.2 How many hours do you work every week?
_____

5.3 What language do you mainly use in your job?
_____

6. Which country do you come from?
_____

7. Did you go to school in your home country?

      Yes   No

(Up to which stage? _____)

8. What is your highest educational qualification and subject?

_____

9. What was the main language used when you got your qualification?

_____

10. What is your mother's highest educational qualification?

_____

11. What is your father's highest educational qualification?

_____

12. How long have you been in the UK?

| Less than 1 year | 1-3 years | 4-6 years |
| 7-9 years | 10-12 years | More than 13 years |

13. Do you currently live…?

| Alone | with family | with relative(s) | with friend(s) |

Other (please state: _____)

14. What language did you first learn as a child?

_____

15. Do you speak any other languages?

      Yes   No

(What language(s)? _____)

Section 2: your opinions on your progress

Please circle one number under each statement to show how you feel:

Strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

16. The ESOL classes we go to help to make me more confident.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

227

17. The ESOL classes we go to allow me to make new friends.

> 1   2   3   4   5

18. The ESOL classes we go to help me interact with people outside of class.

> 1   2   3   4   5

19. The ESOL classes we go to allow me to be able to travel more.

> 1   2   3   4   5

20. we always feel like contributing in the lesson.

> 1   2   3   4   5

21. we feel excited about coming to my ESOL classes.

> 1   2   3   4   5

22. we feel that coming to the ESOL classes will help me get a job.

> 1   2   3   4   5

23. Coming to the ESOL classes makes me want to get involved in other classes or activities.

> 1   2   3   4   5

24. Coming to the ESOL classes makes me want to continue learning English.

> 1   2   3   4   5

25. Coming to the ESOL classes makes me think more positively about my life.

> 1   2   3   4   5

<u>Section 3:</u> your language learning confidence

Please circle one number under each statement to show how you feel:

Strongly disagree   disagree   neutral   agree   strongly agree

> 1   2   3   4   5

26. We get nervous when we am supposed to speak English in class.

<div align="center">

1   2   3   4   5

</div>

27. I'm not afraid of making mistakes when we read out loud in English.

<div align="center">

1   2   3   4   5

</div>

28. We feel frustrated when we don't understand every word my English teacher says.

<div align="center">

1   2   3   4   5

</div>

29. We often get bored or distracted in my English class.

<div align="center">

1   2   3   4   5

</div>

30. We feel a lot of pressure to do well when we have a test in English.

<div align="center">

1   2   3   4   5

</div>

31. We like the way that English is taught in my class.

<div align="center">

1   2   3   4   5

</div>

32. We think English is easier for me than other students in my class.

<div align="center">

1   2   3   4   5

</div>

33. We don't worry about getting bad grades in English.

<div align="center">

1   2   3   4   5

</div>

34. We would be willing to speak English with a native speaker we didn't know.

<div align="center">

1   2   3   4   5

</div>

35. We think we am good at learning languages.

<div align="center">

1   2   3   4   5

</div>

36. We enjoy learning English.

<div align="center">

1   2   3   4   5

</div>

Please explain this answer- what do you like or not like about it?

229

22

Section 4: your identity

These statements describe different aspects of identity.

Please read each statement carefully and choose a number from the scale below to show how important you feel it is to your sense of who you are.

Not important   extremely important
    1   2   3   4   5

37. The things we own (my possessions)
    1   2   3   4   5

38. My personal values and moral standards
    1   2   3   4   5

39. My age, belonging to my age group or being part of my generation
    1   2   3   4   5

40. My first language, or my regional accent or dialect
    1   2   3   4   5

41. My ethnic background
    1   2   3   4   5

42. My social class
    1   2   3   4   5

43. My religion
    1   2   3   4   5

44. My social behaviour, such as the way we act when meeting people
    1   2   3   4   5

45. My physical appearance (my height, weight, colour or shape of my body)
    1   2   3   4   5

46. My personal goals for the future
    1   2   3   4   5

47. My academic ability and performance (e.g. the grades we achieve and comments we get from my teachers)
    1   2   3   4   5

48. My career plans
    1   2   3   4   5

49. My feeling of being a unique person (being different from others)

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

50. My reputation (what others think of me)

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

51. My feeling of pride in my country, being proud to be a citizen

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

52. My feeling of belonging to my community

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

53. Where we live or where we were raised

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

54. Being a good friend to those we really care about

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

55. My physical abilities, being coordinated and good at athletic activities

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

56. My political opinions or activities

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

57. Being an ESOL student as an adult

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

58. Being a wife/mother

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

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