Retaining the Mother Tongue while Learning Host Country's Languages. A Study with Second Generation Sudanese Immigrant Children

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Abstract

Sadly, the destination of some vital national languages has been buried with their speakers during the whole death trips by land and sea, with the topic of migration affecting a lot of international and local news stations. The present study investigates the difficulties confronting Sudanese immigrant children when communicating in some indigenous languages besides learning the host countries' languages. Most participants in the current study are multilingual Sudanese immigrants from areas and intense conflict zones such as Darfur, Blue Nile, and South Kordofan. The real issue is how immigrants who make it to their intended destinations preserve their home tongues and cultural traditions as sources of identity. The researcher employed a qualitative research methodology to carry out this investigation. An initial 58 Sudanese immigrants were interviewed. The study found that (1) it might be challenging to communicate with kids even though parents speak these languages at home. (2) this situation may decrease the number of those who speak these national languages and will result in losing the national identity of future generations in the diaspora unless this situation changes, (3) children of Sudanese immigrants in the diaspora learn primarily the host country language, in addition to their indigenous languages based on the data collection and analysis. It is recommended that parents should use their local language continually at home with their children to preserve their identity and cultural heritage.

1. INTRODUCTION

Refugees have fled their country and cannot return due to a "fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion" (the United Nations Refugee Convention, 1951). Many of them need to be more educated, making the task even more difficult for language teachers, who are also desperately trying to find common ground for communication. Globally, there are more than 25 million refugees. Refugees are at various stages of their movement, involving various life circumstances and requirements (Drachman, 1992). There has never been such a significant movement in modern history, and these people are fleeing ongoing war zones. Several studies

in host countries, such as Turkey, which has also received many refugees, have identified problematic areas associated with these mass relocations (Steele, 2017; Williams, 2016). According to the UNHCR (2017), displaced Syrian refugees have surpassed 5.6 million, with nearly half being children. Due to the multi-year conflict, Syria remains the world's leading producer of refugees.

Language acquisition is frequently a crucial component of a traveller's journey, whether in their final destination or a country of transition. Most refugees have access to smartphones during their erratic journey (Gillespie et al., 2018). When teaching immigrants the languages of the host countries, theories of first and second language acquisition with a focus on morphosyntax have been proven helpful. Selinker (1972) defines the concept of interlanguage as the "developing system that the learner subconsciously constructs in his or her mind," which stands out as a critical element when defining the start of learning a second language. The issue of how L2 learners of any age can systematize their acquisition of morphosyntax in a way comparable to how L1 youngsters do so stands out in particular (Schwartz & Sprouse, 2013).

1.1. Statement of the problem

Children of Sudanese immigrants frequently have difficulty conversing in some indigenous languages and learning the languages of their host countries, which limits their ability to express and maintain their national identities. Based on the results of the current study, the communication problems associated with Sudanese immigrants in some hosting countries lie in the fact that it could be challenging to communicate with children in their national languages even though parents speak them at home. Therefore, this circumstance may reduce the number of people who speak these native tongues, leading to future diaspora generations losing their sense of national identity. Moreover, as the researcher is also a multilingual Sudanese who stayed in Saudi Arabia during the preparation of this study, it is evident that he finds it challenging to communicate with his children at home in their native language, a situation that seems to have been affected decades by what is linguistically known as a language shift phenomenon. Thus, young generations whose parents are either bilingual or multilingual today speak only Arabic as a lingua franca, even in regions such as Darfur, where most study subjects are descending.

1.2. Research questions

The current study examines the challenges faced by Sudanese immigrants trying to communicate with children in some indigenous languages so they can express and uphold their national identities. The author endeavour to find answers to the following questions aiming at accomplishing the aforementioned goals:

1. To what extent do Sudanese immigrants use the native language at home?

2. In language, do Sudanese immigrants communicate with their children at home?

3. Do Sudanese immigrants easily use their native language in public as an immigrant?

4. Does establishing indigenous musical groups in the hosting countries maintain the national languages and cultural heritage?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teaching and learning languages of immigrants exclusively depend on different theories; in the following section, the researcher reviews a few of them. It is also vital to shedding light on some policies related to the languages of the hots countries. Theories related to first and second language acquisition with a focus on morphosyntax are applicable when teaching immigrants the host countries' languages. When defining the beginning of learning a second language, the idea of interlanguage, which Selinker (1972) defines as the system subconsciously constructed in the learner's mind; such system, is considered a crucial component. In particular, the question of how L2 learners at any age systematize the acquisition of morphosyntax like L1 children (Schwartz & Sprouse, 2013). It also discusses the present controversy over whether or not L2 acquisition has a critical phase and how some answers can be found in the realm of neurolinguistics research. The assertion made by Hawkins (2001) that "there are common stages of development that are essentially independent of the learner's L1; the learner's age at initial exposure to the L2; the kind of exposure (naturalistic versus classroom); and the learner's educational background" (p.)is interesting enough. Following a discussion of the many steps involved in learning L2 morphosyntax, the chapter investigates the Hawkins factors and how they affect L2 learning.

They refer to the whole transfer/full access theory (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996) with particular emphasis on functional categories, which are hard to learn if they are not shared by the L1 and L2 (Hawkins,1997; Hawkins & Liszka,2003). Regarding educational background, some scholars believe literacy can affect how morphosyntax is learned (Tarone & Bigelow, 2005). Here, the author contrasts the Independent Development Hypothesis (Volterra & Taeschner, 1978) with the Unitary Language Systems Hypothesis (Lindholm & Padilla, 1978). In contrast to the latter, which contends that two different linguistic systems existed from the beginning of acquisition, the former supports the idea that simultaneous bilinguals only had one initial linguistic system. The author underlines specific vocabulary and morphosyntax changes between the acquisition stages for monolingual and bilingual learners.

Additionally, the author notes that a crosslinguistic effect between the two languages is inevitable (Serratrice et al., 2004), particularly for sequential bilinguals, or people who acquire a second language after the foundational elements of their first language have been established (Haznedar, 2010). Spolsky and Shohamy (1999) assert that when it comes to language policy,

it is typically an explicit declaration of language use that needs to be formally documented or written with consideration for the fact that the policymakers impose over those who are expected to obey. However, Cooper (1989) describes language planning as a situation in which decision-makers deliberately attempt to influence how others use their language codes regarding acquisition, structure, and functional allocation. Language policy and planning (LPP) are frequently regarded as crucial in maintaining a language (e.g., Alzabidi & Al-Ahdal, 2022; Hornberger & Coronel-Molina, 2004). Language policy research, for instance, is expressly included in studies on language maintenance (Garcia, 2003). There is much dispute between the terms of *policy* and *planning* regarding LPP. Language planning may be included in language policy (Schiffman & Ricento, 1996), perhaps a component of planning (Al-Ahdal & Almarshedi, 2022; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997), or maybe independent but related activities (Djité, 1994), or may have combined with language policy to the point where it is no longer helpful to distinguish between the two (Hornberger, 2006). The discussion between the two terms showed that planning refers to the methods used to make decisions. In contrast, policy refers to the conclusions reached due to explicit or implicit decision-making processes.

Even where policies appear to support language maintenance, the reality is more complicated because language maintenance occurs within contexts of covert policy. That develops less supportive discourses (Liddicoat & Curnow, 2014). This conceptualization of minority languages as barriers to the acquisition of the dominant language has influenced government policy in Australia's Northern Territory concerning bilingual programs for speakers of aboriginal languages, leading to the withdrawal of support for these languages in favour of English (Liddicoat, 2018; Liddicoat & Curnow 2014). The Minister for Education introduced an educational reform in 2008 that required all Northern Territory schools to teach English for the first four hours of schooling.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS
3.1. Research design

The data collection process is undertaken via a quantitative method. \The research community is Sudanese immigrants living in several neighbouring countries and other countries worldwide. The sample was limited to Sudanese immigrants in Cairo, Tel Aviv, and Baltimore, USA.

3.2. Participants

It is difficult to determine the total number of the research community simply because, in Egypt alone, almost 25,000 Sudanese refugees are currently listed as refugees (UNHCR, 2017). Of these large numbers,58 of the immigrant communities were interviewed basically; 25 in Cairo, 20 in Tel Aviv, and 13 in Baltimore, USA, were selected as the study sample. Most of

the selected participants are either bilingual or multilingual. Bilingual and multilingual immigrants were undoubtedly among those enrolled with access to essential health and education services who were the focus of this investigation. The most important findings summarized and considred are the responses of the bilinguals, including the musicians who kept distributing their musical works in indigenous languages to connect future generations with the value of the cultural heritage that cannot be separated from language. The researcher also assessed the responses of some social activist immigrants concerned with the culture associated with these languages aiming at protecting them from dying out. To better understand the concepts behind the study questions, the author directly contacted the sample of the study subjects targeting immigrant communities in the three cities mentioned above for the unique presence of thousands of immigrants' flock, some of them settled by the foremost and some still waiting for his chance to reach their final destinations worldwide. The participants have been contacted using several social media platforms, including WhatsApp. They were asked in Sudanese Arabic dialect about their use of the national language at home, in local places, and the impact of establishing musical bands for preserving the national languages.

3.3.Instrument

The researcher initially designed and distributed an interview consisting of four open-ended questions before being adjudicated by a group of referees, who recommended some amendments to the question items. The researcher asked the interviewees in the Sudanese Arabic language some questions. Finally, after the data were collected and analyzed, the most important results were thematically analyzed and displayed:

4. SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

As stated clearly, the current study intends to investigate the difficulties Sudanese immigrant children encounter when attempting to communicate in diverse indigenous languages that allow them to express and maintain their national identities in the diaspora and learn the host countries' languages. Among the various responses calculated, the following are the most important ones. The first study subject is a bilingual who has resided with his family in Cairo, Egypt, for almost a decade. For the participant, the subject of language and culture cannot be separated in immigrant communities. His participation was a reasonable attempt to investigate the case of several immigrants' languages in Egypt that contributes to the present study's aims.

RQ1: To what extent do Sudanese immigrants use the native language at home? To answer this question, the researcher narrated some of the interviewees' responses. **The first interviewees mentioned**, "as (Fur) native speakers based in Cairo, we regularly use our national language to communicate with each other". **Another interviewee reported,** " I can say that mainly (Massalit) natives use their national languages to communicate when they meet

each other". **Finally**, " we use our national languages to communicate when we meet each other as well as when we make telephone calls", **a Sudanese immigrant living in Tel Aviv stated.**

The participants said that the massive waves of Sudanese immigrants and asylum seekers towards Egypt during the last couple of years were indeed accompanied by the migration of specific national languages these immigrants speak. The majority came from the remote regions of Sudan where languages such as Mssalit, Zakhawa, Fur, and Nubian languages are spoken, besides languages from eastern Sudan spoken by the ethnicities of Bano Aamer, and Hadundawa. According to the participant, many indigenous groups settled in Cairo have private social and cultural associations that enable them to use their indigenous languages in diverse events organized.

We can mention some of them, like Zakhwa, Dajo, and Fur associations, as well as the international Nubian association, which comprises many Nubian ethnicities under one roof.

Moreover, the study subject also refers to other communities from east Sudan and far north including the association for Dongola and Mahas. Furthermore, there is an association in the name of the "Sudanese Refuge Cooperation" in Egypt, as well as an association for Sudanese disabled refugees. All these associations and many more are registered under the umbrella of (UNHCR).

As a bilingual and social activist, the panelist is currently supporting different groups of refugees concerning their overall rights, including housing, living, health care, and education, particularly those with no association to support their legal issues and rights, regardless of their ethnic groups. Findings showed that Sudanese immigrants in Tel Aviv do not use their national language at home.

RQ2: In what language do Sudanese immigrants communicate with their children at home?

The first interviewee stated, "I find it difficult to communicate with my kids at home in Fur language because they only speak Arabic." **Another interviewee confirmed**, "As I am not a professional (Fur) native speaker, I prefer to communicate with my kids at home in Arabic instead of English". **The third mentioned**, "I regularly attempt to communicate with my kids at home in my native language, but my wife does not take it seriously although she is professional in the same native language and instead she communicates to them in Arabic.". Most participants confessed that they did not use their national languages at home to communicate with their children due to the parents limited knowledge of such national languages or the carelessness of one of them and shifts to use the language of folks. This carelessness leads to the losing of national languages and cultural heritage of such immigrants within one or two

generations. As a result of the father's efforts in enabling his children to communicate Fur's native language, they can now understand the ancestral language, particularly, **he added**, "my elder daughter, who can understand the meaning of words and parts of speech in Fur's native language, but she cannot speak it professionally. Additionally, she cannot construct useful sentences too, while the remaining children can only memorize a few words". Therefore, **the interviewee** believes that if parents regularly talk to their children in their ancestral language, certainly they will easily be able to communicate in that language at the end of the day. Thus, by referring to the importance of communicating with children to enable them to learn the ancestral language, we can say **the interviewees** point to a solid relationship between the quality of input that correlates with the quality of the output. Accordingly, the study shows that the majority of parents living abroad tend to speak to their children in languages other than indigenous ones. **One interviewee** also confirmed "I regularly encourage even my extended family to communicate in our native language". He focused on speaking national language at sojourn and travel especially with the young age groups to enable them to use the language correctly.

When referring to the role of the indigenous languages at home, the interviewee stated that he faces great difficulties communicating with the kids in Fur native language because their mother is not taken the issue seriously. Although she is a professional Fur native speaker, instead she communicates with her multilingual kids in Arabic. Moreover, he intentionally gives his kids indigenous Fur ethnicity names to connect them with their ancestral cultural heritage.

This finding diverged from Valdés (1998), who reported that 98% of families use their national language at home.

RQ3: Do Sudanese immigrants easily use your native language in public as an immigrant?

An interviewee confirmed, "we feel at home or free to speak our languages in public, whenever we gather as communities". **Another mentioned**, "different bilingual communities do not feel shame to use their indigenous languages in public, whenever they gathered as communities. But I think on top of all Sudanese immigrants based in Baltimore, USA, who take the issue of the native language seriously is the (Mssalit) community simply because even the ones who were born in the USA can communicate in Massalit as parents are willing and able to keep them in touch with the indigenous language". Furthermore, **an interviewee added,** "even in workplaces and parks, we do not feel shame to use our indigenous languages in public, whenever we gathered as communities". The participants affirmed that there are many centers

for learning and developing several national languages in Egypt today. Among which is Massalet, Fur, Zakhawa, Folani, Nubian, and Dajo languages centres. This indicates that these ethnicities take the issue of languages seriously when proposing their cases as immigrants aiming to be settled by international organizations.

Sudanese immigrants affirmed that they use the national languages effectively for communication wherever and whenever they meet a partner from their ethnic group. This reveals the flexibility of the language policies in some hosting countries regardless of the speakers' ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. Not only that, but as confirmed by one of the participants from the Sudanese resident community of Tel Aviv reporting, "the situation of national languages usage has gradually changed since 2000, and as far as I am concerned, most of the immigrants' major languages such Zaghawa, Fur, Massalit and perhaps many more languages have been documented". The documentation of these languages has encouraged their usage by many speakers in everyday communications, particularly when they gather together. Thus, the interviewee believes that immigrants may be keen to use their languages abroad much better than their community members at home. Interestingly, he also mentions that as immigrants, they freely use their native languages in public at workplaces, transportation means, and even at various governmental institutions throughout the day whenever they can communicate with each other. This finding is confirmed by Brader et al. (2008), who mentioned that identity is respected in the USA. Therefore, immigrants use their native languages with each other.

 For the panelist, your language is your identity, and that is why the **interviewee** does not feel shame to communicate with others even in the presence of those who don't speak their native language. However, as far as he knows, this is not the case in Sudan, for instance, the subject still remembers that when two speakers from the same ethnic group communicate with each other in the presence of someone who does not share the same language it seems a shame. According to his explanation of this phenomenon, it seems as if those behind such policies were intentionally meant to prevent others from using their native languages. Among the responses reported is that when making telephone calls, immigrants who share the same indigenous language can communicate with each other with the existence of a friend from a different ethnicity, then the atmosphere can be tempered to avoid embarrassment via translating the content of the telephone call in a friendly manner.

RQ4: Does establishing indigenous musical groups in the hosting countries maintain the national languages and the cultural heritage?

An interviewee answered, "Yes, we confirmed that the establishment of the indigenous musical bands effectively protect these languages from dying out and maintain them."

The panelist states that the issue of the indigenous-rooted culture associated with native languages of course was initially raised during their arrival in Tel Aviv two decades ago. During the interviews on refugee issues, he responded positively when asked about the indigenous-rooted culture as well as the musical instruments associated with **them. An interviewee mentioned, " I** practically engaged in performing some indigenous music with the drum as the main and only musical instrument associated with our band during that period". Likely what they have been playing was accepted by local audiences who regularly attend such events and make their best usage to enjoy the music regardless of the language differences. When they observed that the type of music they perform is enjoyed by many people with great concern, they decided to perform several concerts at numerous public places, including national parks. As a result of their great performance and the concern of many locals regarding their music, they were invited to participate in the "International day for the African Culture". After assessing their initial experience, which they believe was successful, they were again invited to attend the same events when they discovered the participation of several other bands that connect to the concept of national languages and heritage. To name some, the interviewee mentioned, "numerous bands representing the indigenous music and languages of Massalit, Zakhawa, and the Nubian cultural heritages. The well-equipped and prepared bands that play organized music associated with a variety of musical instruments inspired them to work seriously in establishing the Fur native musical band and that was the birth of "Nogoom Darfur"". This signifies Darfur celebrities or stars when translated into the English language. Finally, an interviewee stated " since we are immigrants, and we are not sure when we will go home, it seems reasonable to endeavour to protect our national languages and the culture associated with them". This process requires a lot of work to maintain linguistic and cultural heritages for the next generations though it seems obvious that it is challenging to reverse language loss, even with significant monetary expenditure. It is reported that adopting national music participates in culture and language of minors groups in host countries (Grant, 2014).

5. CONCLUSION

To sum up the findings, we can say that besides learning the languages of the host countries, Sudanese immigrant children often struggle to communicate in some indigenous languages, which hinders their ability to express and keep their national identities. It is also shown that even though parents speak these national languages at home, it might be challenging to communicate with kids due to linguistic overlap and language policies in the hosting countries. Thus, this situation may decrease the number of those who speak the Sudanese national languages abroad, and they will lose the national identity of future generations in the diaspora unless this situation changes. Most of the bilingual immigrants based in Cairo, Tel Aviv , and

Baltimore, USA established social centres for their communities as no restrictions are exist regarding the foundation of these centres, thus, I can say that they have the opportunity to use their Indigenous Languages.

5.1. Recommendations

Accordingly, the study makes the following suggestions:

1. It is crucial to establish language learning centers in the hosting countries to enable children to learn the indigenous language.

2. To ensure communication between the generation of parents and children, parents should strive to enhance communication in these languages as much as possible.

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