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Religion, identity and investment in adult migrants' English language learning in the UK

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Abstract

This chapter reports the experiences of learning English and identity (re)construction of fourteen Syrian adult Muslim refugees of both genders and a variety of ages, recently arrived in the UK and enrolled at an ESOL College. Drawing on a range of data sources, the chapter explores how its Syrian informants' religious identities acted both as a motivational and/or subverting factor for their investment and take-up of learning opportunities, both within and beyond the ESOL classroom. It also takes in the implications of the 2017 Manchester and London terrorist attacks for the Syrians' sense of self and its restrictive implications for their English language learning. The chapter argues that language teachers and practitioners who are critically informed about religion and religious identity can utilise the classroom as a space for language learning itself but also as a site for learners to take up more powerful and desirable identities, to feel more accepted by host communities, and, consequently, to develop their investment in language learning. As similar processes of differentiation and exclusion, and of positioning and/or being positioned by others, operate for migrants to Europe from other religious, cultural and ethnic groups, the findings and implications of the chapter are of relevance across the continent.

1. Introduction

Contemporary trends in migration to and within Europe are increasingly complex. In 2017, for example, a total of 4.4 million people immigrated to the EU's 28 individual member states, of whom around 52 per cent were EU citizens either moving between member states or returning to the EU from elsewhere in the world (Eurostat 2019a). The latter contributed to the 2.4 million people who immigrated to the EU from non-EU countries during the same year (ibid.), others moving to meet labour shortages in certain sectors, to join family members already living in Europe, and, of relevance to this chapter, as refugees, to escape war, civil unrest and persecution.

According to the UNHCR (2017), there are approximately 25.5 million refugees worldwide, with 6.3 million of these (i.e., 25 per cent) coming from Syria. While most refugees remain close to their home country – Turkey, Pakistan Uganda, and Lebanon host the largest numbers of refugees worldwide (ibid.) - the numbers of refugees arriving in Europe and the EU has increased significantly[1] in recent years, the main countries of origin being Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan (Eurostat 2019b). Consequently, the majority of refugees arriving in Europe are Muslims, which, as even a cursory glance at contemporary European news outlets shows, has become a source of debate for some politicians in Europe and amongst some sections of the population.

This chapter therefore reports the experiences of learning English and identity (re)construction of a group of Syrian adult Muslim refugees recently arrived in the UK. Under the terms of its Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS, launched 2015; updated 2019), the UK government is currently seeking to resettle up to 20,000 Syrians around the UK, in groups which are big enough 'to share a language and culture and avoid a feeling of isolation' (VPRS, UK Home Office: 13) whilst emphasising the need to learn English, including through organised 'ESOL' (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes, to assist with 'integration' and 'employability' (p.14). This chapter will therefore explore how its Syrian informants' religious identities acted both as a motivational and/or subverting factor for their investment and take-up of learning opportunities, both within and beyond the ESOL classroom. It will also take in the implications of the 2017 Manchester and London terrorist attacks for the Syrians' sense of self and its restrictive implications for their English language learning. The chapter will argue that language teachers and practitioners who are critically informed about religion can utilise the classroom not only as spaces for language learning but also, and importantly, as a site for learners to take up more powerful, desirable identities and to feel accepted by host communities, with implications for language learning.

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[1] It should be noted, however, that while the rise in refugee arrivals in the EU is significant, the absolute numbers remain notably lower than in host countries such as Turkey and Pakistan. For example, in 2017, there were 970,400 refugees in Germany, the country which hosts the highest number of refugees in the EU; UNHCR reports the UK as hosting around 122,000 refugees. In Turkey, in the same year, there were 3.5 million refugees (UNHCR, 2017).

2. Framing the discussion: religion, identity, and investment in language learning

Drawing upon poststructuralist thinking, this chapter takes as its starting point the suggestion that language 'constitutes social reality for us. Neither social reality nor the 'natural' world has fixed intrinsic meanings which language reflects or expresses' (Weedon 1997: 22). That is, meaning is socially constructed and produced *within/through* language rather than reflected *by* language, making language truly social and, consequently, a site of political struggle. From this perspective, language is the locus of social organisation and power, and a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977), with speaking rights between individuals and groups rarely shared equally (ibid.) due to inequitable power relationships. Essentially, poststructuralist perspectives place power and social relationships at the centre of language, and suggest that language works differently for different people from different groups. Yet not only is language a form of symbolic capital and social power, it is also a site of identity construction and negotiation. As Anzaldúa's (1987: 59) puts it, 'I am my language'.

2.1 Poststructuralist theories of identity

Central to this chapter's understanding of identity is the notion of 'subjectivity', an individual's sense of themselves and their ways of understanding their relations to the world (Weedon 1997). Rather than being fixed, coherent and rational, poststructuralist thinking suggests that subjectivity is 'precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak' (Weedon 1997: 32). From this perspective, identity is dynamic, multiple, contradictory, fluid and always changing over historical time and social space (Foucault 1980; Holland and Lave 2001). It is not innate, but is socially constructed and re-constructed, with individuals being the 'subject *of'* a set of relationships (i.e. in a position of power) or 'subject *to'* a set of relationships (i.e. in a position of reduced power) (Norton 2011). While people (re)construct and negotiate identity, they sometimes take on identities socially-imposed on or assigned to them by others.

Language plays a central role in identity construction. It is in and through language (linguistic interaction) that subjectivity is constituted; language and identity are mutually constitutive and inseparable (Weedon 1997). On the one hand, language supplies the terms and other linguistic means by which identities are expressed, and, on the other, the linguistic resources, such as narratives, story lines, pronouns, and forms of address that individuals use serve to index their identities (Tabouret-Keller 1997). When people use language, they are not only communicating and exchanging information, but also organising and reorganising a sense of who they are, what they can achieve, and what they hope for. As such, they are engaged in a process of identity construction and negotiation.

This approach to identity lends itself to the possibility of individual and social change. It opens up the opportunity for individuals to resist and take up more powerful identity positions; as Norton (2013: 5) notes, 'identities are not merely given by social structures or ascribed by others, but are also negotiated by agents who wish to position themselves'. Thus, individuals are accorded agency, 'the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world' (Rogers and Wetzel 2013: 63), and voice to assert their identity.

2.2 Identity and language learning

The relationship between language learning, identity and identity change has attracted increasing attention in recent years (e.g., Block 2007; Giroir 2014; Norton 2000; Sacchi 2014). Drawing on poststructuralist theories to understand social influences on language learning, this body of work offers new perspectives on language learning, illustrating how learners' identity positions can effect, positively and/or negatively, their L2 learning processes as well as, in the case of migrants, their access to the host community resources. It also highlights how access to linguistic and interactional opportunities is shaped by language learners' social class, gender, race and age identities, and the extent to which the conditions under which language learners speak, learn and use the target language are linked to inequitable power relations. For some migrants, participation in their new host community and in/through its language(s) may provide positive opportunities for self-representation, and to identify and be identified as legitimate speakers within their L2 discourse; this, in turn, encourages them to cross boundaries and learn the target language (Norton 2000; Pavlenko 2002). Yet, sometimes, immigrants might be assigned identities which are negative, unacceptable or incompatible with the identities they occupied prior to their migration. They might find that their previous symbolic and material resources are not valued, and they might be positioned as stupid, incompetent, a burden on society, or even as terrorists. In this case, 'their desire to acquire the symbolic capital offered by the new language might be in conflict with their resistance to the range of identities offered to them by that language' (Pavlenko 2002: 285).

Implicit in the discussion so far is the understanding that identity and identities can change over time, which has important implications for second language education and teachers; language teaching becomes an intervention in identity formation and change. As Pavlenko (2001: 319-320) argues, 'the process of second language socialization and participation in new discursive communities may entail significant changes in ways some L2 users perceive themselves and are perceived by others'. In other words, language learning and socialisation may 'transform who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity' (Wenger 1998: 215). This does not mean, however, that language learning is *always* a transformative experience.

2.3 Investment in language learning

Yet if language is a central element of identity, and if identity and language learning are intertwined, how might the relationship of learners to the language being learned and their 'often ambivalent' (Norton 2013: 6) attitude towards the language itself, and towards learning and practising it, be conceptualised?

In her early research (Norton 2000; Norton Peirce 1995), Norton found that 'high levels of motivation did not necessarily translate into good language learning, and that unequal relations of power between language learners and target language speakers was a common theme in the data' (Norton 2013: 6). In other words, learners who fail to learn a second language are not necessarily 'unmotivated'. Norton thus suggests the concept of 'investment' as a way of linking learners' desire to learn a second language, their social context, and their changing and contradictory identity/ies; that is, learners 'invest' in learning a language with the hope that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic (language, education, friendship or recognition) and material resources (real estate, money or job), which will consequently increase the value of their cultural capital and social power. As Norton (2016: 2) puts it, 'this in turn provides for a wider range of identity positions from which the learner can speak or listen, read or write'. Hence, an investment in the second language is also an investment in a learner's own identity, and, because identity is multiple, contradictory and frequently a site of struggle, investment itself 'is also complex, contradictory, and often in a state of flux' (Darvin and Norton 2016: 20).

Investment thus serves as a ‘significant explanatory construct’ (Cummins 2006: 59). It goes beyond the surface to capture the complex interaction of different forces affecting language learners' desire and commitment to learn and practice a second language. A language learner might be highly motivated to learn a language, but not necessarily invested in the language practices of a given context if, for instance, the practices are racist, sexist, homophobic, elitist, anti-immigrant, anti-refugee or Islamophobic, or if there are inconsistencies between the language classroom practices and learners' imagined identities and communities (see Section 2.4, below). Consequently, the language learner might gradually be excluded and positioned as unmotivated or disengaged by teachers, peers or institutional structures and systems.

2.4 Investment, imagined communities and imagined identities

We have already noted (Section 2.3, above) that learners invest in learning a language with the hope of acquiring symbolic and material resources in order to increase their cultural capital and social power. Implicitly, therefore, for many language learners, particularly those who, like the Syrian informants in this chapter, have immigrated to a new host country, investment is underpinned by the learners’ sense of the imagined community which they aspire to when they learn the new language (Norton 2013; Pavlenko and Norton 2007). As ‘groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination’ (Kanno and Norton 2003: 241), imagined communities are where and with whom learners imagine themselves to be in the future. For Norton (2013: 8), imagined communities are ‘no less real than the ones in which learners have daily engagement and might even have a stronger impact on their current actions and investment’. Learners’ imagined communities are thus central to their investment in language learning.

Consequently, the notion of imagined communities has great implications for informing critical and transformative language pedagogy, and making sense of language learners' stories. Imagined identities can be a rich resource helping teachers construct classroom activities that engage language learners and that contribute to their desired trajectories towards participation in their imagined communities (e.g., Chang (2011) in the USA; Dagenais et al. (2008) in Canada; Darvin and Norton (2016) in Canada and the Uganda; Kanno (2008) in Japan; Przymus (2016) in the USA).

2.5 Religious identity, Islam and language learning

While much research into the relationship between identity, investment and language learning explores the multiple and intersecting dimensions of language learners' identities, an increasing body of work seeks to investigate the ways in which particular identifications, such as race, gender, social class and sexual orientation may impact the process of second language learning, not as 'variables', but rather as socially and historically constructed sets of relationships within particular relations of power (Norton 2013).

Yet there is relatively little research about the role religion can play in language learning and teaching, or the possible intersections between religion and other identity categories and their subsequent impact on the processes and outcomes of L2 learning in both formal and informal settings, notable exceptions being, for example, Bigelow (2010), Giroir (2014) and Sarroub (2005). This under-representation in the literature is relatively surprising considering the fundamental role religion can play in politics, the social organisation of communities and homes, and the identity formation of many individuals.

2.5.1 Islam and identity

For Muslims, as with most religious communities, religion is very important in shaping and developing identity (Ethnic Minority British Election Study) (EMBES) 2010 Howat et al.; Iner and Yusel 2015); Islam places religion at the centre of its community, over and above other identity categories such as ethnicity, race, age, gender, sexuality or disability.

The role of Islam in Muslims' lives can become more central in times of crisis, emotional stress, trauma, and displacement. McMichael's (2002) study gathered Somali Muslim refugee women's narratives about their lives in Australia and experiences of displacement and resettlement, finding that participants' talk was sprinkled with references to Allah and religious faith. Her data showed that 'Islam provides an enduring 'home' that is carried throughout displacement and resettlement', a home that provides stability and solace in their often unstable worlds (p.171). The study also demonstrated a diversity of Islamic ideologies and practices, which were 'inseparable' from culture. Obviously, 'religion is as complex as categories such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, but this complexity has yet to be thoroughly understood in our highly secularized mainstream research agendas' (Bigelow 2018: 432).

Sarroub's research (2002; 2005) also explores the ways in which Islam is a fundamental aspect of her female participants' identity and school experiences. Sarroub investigated how six hijabat Yemeni adolescent girls sought success and negotiated their American and Yemeni identities. To achieve success, the hijabat had to maintain their identities as good daughters, sisters, future wives, students, and Yemeni Muslims, requiring a challenging negotiation of conflicting cultural norms grounded in patriarchal family expectations, liberal public school ideals, and conservative Yemeni Muslim traditions. The hijabat found creative ways to enact acceptable and valid cultural norms at school and at home and forge identities within, and through, 'in-between' spaces and texts, forms of discourse 'that are manifested in different contexts and bridge, subvert, and re-create Yemeni and American social and cultural norms' (2002: 133). Arranging school life into religiously motivated textual categories of halal (lawful), haram (forbidden) and makruh (not written as forbidden in the Quran but condemned by Prophet Muhammad) gave the hijabat 'the opportunity to maintain Yemeni social status and norms within the confines of school' (2002: 138). The study also showed religion, culture and gender interacted to influence the practices and conversations of the hijabat, supporting Han's

(2018) contention that religion and language teaching and learning should be seen as social practices that interact with other factors in people's lives.

It is worth pointing out that the hijabat in Sarroub's study were either U.S.-born or had grown up in the United States, and thus were highly literate in English and Arabic; in other words, they possessed the symbolic capital (knowledge of Arabic and English and intercultural awareness of both cultures) which allowed them partly to successfully negotiate appropriate social and academic spaces for themselves in and out of school, and negotiate their dual identities as Yemeni Muslims and Americans. A key question, therefore, is whether Muslim refugees and immigrants who come to Europe without any previous knowledge of the language(s) or culture(s) of their host country would be able to achieve the successes or create the in-between places of the hijabat, particularly in times of event-driven stress or crisis, such as terrorist attacks. Secondly, the hijabats' narrativisation was restricted to their home, school, and Yemeni Arabic communities such as Islamic lectures, Arabic schools, wedding parties; in wider American mainstream society, the girls were 'rarely allowed to distance themselves from the home or be seen in public working in what were considered to be male domains' (2005: 25). It would be interesting, therefore, to listen to the stories of Muslims, particularly Muslim women, while trying to belong and participate in the wider host communities.

2.5.2 Muslim identity and language learning

Amid small but emerging literature focusing on the intersection of religion and language teaching and learning, research tends to focus upon the religious identities of teachers and on the place of Christianity within the international activity of English language teaching (e.g., Shepard-Wong and Canagarajah 2011; Shepard-Wong et al. 2012). Those few studies which do look at language learning, rather than teaching, tend to focus upon the relationship between religion, most commonly Christianity, and learners' motivation (e.g., Lepp-Kaethler and Dörnyei 2012; Ushioda 2012). Consequently, few studies look explicitly at the intersection between religion and L2 learning processes and participation, and how learners' religious identification can impact their L2 learning processes as well as their access to L2 community resources.

Giroir (ibid.), however, does explore the processes by which two Saudi English language learners in the USA were able to renegotiate their peripherality as Arab Muslim men through their ongoing interactions as cultural and linguistic novices in their host community. Although the two participants differ in critical ways and employ different discursive practices, the data illustrate 'not only how post-9/11 discourses served as powerfully marginalizing structures, but also how the learners actively managed those structures in their bids for fuller participation in L2 communities' (p.34). Initially marginalized by post-9/11 discourses, one of the learners, for example, adopted a new, more desirable identity position by attaching himself explicitly and positively to his religious and cultural identity, repositioning himself from 'a terrorist' to 'a good Muslim' in the eyes of his host community. Consequently, he gained the right to speak and be listened to. Despite this positive outcome, however, Giroir (ibid.: 50) problematizes these events, noting the broader societal discourses that 'place the onus on L2 learners to negotiate for participation rights in expert communities'; in other words, the Saudi immigrant 'was able to achieve a legitimate status largely because he was granted the right to speak by a more powerfully positioned 'expert''.

Like Sarroub's participants, a critical reading of Giroir's Muslim learners' success might also point to other factors which helped them resist discriminatory social forces and become legitimate speakers and participants in their host community, with all the learning opportunities that accompanied this. They were Saudi men, literate, educated, from middle- to upper-class backgrounds, and their academic and professional paths were sanctioned and supported by their home government, which also seemed to shape their liberal religious stance and thus increase their interactional opportunities Thus, they possessed economic and cultural capital that other Muslim and Arab immigrants and refugees might not have.

Yet how might more marginalised groups such as Muslim refugees or asylum seekers who immigrate or seek refuge in European countries without any knowledge of host community languages or with little economic and symbolic capital manage the complexities of identity (re)formation and change, and language learning? To what extent do they, or can they, invest in language learning, and participate within the opportunities which arise within and beyond the classroom? Very little research explores the current complex conditions for Arab and Muslim refugees for language learning and identity (re)construction, and addressing this gap becomes more imperative when the current migration and displacement patterns in today's political and economic landscapes (as outlined in Section 1, Introduction, above) are considered.

This chapter will therefore now turn to focus on the language learning experiences and the process of identity construction and negotiation of a particularly marginalised cultural group: Syrian refugees in the UK.

3. An ethnographic research methodology

The data in this chapter are drawn from a wider year-long ethnographic project which broadly aimed at understanding the language learning and related identity experiences of a group of fourteen adult Muslim Syrian refugees recently arrived in the north east of England, all within 18 months of the start of the study. The project focused in particular on the intersection of their language investment with their social and religious identities, both within and beyond the ESOL classroom, and sought to draw out the participants' *emic* perspectives on their experiences, that is, their own meanings for social actions and their own understandings of their social world (Davies 1995). The larger dataset included semi-structured interviews with the fourteen refugees and their ESOL teachers, including the manager of the institution where they studied; classroom observations and field notes alongside audio-recordings and subsequent transcriptions of classroom events; learner diaries, either written or audiorecorded according to the participants’ preferences; learner shadowing, both in-class and beyond; researcher diaries; and a collection of relevant documents which ranged from classroom handouts to UK job-search and Jobcentre forms and related paperwork. Data was collected both in Arabic (with subsequent translation into English) and in English, the multiple sources enabling the clarification and corroboration of data across the project through a process of triangulation.

Of the fourteen Syrian participants in the project, eight were female and six male, with ages ranging from 19 to 49. Amongst them were three couples, a mother and her daughter, and an aunt and her niece who was also her daughter-in-law. Thirteen participants had come to the UK via Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq under the UK’s Vulnerable Person Resettlement (VPR) scheme, while one participant had travelled directly from Syria to Britain. All reported experiencing racism and other indignities both during their journeys to and within the UK. The participants came from various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds in Syria, and had differing linguistic abilities. While ten had received six years of schooling or less, two had university degrees. Ten participants did not know any English before arriving in Britain, while four knew very little. None of them had previously experienced living in a non-Arabic-speaking country. All the learners were Muslims and all women were Hijabis (see Section 2.5.1, above).

The project followed strict ethical guidelines, including voluntary and anonymous participation via a process of informed consent, and central to its success (or otherwise!), and to the reliability and validity of the data collected, was the establishment of relationship of trust between the refugees, and their teachers, and the researcher in the field (the lead author of this chapter), who is a Muslim adult Syrian female. This was facilitated by the researcher volunteering at the ESOL institution and becoming well-known to the refugees and their teachers prior to data collection, and developed further during the course of the study.

Informed by grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008), data analysis sought to understand participants social construction of meaning (Emerson et al. 2011). The unstructured data underwent an initial process of coding for broad categories related to investment in language learning and religious identity, followed by further analytic, discursive stages of going back and forth through the data from multiple sources, nuancing those initial categories to develop major themes. The analysis and report of participants' experiences and stories in the remainder of the chapter therefore involves the authors as co-constructors of knowledge in order to understand and present the participants' 'multiple perspectives, multiple voices, and multiple interpretations' of their experiences (Merriam 20019: 12).

4. Religious identity, investment and language learning: the case of Muslim Syrian refugees

Like McMichael's (2002) and Sarroub's informants (2002, 2005; see Section 2.5.1, above), the centrality of Islam to most Syrian participants' lives was evident throughout the data, which were peppered with references to the participants' religious beliefs. Islam provided an overarching framework that shaped their perceptions of their experiences and practices in a new culture. The refugees drew upon the ideologies of Islam to make sense of their experiences, and in turn Islam shaped the viable identities from which they could choose, the spaces they could be in, how and with whom they could interact, their styles of speech with the opposite gender, and their modes of thinking. As the discussion will show, therefore, Islam was a motivating and/or a shaping factor of Syrian participants' English learning practices in and out of the ESOL classroom, at times facilitating and supporting learning, but also on occasion subverting and restricting their take up of language learning opportunities. Before proceeding, it is important to note that the data reflects not only the heterogeneity of the category 'Muslim' (see McMichael 2002, Section 2.5.1, above), but also the multiple ways in which the Syrians defined and presented themselves as Muslims and how that was manifested in learning English.

4.1 Islam and investment in learning English

The value of seeking knowledge and education is deeply rooted in Islam through the Quran and the Hadith of Prophet Muhammed (Al-Omari 2015)[2], and this emphasis was strongly reflected in many participants' narratives of making sense of learning English. Islam enhanced the process of learning English and encouraged a number of participants to be 'good' language learners, for example:

> Our religion urges us to seek knowledge to help ourselves and others, doesn't it? The Quran asks us to learn…from a religious perspective if I learned English and helped a woman in need, I will be rewarded. My religion even gives me more motivation to learn English. (Amaan[3], interview)
>
> You know I shouldn't be a normal person, I like to be outstanding. Companions of Muhammad were reciters of the Quran and so forth...that applies to learning English and it's a motivator. (Waard, interview)

In his account, not only did Waard trace direct links between his motivation to learn English and his own interpretation of Islamic scripture and stories, but also pointed out that his drive to be the number one student derived from his interpretation of Islam – he did not want to be a 'normal' English learner. Indeed, during his studies, Waard undertook a great deal of autonomous learning and often obtained the highest marks in his ESOL class (it is worth noting, however, that this was not solely an outcome of his religious understandings - there is an intersection here between religious identity and Waard's identification with education via his middle class background in Syria, which together mediated the enactment of cultural and academic norms at home and at school).

4.2 Repositioning Muslims through English

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[2] For example, the first word revealed from Allah to Prophet Muhammad within the Quran was Iqraa (اقرأ), which here goes beyond the literal act of reading and reciting to encompass reading for education and enlightenment; seeking knowledge to make sense of this world; and overcoming barriers of ignorance to change the world for better (Al-Omari 2015).

[3] For reasons of anonymity, a pseudonym, like all participants' names in the chapter.

Religion also intersected positively with learning English through the responsibility that some of the Syrians took to try to change their host community's perspectives of Islam. The increasing stigmatisation of Muslims in public and media discourses (Bigelow 2008) meant that some learners wished to reposition themselves and Muslims more generally, and to 'appropriate more desirable identities' (Norton and Toohey 2011: 414) through being good language learners and members of society:

> [I provide a good example of Islam] through taking things seriously, being on time…my religion tells me to do this… [The host community] have a bad idea about Islam. Also by being committed to English, being attentive to what the teacher is saying, by not being apathetic or disengaged… I want to show that I didn't come here to be a burden on this country or take charity…I want to earn money by the sweat of my brow (Omar, interview)

Classroom observation showed this participant, Omar, to be a very attentive and committed language learner who always came to class on time. He hoped, through his religiously-motivated commitment, to change his teacher's perceptions of Muslims, and drew upon his religious investment in learning English; likewise, a female refugee, Fatima, who on helping a fellow bus passenger, felt frustrated at not being able to explain to others the religious motivations for her actions:

> I was annoyed that I couldn't reply to the driver and tell him that it's just my duty…I wanted to tell him that it's our religion that urges us to do this… I wish I could express that…(diary)

Here, Fatima traces links between her motivation to speak English and her desire to provide a 'truer' version of her religion within her host community, as both she and Omar attempt to reposition themselves to resist ascribed identity positions which are often hostile to Muslims (such as 'other', 'extremist', 'threat' or 'terrorist'; Mason-Bish and Zempi 2018).

Participants were therefore being strategic when they made sense of learning English within the context of their religious identity. Islam was an 'anchoring home' for them, one that could be 'carried' and 'lived in' throughout the processes of displacement, migration and resettlement (McMichael

2002: 179). The act of linking their investment in English to that anchoring home made learners less alienated while they were learning English and socialising in a new secular milieu, and gave their investment in English a sense of groundedness and stability in their often-unstable life of displacement. From this perspective, Islam was 'investment-inspiring' (Norton 2000; Block 2007).

4.3 Islam as a 'shaper' of English language learning opportunities

Interaction and meaningful communication in the second language are central to language learning (Swain and Lapkin 1998). Contemporary language classroom methodologies tend to focus on communicative pair and groupwork activities and, in an effort to recognize individual needs, skills and abilities, are generally learner-centred, valuing collaborative and cooperative in-class tasks. For some of the participants in this study, such approaches sat uneasily with their religious beliefs and identities. Similarly, while opportunities clearly existed for the Syrian refugees to 'immerse' themselves in English and interact with the local population in a variety of social contexts, their religious identity worked as a 'shaping' and sometimes limiting influence in their new milieu, either through their own positioning and understanding of Islam, or in the way they were 'included' or 'excluded' by the host population.

4.3.1. In the classroom: mixed seating as incompatible with Islam?

For some of the Syrian refugees, gender segregation was a central tenet of their Islamic beliefs, and, of the fourteen participants, five females and two males were unhappy and/or refused to work with students from the opposite gender in the classroom for what they described as religious reasons[4]:

> I've never seen a woman and a man at the same table and working together…if the man wants to hold a rubber, he might touch the woman…It's got to do with our religion…I'm always comfortable in the classroom until the teacher asks me to move to the women's table. I really

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[4] It is worth noting that there is nothing in the Quran and the Hadith which requires absolute gender segregation. It is a disputed issue in Islam.

> get upset…I get annoyed…They're my people, but I swear by God when I'm at their table I feel uncomfortable…it just feels awkward. (Adam, interview)
>
> I'm still the same as I was in Syria and Lebanon. I haven't tried to interact or talk with guys…it's related to our religion. (Mariam, interview)

Running through the comments was a lack of investment in pair and groupwork due to these Muslim participants' *own* interpretation of Islam - working in pairs and groups with students of the opposite gender was incompatible with their religious identities. Classroom observation confirmed this, showing that when teachers enforced mixed seating, these seven participants remained silent and did not participate. The women shied away from men, sometimes exchanging their seating with others in the class. This seemed to constrain their English learning and speaking opportunities in the classroom and around the ESOL college more generally. Their female teacher, however, argued that mixed seating in the classroom increased the learners' prospects for integration into British society and the workplace:

> if you've got integration in the classroom then hopefully you're going to have integration in society outside and people are going to have that situation … in the workplace that men and women have to work together at different levels and they need to be able to cope with that. (interview)

Regardless of this argument and the realities of the world beyond the classroom (it is interesting to note, for example, that the teacher does not identify a *pedagogical* need for mixed-gender grouping, and the extent to which mixing during lessons is actually an indicator of or facilitator integration beyond the classroom might be questioned), the Syrian learners, as relatively new arrivals in the UK, had not yet developed the new English-mediated gender and cultural subject positions that accepted this position, due to the conflict it created with their identification as Muslims. Their resistance to mixed-gender seating eventually led the teacher to return to the learners' own seating preferences, with a subsequent increase in interaction, participation and good humour, and, consequently, learning opportunities. This also served to legitimize the Islam-informed positioning of the students despite their 'violation' of classroom rules.

The students' acts of learner resistance were an important identity practice that helped them while they attempted to keep their dual identities as Muslims and students, particularly those who had little prior experience of formal education. However, it would also be remiss not to acknowledge the intertwinning of the refugees' broader cultural norms around gender and their religious practices, a point made in interview by four of the female refugees. Finally, it is worth noting that two participants, who were university graduates, worked comfortably in mixed-gender pairs and groups, and one male, Waard who, as the data above (Section 4.1) shows, had a strong religious identity, regularly helped female students. Thus, there is no single, uniform Muslim identity; individuals' religious identities are nuanced and intricate, mediated by issues such as education, culture, and gender.

4.3.2 Beyond the classroom: possible constraints on interaction

While the section above outlines the way in which Islamic identity/ies can shape ESOL classroom practices, this section looks beyond the classroom, contrasting the experiences of two male learners, Waard and Amaan, who reported turning down English-speaking and learning opportunities which they believed crossed religious boundaries, with Fadi, another male, who did not.

Amaan, who frequently expressed concerns about the lack of speaking-English opportunities available to him in the host community, was introduced to an English woman who agreed to help him with speaking English. However:

> She said 'let's go for a drink tomorrow' I said I don't drink … In short, the only way to speak English is to become a friend with an English woman … but this way doesn't suit our religion, traditions or culture. (interview)

Yet Amaan also referred to Muslim friends who did have English girlfriends and had made considerable progress learning English. For him, however, opportunities for speaking English which contradicted his religious and cultural beliefs were avoided.

Similarly, Waard refused several offers to live with an English family while he was waiting to be re-united with his family elsewhere in the UK, as he believed this would compromise his religious reservations about drinking alcohol:

> There are [religious] things I can't give up for the sake of learning English… Here we're talking about drinking. The prohibition means also that you shouldn't sit at the same table with people drinking alcohol…because you're joining them…There are rules (recorded interaction, shadowing)

In these examples, the two men's investment in their Muslim identities was stronger than their investment in learning English and their imagined future English-speaking identities. Amaan and Waard straddled two worlds: the literal physical world in which they lived and the world of religious beliefs and its imagined extension in the hereafter. Their refusal of interaction opportunities was structured by their religious investment in the spiritual world which they prioritized over their physical world.

In contrast to Amaan and Waard, Fadi considered himself to be a Muslim, but also an 'open-minded, liberal man' who mixed regularly with women and also drank alcohol (interview). Like Giroir's participants (2014; see Section 2.5.2, above), this provided him with more 'space' and viable identity positions from which he could participate in the host community's social life and seek English-speaking and practice opportunities, becoming friendly with women outside his family, and welcoming 'any interaction opportunities'. Once again, the range of religious identities within the group of Syrian Muslim refugees is evident, as are the consequent implications for language learning. Furthermore, it is again important to note that within the study, the issue of whether and how to engage with English-speaking opportunities beyond the classroom was a question reflected on by primarily male participants. For the female refugees, social opportunities beyond their immediate community of Muslim peers were limited, due to the combination of religious identity and community gender norms noted above (Section 2.4.1).

4.4 Islam, investment and language learning in a hostile environment: implications of the Manchester and London attacks

The discussion so far has highlighted how individuals’ religious identities affected their investment in and the take up of opportunities to learn English, implicitly acknowledging their agency and ability to decide their own actions based on their understanding of their religious faith. Clearly, however, for these Muslim Syrian refugees, as with many migrants in Europe, individual and migrant community agency is constrained by the societal structures and discourses of the host community. To illustrate some of these issues, the chapter will examine how four terrorist attacks which occurred during the course of this study impacted on the participants’ religious identities, their investment in learning English, and their English-language practices.

Between March and June 2017, London and Manchester cities witnessed four attacks, killing 36 people with almost 200 injured. Three of these attacks were committed by Muslim men in busy secular locations, and one by a non-Muslim man targeting Muslims outside a London mosque. There was consequently a spike in the number of anti-Muslim hate crimes in the UK, one source recording a 475 per cent increase in the week following the attack in Manchester and a 30.6 per cent increase in similar hate crimes from 2016 to 2017 (Tell MAMA 2018[5])

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[5] https://tellmamauk.org/about-us/

Following the attacks, all the Syrians in this study felt more vulnerable because of their religion. Ten feared revenge attacks, particularly the women, who were identifiable as Muslims through their hijabs, consequently modifying their day-to-day behaviour. Typical of most participants, Waard, for example noted that:

> When a problem happens, one needs to limit social activities so they're not exposed to danger… if there wasn't an urgent need, we didn't go out. (interview)

Similarly, Jean, one of the most active and positive learners before the attacks, reported that

> People stopped smiling at me and honestly I felt scared. I couldn't believe it when it rained because then I could put my hood up and tighten it so no one could see my hijab [laughs]… Actually, the way they look at me has changed a lot, I felt like they're looking from the corner of their eyes…Before the attacks, particularly old people on the bus always smiled at and talked to my children. Then, I would talk to them. However, since Manchester and London attacks, I really feel there's been a barrier. (diary)

By their own accounts, therefore, the Muslim Syrians took up the identity positions of '*Islamic accomplice', 'outsider'* or '*outcast'.* These were not wholly self-ascribed; nor were they explicitly imposed by non-Muslim UK citizens. Rather, they were the result of the pre-existing association between Muslims and terrorism in the discourses circulating in society and media (Kassimeris and Jackson 2012), amplified by the four terror attacks. And as 'accomplices' and 'outcasts', the Syrian refugees withdrew into their L1 communities and restricted their social activities, including attendance at their ESOL classes, restricting their opportunities to speak and learn English.

The exacerbation of anti-Islamic societal discourses and the Syrian refugees reshaped identities following the attacks also raised complex questions concerning their investment in learning English: how far could participants invest in English or seek interaction opportunities when they were feeling 'fearful' and unwelcome, and accused of complicity in acts of terrorism, by the speakers of the language they were learning, and how could they invest in learning a language that was the vehicle for prejudice against themselves? If learners consistently identify or are identified as vulnerable and lonely subject, this is likely to frame their language learning investment and experiences in ways which are limiting (Phipps 2017). As Amaan noted:

> when a bombing happens, it overwhelms me. Shall I worry about my family, my children and my parents or learning English? Of course, I wouldn't be bothered about learning English. It wouldn't be a priority for me. (interview)

To summarise, therefore, the terror attacks powerfully shaped discourses around Islam with a direct impact on Syrian refugees' sense of self, well-being, and the processes and outcomes of English learning in both formal and informal settings. This must be understood against the backdrop of Syrians' previous experiences as traumatised individuals and survivors of war, and who they had become within the UK, collectively and individually, as newly-arrived Muslims. The attacks further demarcated who they were, where they belonged, and what and how they could learn, their subsequent investment in learning English emerging and being shaped through the complex interaction of individual identities, and the discourses and social norms within their Syrian community and wider British society.

5. Conclusions and implications

Drawing on data from a wider ethnographic project, this chapter has explored the experiences of a group of Syrian adult Muslim refugees recently arrived in the north east of England, finding that religion serves as a useful lens through which to make sense of the participants' shifting identities, their investment in learning English, and their access to language learning opportunities in their new environment. Confirming that Islam is 'a mosaic, not a monolith' (Gregorian, 2003: 1), the data shows that a range of Muslim identities exist, even within this relatively small group of fourteen adults, resulting in different levels of investment in learning English and differential access to interactional opportunities, both in the ESOL classroom and beyond.

Yet it would be wrong to assume a simple one-to-one correspondence between religious positioning and language learning. Rather, the relations between religious identity and learning English seem to be complex and may entail paradoxical pathways which draw upon individuals' own multifaceted and complex understandings of their religion - in this case, Islam. Furthermore, as this chapter shows, religious identity intersects with other discursive frames such as gender, social class and culture, meaning that the implications for language learning are rarely simple or straightforward.

What, therefore, are the practical implications of the data and analysis for English language teachers and other ESOL stakeholders? Teachers and other practitioners, including institutional managers, who are more critically informed about the role of religion in learners' experiences, narratives and understanding of their own lives can utilise the classroom (and, indeed, other shared locations, such as institutional cafeterias, corridors and common rooms) not only as a space for the development of English but also as an important site for learners to take up more powerful identities and to voice their concerns and vulnerability. Consequently, teachers can learn about and better understand the investment and the language learning practices of their learners such as their commitment to learning, approaches to punctuality, resistance (or otherwise) to working in mixed-gender groups, and approaches to participation, and silence, in the classroom; clearly, it is important for teachers not to impose values/practices that go against the learners' perceived identities without negotiation and developing shared understandings with the learners' themselves.

For ESOL colleges and institutions, meanwhile, the challenge is to recognise and challenge, rather than inadvertently reproduce or reinforce, the broader societal inequalities that many immigrant learners are likely to have experienced as a result of their religious affiliations. Developing approaches that accommodate governmental and institutional priorities (in the UK, for example, the promotion and teaching of 'British values' and a campaign to safeguard learners from religious extremism) in ways which respect and value religious diversity and difference is essential, not only to prevent or contest the marginalisation that many Muslim immigrants experience in their host society, but also for its likely positive effects on their investment in learning the language(s) of those communities.

Understanding the role of religion and religious identity in language learning is, therefore, of crucial importance in the UK and in Europe more generally, where Muslims form a significant proportion of the migrant and refugee population. Language learning is of central importance in how societies manage their changing demographics successfully, not just 'coping' with migration but reaping the benefits of a more diverse population, and in how individuals are to fulfil their potential and lead satisfying lives in their host community. By becoming more critically informed about the implications of religion and religious identity on language learning, language teachers and other stakeholders can utilise the classroom both as a site for language learning and, importantly, as a safe space for learners to take up more powerful and desirable identities, to feel more accepted by host communities, and, consequently, to develop their investment in language learning.

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