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**IDENTITI(ES) AND INVESTMENT IN  
LEARNING ENGLISH: AN  
ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF  
SYRIAN REFUGEES IN THE UK**

A AL-DHAIF

PhD

2019

**IDENTITI(ES) AND INVESTMENT IN  
LEARNING ENGLISH: AN  
ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF  
SYRIAN REFUGEES IN THE UK**

**AMINA AL-DHAIF**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements of the  
University of Northumbria at Newcastle  
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Doctor of Philosophy

Research undertaken in the  
Faculty of Arts, Design & Social  
Sciences

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## Abstract

This PhD project explored the experiences of 14 adult Syrian refugee language learners, recently arrived in the North East of England, as they learned English and negotiated their sense of self in their new environment. It sought to uncover the ways in which identities, identity transformations, and relations of power were implicated in the Syrians' investment in learning English. Further, it aimed to explore the conditions under which the Syrian learners were learning English and negotiating who they were in their ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) college and classrooms.

To address these research questions, data was collected through a 14-month ethnographic project with 8 female and 6 male Syrian learners who came from various cultural, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds in Syria, 4 of their ESOL teachers, and the manager of their ESOL institution. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews with the learners, their ESOL teachers, and the college manager; classroom observations and field notes alongside audio-recordings and subsequent transcriptions of classroom events; learner diaries, either written or audio-recorded according to the participants' preferences; learner shadowing, both in-class and beyond; researcher diaries; and a collection of relevant documents. Data was collected both in Arabic (with subsequent translation into English) and in English.

The analysis drew upon poststructuralist theories of language, identity, and positioning, Lave and Wenger's communities of practice (CoP) framework (Lave and Wenger 1991), and Norton's theory of identity and language learning (Norton 2000). The findings of the project show that, through the processes of learning English and participation in new communities of practice, the participants (re)constructed their social class, religious, and gendered identities; identities which were expansive and/or restrictive factors in their learning of English. The analysis also reveals that the learners' multiple identities did not emerge and operate independently of each other. Instead, the various identities of each Syrian learner interconnected to create a complex picture of how an individual's identity/ies was/were enacted. Additionally, the findings show the ways in which many of these language learners acted with agency in forging English learning opportunities, accessing English-speaking communities, and resisting marginalising discourses, noting also that their agency was at times situated and constrained by power structures in their inter- and intra- communities. Teacher and institutional awareness and appreciation of the complexity and diversity of the learners' identities and the interrelated intersections between identity and language learning can help them (1) develop a deeper and richer understanding of their learners' level of investment in learning English and their classroom practices and (2) support their learners in tackling the challenges they face in and beyond the language learning classroom.

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Heartfelt and humble gratitude to all of you.

## **Dedication**

To all those who are voiceless and invisible...

## Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the University Ethics Committee.

**I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is 93,633.**

Name:

Signature:

Date:

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

This project explores the experiences of 14 adult Syrian refugee language learners, recently arrived in the UK and enrolled in an ESOL college in the North East of England, as they learned English and experienced changes in their own sense of identity. It seeks to uncover the ways in which identities, identity transformations, and relations of power were implicated in the Syrians' investment in learning English. Further, it aims to explore the conditions under which the Syrian learners were learning English and negotiating who they were in their ESOL classrooms and college. Following this introduction, I locate the context of the project in the contemporary migration trends in the world and the UK. I then turn to sketch out some challenges faced by refugees, and forced immigrants, upon their arrival in the UK including learning English. The final sections present the research questions and the significance of the project.

### 1.1. Contemporary global migration trends and (Syrian) refugees in the UK

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2019), there are 70.8 million forcibly displaced people in the world at present, including refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people (IDPs). In the context of contemporary discussions on forcible displacement, the terms "refugee", "asylum seeker", and "internally displaced" are at times used interchangeably. This blurring of terms hides significant differences between the groups, particularly, for example, in the level of support and access to services afforded to people within the above categorisation. Refugees are people who have fled their country and cannot return because of a fear of persecution or serious and indiscriminate threats to life, physical integrity or freedom (UNHCR 1951). They are often afforded some sort of legal protection, either by their host country's government, the UNHCR, or both. When people flee their own country and seek refuge in another country, they can apply for asylum. While their asylum claim is being considered, they are referred to as asylum seekers. Unlike refugees, most asylum seekers in the UK are not eligible to work nor do they have recourse to public funds (Right to Remain 2018); additionally, they can only be eligible for ESOL classes if they have lived in the UK for six months or longer while their claim is being assessed (House of Commons Library 2017). IDPs are individuals who have been forced to flee their home for similar reasons as refugees, but remain in their own country and have not crossed an international border.

25.9 million of the 70.8 million forcibly displaced people are refugees. 67% of those identified as refugees by the UNHCR come from Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, and Somalia. About 80% of the refugees live in countries neighbouring their countries of origin. The top refugee-hosting countries are Turkey (3.7m), followed by Pakistan (1.4m), Uganda (1.2m), Sudan (1.1m), and Germany (1.1m). Syrians make up

the largest refugee population in the world (around 25%), with an estimated number of 7.2 million Syrians having fled to escape the war. The population of Syria before the revolution had started in 2011 was 24.5 million (BBC 2016b). 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees are in Turkey, 948,849 in Lebanon, 671,551 in Jordan, 252,526 in Iraq, and 132,871 in Egypt (UNHCR 2019). Despite the attempts of some European governments to curtail migration, the numbers of refugees arriving in Europe has also increased significantly in recent years. The migration phenomenon peaked in 2015, when more than one million people arrived in Europe, making it a record year for migration. A large proportion of arrivals travelled via the eastern route through Turkey, Greece, and the Balkans. Similarly, the central Mediterranean route has been one of the most consistently busy and popular migration routes. Other “illegal” main migration routes include the Eastern Mediterranean route between Turkey and Greece, the Western Mediterranean route extending from Morocco to Spain, and the Western Balkans route extending through Macedonia and Serbia to Croatia, Slovenia and Hungary (MacGregor 2019). In 2018, 638,000 asylum seekers applied for international protection in the Member States of the EU, down by 10 % compared with 2017 (712,000) and just over half the number recorded in 2016, when nearly 1.3 million asylum applicants were registered (Eurostat 2019).

As a response to the increasing numbers of refugees from Syria, the UK provided aid to refugee camps on Syria’s borders, but also agreed to resettle up to 20,000 Syrian refugees under its Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme (VPR). Although the VPR Scheme has received much media and political attention, the scheme is only one way in which those who have fled persecution may have gained the right to remain in the UK. The UK also runs three programmes for the resettlement of refugees: the Gateway Protection Programme, the Mandate Refugee Programme, and the Vulnerable Children Resettlement Scheme from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Meanwhile, some forcibly displaced people take the sea route to Europe and then to the UK in order to seek asylum. Within the refugee population in the UK, the experiences of those who have been resettled as part of a government-led resettlement scheme differ considerably from those who have been offered the refugee status following an asylum claim (Chick and Hannagan-Lewis 2019). The discrepancies between the level of support offered to the refugees on government-led resettlement schemes against that offered to those on the asylum route has led to the observation that the UK has “a two-tier” system of support for refugees (APPG<sup>1</sup> on Refugees 2017: 6). For example, the VPR scheme offers tightening funding to local authorities to meet the costs incurred by resettling Syrian refugees - from full funding in the first year of a refugees’ resettlement, to £1000 per person in year 5 (Home Office 2018). Additionally, there is the £10m pledged by the UK Government to “enhance the

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<sup>1</sup> All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees

English language skills of adults to improve their resettlement and integration experience and employability” (Home Office 2017: 6). On the other hand, those who gain refugee status following a successful claim to asylum do not have access to comparable levels of funding or support on a local authority level.

The government’s Syrian VPR Scheme was launched in January 2014 and has helped vulnerable Syrians in the greatest need, including people requiring urgent medical treatment, survivors of violence and torture, women and children at risk, and vulnerable elderly people. The government’s approach is to take refugees directly from non-European countries where resettlement may be the only durable solution, often from the countries bordering Syria such as Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. This provides refugees with a direct and safe route to the UK. The government is seeking to resettle Syrians around the UK, in groups which are big enough “to share a language and culture and avoid a feeling of isolation” (Home Office 2019a: 13) whilst emphasising the need to learn English, through organised ESOL classes, to assist with “integration” and “employability” (Home Office 2019a: 14). The government’s policy is aimed at ensuring an equitable distribution of refugees across the country so that no individual local authority bears a disproportionate share of the responsibility (Home Office 2017).

## **1.2. Some challenges refugees face upon arrival in the UK**

Having set the scene, it is time now to summarise some challenges faced by refugees, and forced migrants, upon their arrival in the UK. One of the big challenges is learning English. The UK government acknowledges the vital importance of English for refugees to integrate in the British community and to harness the opportunities that life in the UK offers in easy and direct ways. The government’s Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper (2018) contains some proposals with regards to boosting learning English such as developing a new ESOL strategy for England; introducing a new scheme to consolidate existing volunteer-based support and encourage more volunteers to take part in setting up new conversation clubs; and launching an online-hub to help volunteers facilitate the conversation clubs. Nevertheless, the contradictions in the UK government policy are evident. The same government that emphasised the importance of English for integration and community cohesion was simultaneously responsible for considerable cuts of funding for the ESOL classes (Roberts et al. 2007). A real terms reduction of 60% in recent years to government funding for ESOL - funding has shrunk from £212.3m in 2008 to £105m in 2018 - means that refugees are waiting for months and often years to begin classes<sup>2</sup> and this is leading to loneliness, isolation, and inability to find jobs (Refugee Action 2019). As

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that the UK government has allocated specific funding for resettled Syrian refugees’ ESOL classes (APPG on Refugees 2017). However, in this section I aim to present the challenges faced by all refugees rather than a specific section.

Simpson argues, ESOL in the UK is “fragmented”, “massively under-resourced”, “very much ignored and undervalued in national policy” (2017: 92). Other difficulties in accessing ESOL classes and learning English include: the lack of childcare provision in ESOL institutions (Court 2014; Dumper 2002); shortfalls in delivering ESOL (insufficient ESOL hours or access to appropriate language levels) (APPG on Refugees 2017); the lack of integrated courses in ESOL with vocational qualifications (Chick and Hannagan-Lewis 2019); low levels of literacy and education in the first language of ESOL learners (Chick and Hannagan-Lewis 2019; Court 2014; Simpson 2016); and the lack of opportunities to practise English with expert speakers of the language (Cooke and Simpson 2008).

Other barriers that refugees and forced migrants face in their social lives and integration in the British community include having to contend with racism, anti-immigration policies and rhetoric, poverty, and language difficulties (Bryers et al. 2013). Cooke and Simpson (2009) pointed out how a “pervasive anti-migrant and xenophobic discourse” around immigration in the popular media means that “ESOL students, as migrants to the UK, are positioned in public and everyday discourse as being of a lower status than the local-born population” (p.20). Public debates around immigration are often embedded in discourses which “Otherise” those who cannot speak English (Cameron 2013) and promote the “one nation, one language” ideology that devalues the refugee language learners’ linguistic resources (Simpson 2016: 181). In addition to their inferior, demonising positioning, refugees are inaudible. “Audibility” is not only related to language ability, but also to the resources, knowledge, social networks, friendship, education, and status (i.e., the “social and cultural capital”) (Bourdieu 1986; see Chapter 2) necessary to function in a society on an equal footing (Cooke and Simpson 2009). Further, many refugees work in jobs that are far below their professional level and future aspirations, which has an impact on their sense of self and self-esteem (Simpson and Cooke 2010).

### **1.3. Research questions and the research design**

In light of the contexts briefly outlined above, this project sought to uncover the real-life experiences of a group of 14 Syrian refugees recently arrived in the North East of England. How did they navigate their “new lives” following their varied journeys to the UK? How did they go about learning English? What facilitating factors and barriers did they encounter, and how did their sense of self change in light of their experiences and living in a new environment? Thus, the current project was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How does the Syrian refugees’ investment in learning English intersect with their social positioning and changing identities?

- 2) How far and in what ways do structures of marginalisation and Islamophobia shape the Syrian refugees' identity construction and their subsequent investment in learning English?
- 3) In what ways, if any, do the Syrian refugees resist these structures and situate themselves in their new social milieu?
- 4) To what extent do the conditions within the ESOL College facilitate or constrain the Syrian refugees' negotiation of their identities and fulfilling their potential as English learners and novices in culturally and linguistically new communities?

These conditions include (1) how the Syrian learners are positioned in the ESOL classroom and (2) space for their identities to be expressed and valued.

To address these research questions, I conducted a 14-month ethnographic project with 14 Syrian adult refugee language learners, 4 ESOL teachers, and the manager of the ESOL institution, Northeast College<sup>3</sup>, where the learners studied English. The 8 female and 6 male Syrian learners came from various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds in Syria, and had differing linguistic abilities. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews with the learners, their ESOL teachers, and the manager; classroom observations and field notes alongside audio-recordings and subsequent transcriptions of classroom events; learner diaries, either written or audio-recorded 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. The project focused on the language learners' emic perspectives of their experiences, that is, their own meanings for social actions and their own understandings of their social world (Davis 1995) because they were what shaped their behaviour and stances.

#### **1.4. Significance of the project**

Identity has become an established research area "in its own right" (Zuengler and Miller 2006: 43). It features in most encyclopaedias and handbooks of Applied Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and Language Teaching (Block 2007; 2010; Morgan and Clarke 2011; Norton 2006; 2010; and Ricento 2005; to name but a few). Although there has been increasing attention to the ways in which learners' multiple identities are implicated in the language learning processes and outcomes, and current research has begun to focus on language learning as framed by individuals' identity aspects such as

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<sup>3</sup> All the names used throughout the study, including the names of research locations, participants, and organisations are pseudonyms.

race, gender, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and religion, there are some issues that have been far under-examined in identity research and language learning. First, 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 language learning. This project aimed to address this gap through exploring how 14 Syrian Muslim refugees' religious identities shaped and were shaped by their learning of English and social participation in new communities.

Secondly, as Block (2013) underscores, there is a need for more focused attention to social class in second language identity research. Part of the rationale of this project was to focus on a group of Syrian learners who came from different socio-economic and educational backgrounds. I viewed an investigation of the Syrian learners as an opportunity to explore how the loss (or change) of their class capital due to immigration could be implicated in their learning of English and identity practice. It was hoped that an investigation of the Syrian refugees' religious and social class identities would corroborate previous findings in second language identity research.

Thirdly, part of the significance of this project was that all the learner participants, who were mainly beginner language learners, reported on their experiences in their first language, which made them more able to articulate tricky and complicated matters like identity and rendered their voices to be audible. Not only did I share the language with the Syrians, but also the culture, religion, and the experiences of being displaced and trying to integrate in a new culture. This probably encouraged them to open up about issues I doubt they would, say, speaking to people from other backgrounds. To put it differently, had the project been conducted by another researcher from a different culture and speaking a different language, not the same data evidently would have been collected.

Additionally, although the focus of this project was 14 Syrian ESOL language learners enrolled in an ESOL college in the North East of England, the issues and concerns raised in this research are likely to be relevant to most refugees around the UK and, indeed, internationally. What challenges do refugee language learners face in the ESOL classrooms and institutions and in the wider society more generally? What strategies do ESOL learners and their teachers develop to support language learning and facilitate identity development? To what extent are the ESOL institutions facilitating or constraining the refugees' experiences of identity negotiation and social engagement in their new communities? And how do ESOL institutions and teachers identify and support the varying needs and challenges of ESOL learners with very different backgrounds, proficiencies, and identities, accommodating both individual students' English language needs and their need and desire to express their own identities? How can ESOL institutions and teachers

and policy makers best understand and accommodate refugees to support them learn English and fulfil their potential as English learners and novices in culturally and linguistically new communities? This project is a reminder of the importance of listening to the voices and challenges of ESOL learners and incorporating them into the ESOL policy and strategy. Besides, as similar processes of differentiation and exclusion, and of positioning and/or being positioned by others, operate for refugees to Europe from other religious, cultural, and ethnic groups, the findings and implications of the project are of relevance across the continent.

Finally, not only does the importance of this project lie in its findings and implications, but also and equally in the way it was conducted, its discussion of issues which tend to be played down in our field such as the emotions of the researcher, and the ways vulnerable and difficult-to-reach learners were approached (see Chapter 3 for details).

### **1.5. Thesis outline**

This thesis consists of 9 chapters. Following this introductory chapter (Chapter 1), Chapter 2 begins by discussing the theoretical orientations that guided the project: (1) poststructuralist theories of language, identity, and positioning, (2) Lave and Wenger's communities of practice (CoP) framework, and (3) Norton's theory of identity and investment in language learning. These theories emphasise the fluidity and multiplicity of identities and how they are socially constructed. The chapter also reports on the most relevant empirical research conducted on identity, identity aspects, investment in learning English, and imagined identities and communities. This body of work describes how the language learners' multiple identifications and their past and future identities can impact their processes and outcomes of learning the target language (TL) as well as their access to TL interactional opportunities and community resources. The final section presents the research questions that stem from the gaps identified in the literature.

Chapter 3 starts by providing an account of the theoretical perspectives which shaped my thinking as a researcher and setting out the methodological landscape in which the project was designed and conducted. Then, I will take the reader on a narrative journey which describes in detail how the participants and I conducted the project. I shall engage in a reflexive account about the complexity of building trust with the Syrians, and how my methodological thinking was informed by my role as a volunteer classroom assistant in Northeast College. The chapter concludes with how the researcher augmented the data trustworthiness and analysed the data.

Chapters 4 to 6 discuss respectively how social class, religion, and gender were implicated in the Syrian learners' sense of self, learning English, and participation in intra-

and inter-communities of practice. Chapter 4 examines how 5 Syrians' affiliation to different social class positions in their home country directly and indirectly impacted on their (non)investment in learning English in and outside the ESOL classrooms. Chapter 5 explores in depth the role of Islam, both facilitative and restrictive, in the Syrian refugees' identity negotiation and investment in learning English. It also provides evidence of how religious identities were negotiated and modified to appropriate more powerful/desirable identity positions, which in turn facilitated the process of learning English. Chapter 6 attempts to answer the question of how gender, as a social and cultural construct, was implicated in the processes of learning English and identity (re)construction of 4 Syrian women through their (non)participation in new communities of practice.

Chapter 7 will be presented in three sections. Sections 1 and 2 explore respectively the positive and negative role that Northeast College and ESOL teachers played in the Syrian learners' experiences of learning English and negotiating their identities. Subsequently, section 3 reports on how two female learners claimed being subjected to discourses of inferiorisation, Islamophobia, and racism in their own ESOL classrooms, and how these structures appeared to restrictively shape their identities and subsequently their possibilities for English learning and social interaction.

Chapter 8 presents three central and overarching themes gleaned from my analysis of the data. The opening theme is the interrelationship between the learners' identities and the processes they engaged in and their outcomes of English learning. The chapter then examines how the learners' multiple identities did not emerge independently of each other. Instead, the identities interconnected to create a complex picture of how each individual's identities were enacted. The third theme sheds light on the diversity of the Syrian language learners' experiences of identity negotiation and development and English learning. Chapter 9 reviews and answers the research questions and outlines the limitations of the project and some practical implications for ESOL teachers and institutions and policy makers.

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The chapter begins by discussing the theoretical frameworks of the study which draw on (1) poststructuralist theories of language, identity, and positioning (Weedon 1987; 1997), (2) Lave and Wenger's communities of practice framework (Lave and Wenger 1991), and (3) Norton's theory of identity and investment in language learning (Norton 2000). The chapter then reports the most relevant empirical research conducted on identity, investment, and imagined communities. Illustrative examples of studies that investigate how well-researched identity categories like race and gender interact with language learning are also discussed. A review of these studies highlights a research gap - few studies have investigated how social class and, far less, religion can shape the language learning experiences of learners in English speaking contexts. Thus, the current project will address this gap by exploring the processes through which 14 Muslim Syrian refugees from a diversity of social class and religious backgrounds (re)construct their identity, and how this identity (re)construction is intertwined with their language learning experiences. The final section presents the research questions that stem from the gaps identified in the literature.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that, for reasons of space, this chapter and the thesis more generally discuss key concepts with slightly less nuance than what can be found elsewhere in the research literature of the field. Examples of such concepts are identity, religion, social class, and culture. Within academic debate, these terms are constantly formed, redefined, tested, influenced, modified, and reinforced as the historical contexts in which they are used change to give us their current meaning and significance (Williams 2011). They can have different meanings to different groups of people, and no single group is wrong or right by any linguistic criterion. It is not possible, within the constraints of this thesis, to describe these concepts in terms of a particular meaning or definition as they are multi-faceted, dynamic, and ever-emergent. The basic problem of meaning and significance underlies definitions (Williams 2011). Hence, I am not assuming that the descriptions and the definitions I have provided are the single or 'right' ones. Diversity and context-dependent meaning are the ground of my arguments.

### 2.1. Poststructuralism

The theoretical framework adopted in the present study is poststructuralism. Poststructuralist theories sceptically critique and challenge the conditions and foundations of knowledge, particularly with reference to its apparent objectivity and universal applicability, and help to provide powerful tools to expose the partiality of claims to truth (Norton and Morgan 2013). This partiality, in turn, increases the validity of situated and dialogical forms of knowledge (see Benesch 1999; Canagarajah 2002; Foucault 1980;

Norton 2013a). While poststructuralism “does not have one fixed meaning” and has different forms (Weedon 1987: 19), of central importance to this project is its shared fundamental assumptions about language, identity, and positioning. Each of these elements in turn will be discussed below along with the rationale for adopting poststructuralism.

### **2.1.1. Poststructuralist theories of language**

Poststructuralist theories of language, which achieved prominence in the late 20th century, are associated with what is called the “linguistic turn” in contemporary social thought, and have their roots in the structuralist linguistic theories of the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. These theories, as the name implies, build on but are distinct from structuralist theories of language. Poststructuralism’s founding insight, taken from structuralism, is 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. This basic tenet shared by structuralism and poststructuralism is important as it makes language truly social and a site of political struggle.

An understanding of Saussure’s theory of signs is fundamental to understanding poststructuralism. Saussure (1966) theorises language as an abstract system whose building blocks are the signs. Each sign comprises the signifier (sound or written image) and the signified (meaning or concept). The two components of the sign are related to each other arbitrarily and, hence, there is no natural connection between the sound or written image and the meaning or concept it identifies. The meaning of signs is not intrinsic but relational. Each sign derives its meaning from other signs in the language chain. That is, individual signs acquire meaning through the language and their difference within it from other signs. Saussure also notes that each community has its own set of signifying practices that give value to the signs in a language.

However, while structuralists conceive signs as having arbitrary single (fixed) meanings and linguistic communities as being relatively homogeneous and consensual, “poststructuralists take the position that the signifying practices of societies are sites of struggle, and that linguistic communities are heterogeneous arenas characterized by conflicting claims to truth and power” (Norton and Morgan 2013: 2). Structuralism cannot account for the plurality of meaning. It cannot explain why the signifiers ‘language’, ‘civil war’, ‘refugee’ and ‘power’, for example, can have conflicting meanings which can also change over time in the same linguistic community.

Additionally, language, for poststructuralist theories, is the locus of social organisation, power, and a form of symbolic capital: “Language is not only an instrument

of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power. A person speaks not only to be understood but also to be believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished” (Bourdieu 1977: 648). Bourdieu, who explicitly addressed the politics of language, notes that interlocutors seldom share equal speaking rights. “Legitimate” and “illegitimate” speakers are distinguished by their differential “rights to speech” or their “power to impose reception” (1977: 648). Using language, for Bourdieu, is a social and political practice in which an utterance's value and meaning is determined in part by the value and meaning ascribed to the person who speaks, and that person, in turn, is part of a society subject to inequitable relations of power. Thus, it is not only individuals’ but also groups’ ascribed identity positions that structure access to opportunities of language use and learning, and the extent to which their language practices are valued (Bakhtin 1981; Bourdieu, 1980; Weedon 1987, 1997). A poststructuralist framework underscores the idea that “not all languages, discourses or registers are equal in the linguistic marketplace: some are more equal than others” (Pavlenko 2002: 283). In this sense, the value of a particular linguistic variety or practice derives from its ability to provide access to more prestigious forms of education and desired positions in the workforce or on the social mobility ladder. Essentially, poststructuralism integrates power and social relationships into the equation of language, and that language works differently for different people from different groups in society.

Not only is language a form of symbolic capital and social power, but, more importantly, it is a site of identity construction and negotiation:

Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organisation and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is *constructed*...Language is not the expression of unique individuality; it constructs the individual's subjectivity in ways which are socially specific.

(Weedon 1997:21)

Language is the means through which identity is constructed, expressed and reconstructed. This relationship between identity and language has been expressed simply by Anzaldúa (1987): “I am my language” (p.59). This role will be explained further in the next section.

### **2.1.2. Poststructuralist theories of identity**

A key theorist in this regard is Christine Weedon (1987/1997), one of the best-known scholars in feminist poststructuralism, who defined subjectivity as “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself, and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (1997:32). The terms “subject” and “subjectivity” are central to poststructuralism and they signal a crucial break with humanism and many definitions of the individual in SLA research. Humanism presupposes that every individual

has a fixed, coherent, knowing, rational and unique core which makes her/him who s/he is. However, this view is contradicted by poststructuralist theorists who propose a subjectivity which 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).

The poststructuralist theory of identity appears to be important and distinct in three ways. Firstly, social relationships are considered crucial in how individuals are constructed and construct themselves: subjectivity “is not innate, not genetically determined, but socially produced” (Weedon 1997:21). Norton (2011) notes that Weedon’s use of the term “subjectivity” reminds us that the subject (i.e. the individual) can be simultaneously 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). While people (re)construct and negotiate identity, they sometimes take on identities either socially-imposed on them, or assigned to them, by other people. They constantly ask the question “are the perceptions that others have of me true, and do they reflect what I know to be true of myself?” (Mantero 2007: 4). Secondly, poststructuralists underscore the central role of language in identity construction. It is in and through language (linguistic interaction) that subjectivity is constituted; language and identity are mutually constitutive and inseparable. 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.

Finally, the poststructuralist theory of identity has political implications and encourages individual and social change. It opens up the opportunity for subjectivity to change, for individuals to resist and take up more powerful identity positions, and for pedagogical practices to be transformative and empowering. “Identities are not merely given by social structures or ascribed by others, but are also negotiated by agents who wish to position themselves” (Norton 2013a: 5). From this perspective, the individual is accorded more human agency, “the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world” (Rogers and Wetzel 2013: 63), and more voice to assert his/her identity.

### 2.1.3. Poststructuralist theories of positioning

Poststructuralist theories of positioning are of central interest and relevance to this study; they help to understand, as we shall see<sup>4</sup>, how identities are constructed and negotiated. Positioning, as a theoretical construct, has been discussed by many poststructuralist theorists (Foucault 1980; Henriques et al. 1984; Weedon 1987; 1997; Hall 1997), but is most often associated with the work of Davies and Harré (1990; 1999). Positioning Theory focuses on the social construction of identities and the world through discourse. The term 'discourse' has been defined differently across disciplines. In this project, Cameron's understanding of discourse is adopted: "language in use: language used to do something and mean something, language produced and interpreted in a real-world context" (2001: 13). *Position* is used to capture and track the dynamic aspects of selfhood in and through discourse. This selfhood, Davies argues,

is constantly in process; it only exists as process; it is revised and (re)presented through images, metaphors, story lines, and other features of language, such as pronoun grammar; it is spoken and re-spoken, each speaking existing in a palimpsest with the others.

(2000: 137)

Position, as Davies and Harré (1990) put it, is "the central organizing concept for analysing how it is that people do being a person" (p.7). Positions are context-dependent, socially constructed, shifting, dynamic, and influenced by one's class, race, gender, sexuality, religion and culture. In case the society-imposed positions are not favoured, these positions become a space of possibility, a space from which people move forward to exercise agency and bid for more favourable new positions (Giroir 2014a; Norton 2000; and Taylor 2004). Assigning positions to oneself or others is called positioning: "a discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines" (Davies and Harré 1999: 37). Positioning relates to locating oneself or others with particular rights and obligations in and through talk, and it has consequences for the micro and macro levels of communication and social practices which are essential for L2 learning and development (Rex and Schiller 2009). Through positioning, individuals take up various positions and deny or give others the right to do or not do or to say or not say certain things in specific contexts. As speakers actively and agentively position themselves in talk, they (co)construct and (re)shape their self (Korobov and Bamberg 2004; Talmy 2004). This self-positioning is called "reflexive positioning" while positioning others is referred to as "interactive positioning" (Davies and Harré 1999; Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001).

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<sup>4</sup> The relationship between positioning and identity will be explained in detail later in this section.

A legitimate question arises here: what is the relationship between positioning and identity? Drawing on Davies and Harré (1999), Søreide (2006) argues that “if several positions make clusters within a discourse, an identity construction will emerge. [...] To understand identity as a process of narrative positioning is useful” (p.529). The same individual can manifest any of his or her identities or be assigned new identities in the form of positions in different contexts. Some positions, over time, become more dominant in one’s mode of self-presentation (Adams 2011). Positioning therefore closely interacts with our identity, with who we are, hence affecting how we behave and communicate. Given its inseparable, interrelated connection to identity, positioning is viewed as a powerful tool to analyse identity in discourse. Using positioning as a tool, many researchers have examined positioning in English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) classrooms and their possible consequences for L2 learning and use (De Costa 2011; Duff 2002; Hawkins 2005; McKay and Wong 1996; Menard-Warwick 2007; Miller 2007; Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004; Stone and Kidd 2011; and Talmy 2004) but fewer have investigated positioning longitudinally and how positions change over time (e.g., Kayi-Aydar 2012; 2014). The findings of these studies indicate that positioning either limits or gives learners access to language experiences or opportunities that are believed to foster language learning.

Kayi-Aydar (2014) described how two talkative students, Tarek and Ahmad, came to occupy polarised positions in an ESL class in the USA. Tarek, on the one hand, engaged in teacher-like positions, displayed his knowledge and experience whenever possible and sometimes challenged the authority of his teacher. However, by using humour frequently in the class and building friendships, he was able to be accepted and positioned by the class as a funny and helpful classmate. Ahmad, on the other hand, who mirrored Tarek’s behaviours through displaying his competence and dominating classroom conversations, was not accepted by the classroom who positioned him as an outcast and arrogant over the course of the semester. This could be understood with reference to Ahmad’s advanced linguistic proficiency. His classmates were aware that Ahmad was the most advanced student in the class. “By assigning him a negative position, they could be legitimately silent, which could be perceived as a strength rather than a weakness” (p.707). Unsurprisingly, the social positioning of Tarek and Ahmad impacted their language learning opportunities: while the social positionings of Tarek created learning opportunities for him, the positionings of Ahmad did not allow him to benefit from those opportunities because his classmates avoided interacting with him. The greatest value of Kayi-Aydar (2014) lies in how it describes the process through which learners’ positional identities are constructed and reconstructed across contexts and interactions.

Having discussed poststructuralist theories of language, identity and positioning, the chapter moves on to explore briefly the second theoretical framework on which the project is based, i.e. Lave and Wenger's communities of practice.

## **2.2. Communities of practice (CoP) framework**

In addition to poststructuralism, another theoretical framework which is useful in thinking through the topic of identity and language learning is Lave and Wenger's (1991) CoP framework, further developed by Wenger (1998). CoP, emphasising the quintessentially social character of learning, views learning as located in the evolving membership of individuals in their new social communities, and it occurs through participation and engagement within those communities. According to Wenger (1998), learning is a process of participation and cannot be separated from the context in which it occurs. Ultimately, learning can be conceived of as shifts in identity as learners participate in communities of practice and form identities in relation to those communities: "learning and a sense of identity are inseparable. They are two aspects of the same phenomenon" (Lave and Wenger 1991:115). Learning is a process of becoming, or avoiding becoming a certain person, rather than a simple accumulation of habits, skills and knowledge. The CoP framework is often cited by researchers interested in how language learning is socially mediated and shaped in practice and how language learners construct identities as they move from peripheral to full participation in social worlds. CoP is particularly useful here as it allows one to conceptualise language learners as members of social and historical communities rather than isolated individuals, and opens up the possibility for exploring the relationship between language learners' sociocultural experiences and their language learning. It also allows us to reinterpret language learning as a process of participation in new linguistic and cultural communities of practice, in which language learners may attempt to gain membership.

The concept of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) is a primary component of the CoP perspective; it proposes that participation in a new community of practice is initially legitimately peripheral but then it increases gradually in engagement and complexity. LPP is perceived as a positive and necessary point in which newcomers are situated peripherally as a vital part of their apprenticeship experiences. Through LPP, newcomers interact with old-timers in a given community and learn the necessary knowledge and skills, become increasingly more adept at community practices, and gradually move towards fuller participation in that community and become legitimate and active participants. LPP assumes that all newcomers enter communities with equal access to community resources and experts of the practice and they all end up being fully fledged participants and experts in their communities. However, language learning projects that have applied the concept of LPP (Giroir 2014b; Kanno 1995; 1998; 2000; Norton 2000;

Toohy 1998; 2000; Vasilopoulos 2015) have found interestingly that LPP, as Kanno (1998) argued, “is not how it is” (p.128) and that learners “are often blocked from the very resource that is vital to their acquisition of the L2: opportunities to interact with native speakers<sup>5</sup>” (p.129). That is, language learners are not always offered LPP and their paths toward full participation are not always sanctioned. Language learners can be denied access to community resources due to unequal power distributions based on language ideologies, community biases, and discriminatory practices around social dimensions such as religion, social class, race, gender, and linguistic proficiency. How language learners negotiate those structures of marginalisation and peripherality and assume more powerful identity positions remains an important area of investigation.

Thus far, I have discussed poststructuralist theories of language, identity and positioning as well as Lave and Wenger’s CoP framework. It is necessary before moving on to Norton’s theory of identity and investment in language learning to address how identity was conceptualised by cognitive SLA in the 1970s and 1980s.

### **2.3. Identity and SLA**

It is becoming increasingly apparent that SLA is an extremely complex and multifaceted phenomenon which is best researched and examined multidimensionally. Historically, there used to be two paradigms within SLA: cognitive and social. Cognitivism was the historically dominant approach in SLA. From the cognitive perspective, the development of language is first and foremost an internalised, cognitive process in the individual’s brain. On the other hand, socially oriented theories for L2 learning “view learning as a social accomplishment and posit that knowledge and learning are socially distributed, have social histories, and are only possible through sociality” (Ortega 2011: 168). However, it is worth noting that the cognitive-social polarity has moved on and SLA can be taken as a wider discipline that incorporates multiple and varied perspectives. As Larsen-Freeman argues (2007), “these days, a theoretical pluralism prevails....Indeed, the solution the SLA field has perennially adopted when there are conflicting views is to seek a larger frame, one that acknowledges the contributions of each perspective” (p. 773). That is, co-existence of multiple perspectives within SLA does not necessarily mean ignoring or undermining specific approaches. Rather, it is considered a healthy sign of the development of SLA. Additionally, “the epistemological diversity discovered in SLA - across and within social, sociocognitive, and cognitive theories alike - fosters multiple, improved, and nuanced understandings of SLA” (Ortega 2011: 167).

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that the term “native speakers” is limited, stereotyped, and problematic, and the dichotomy between native speakers and non-native speakers has been challenged and questioned by many researchers in Applied Linguistics (e.g., Davies 2003; Llorca 2016; Matsuda 2003; and Paikeday 1985).

Norton Peirce (1995) argues that SLA theorists in the 1970s and 1980s struggled to conceptualise the relationship between the language learner and the social context and they perceived the language learner's identity as fixed and coherent. The learner's personality was described unidimensionally as inhibited or uninhibited, introverted or extroverted, or motivated or unmotivated, "without considering that such affective factors are frequently socially-structured in inequitable relations of power, changing over time and space, and possibly coexisting in contradictory ways in a single individual" (Norton Peirce 1995: 12). SLA theories did not even question how inequitable relations of power in the social world could impact social interaction between language learners and TL speakers, limiting the opportunities for language learners to practise language. Some SLA theorists realise that language learners do not live in idealised, homogeneous communities but in complex, heterogeneous ones. Such heterogeneity, however, has not been approached critically (Ellis 1985; Krashen 1981; Schumann 1978; and Stern 1983).

Further, theories of the good language learner were developed on the premise that language learners can choose under what conditions and with who they interact and that their access to the TL community is a function of their motivation. Gardner and MacIntyre (1992), for instance, argue that "the major characteristic of the informal context is that it is voluntary. Individuals can either participate or not in informal acquisition contexts" (p.213). Another example is the Acculturation model (Schumann 1978; 1986) which, despite focusing on social rather than individual variables in language learning, was based on dichotomous, artificial distinctions between the language learner group and the TL group. According to Schumann (1978), "SLA is just one aspect of acculturation and the degree to which the learner acculturates to the TL group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language" (p.34). Again, this model places the onus on the language learner to maximise contact with the members of the TL community, and takes for granted that the TL speakers are happy to interact with language learners. Additionally, it does not take into account that acculturation is a reciprocal process of *adaptation* by newcomers to the norms of the host country and *accommodation* by the host country to the values brought by the newcomers (Employment and Immigration Canada 1992). Integration should not only be directed at newcomers; it should include and prepare the target culture for the cultural and linguistic diversity that is receiving. "Integration is not a one-way street, or even a two-way street between migrant and 'host' community but is as complex and multi-directional as a 'Spaghetti Junction'" (Bryers et al. 2013: 5).

These asocial, apolitical and power-blind views, nevertheless, seem to be utopian fantasies when confronted by the real experiences of immigrants and language learners in English-speaking contexts. Speakers of the TL might not be invested or happy to accommodate attempts by the language learners to assimilate. Language learners, in

reality, do not always have the luxury to interact with whom they choose as their opportunities to practise English are generally limited and socially structured. Under these circumstances, many learners become marginalised, introverted, and sensitive to rejection (Norton 2000; 2013a). In addition, these theories did not adequately explain why it is that the same language learner feels inferior and marginalised in some sites but powerful and valued in others; why language learners can speak fluently under some conditions while remain silent under others. In a nutshell, cognitive SLA theories did not capture the complex relationships between power, identity and language learning.

#### **2.4. Norton's theory of identity and investment in language learning**

The solution proposed by Norton in the mid-1990s to the social problem of SLA theories is the development of (1) a "comprehensive theory of identity that integrates the language learner and the language learning context" (Norton Peirce 1995: 12); and (2) a theory which accentuates the crucial role power relations play in language learning. Norton Peirce (1995) takes the position that SLA theory needs to develop a conception of identity that is understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction; a conception of identity as fluid, dynamic and contradictory. This has led Norton (2000) to define identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p.5). Drawing on the work of feminist poststructuralism, Norton foregrounds the role of language as constitutive of and constituted by a language learner's identity (2000). It is through language that an individual negotiates and renegotiates a sense of who they are, what they can do, and what they hope for, and it is through language that language learners gain access, or are denied access, to powerful social networks which give them the opportunity to practise and interact in the TL (Heller 1987).

Some scholars have challenged identity theorists to establish the theoretical relevance of identity research insofar as it affects the acquisition of a second language. Gass (1998) argues that categories such as father, native speaker, novice, teacher, mother, and uninitiated, etc., which are obvious identities, "are not deemed to be relevant to the question at hand, which is, how are L2s acquired and what is the nature of learner systems?" (p.86). Norton, along with many scholars (Block 2007; Norton and Toohey 2011; and Pavlenko 2002), responded to this "important and legitimate observation" of Gass (Norton 2013a: 2). The theoretical assumptions that underlie Norton's identity approach to SLA are better understood with reference to poststructuralist theories of language, identity, and positioning and CoP perspective of learning which have been explained above. Norton's approach is based upon four main constructs: identity, power, investment, and imagined communities and identities. Each of these constructs will be explored in detail

respectively with illustrative examples to the interplay between these constructs and language learning.

Drawing particularly on feminist poststructuralism, Norton (2000) argues that three defining characteristics of identity are particularly relevant to SLA: (1) the multiple, non-unitary nature of identity, (2) identity as a site of struggle, and (3) identity as changing over time. These three characteristics will be explained as follows.

#### **2.4.1. Identity as multiple and contradictory**

As discussed earlier, poststructuralism depicts the subject as diverse, contradictory and changing over historical time and social space. "Subjectivity is conceived of as multiple rather than unitary, decentered rather than centered" (Norton 2000: 125). This position has crucial implications for understanding language learners' learning trajectories. It helped Norton (2000) to make sense of the data from her longitudinal case study in Canada, which made a valuable contribution to the study of SLA and offered new perspectives on understanding language learning. Through her two-year involvement in the lives of five adult immigrant women in Canada, Norton painted detailed individual portraits of the ways in which opportunities to practise speaking English were socially structured and shaped by the women's shifting and contradictory identities. For example, Martina, a participant in Norton's study, has multiple identities: she is a Czech immigrant, a mother of two children, a wife, a language learner and a worker at a restaurant. As an immigrant woman, she felt "uncomfortable using English in the group of people whose English language is their mother tongue because they speak fluently without any problems..." (p.126). In the workplace, she was excluded from social anglophone networks as she said: they "loved talking but not with me" (Norton 2013a: 136). Significantly, however, despite feelings of inferiority and marginalisation, Martina refused to be silenced by her co-workers who humiliated and positioned her as a "broom" and asserted herself as a successful user of English:

In restaurant was working a lot of children but the children always thought that I am - I don't know - maybe some broom or something. They always said 'Go and clean the living room', and I was washing the dishes and they didn't do nothing. They talked to each other and they thought that I had to do everything. And I said 'No'. The girl is only 12 years old. She is younger than my son. I said 'No, you are doing nothing. You can go and clean the tables or something'.

(Norton 2000: 99)

This great change in Martina's data, as Norton and Toohey note (2011), could be explained by the fact that Martina "reframed her relationship with her co-workers as domestic rather than professional, and from the identity position 'mother', rather than 'immigrant' or 'broom', she claimed the right to speak" (p. 413). Her identity as a mother and primary caregiver in the home enabled her to violate the appropriate rules of use between supposedly "legitimate" speakers of English (anglophone Canadians) and

imposters (Bourdieu 1977) and to resist exploitation by her co-workers. Through the help of her children, she learned how to serve customers and actively took the initiative to serve the customers:

When I tried first time to talk to two customers alone, they looked at me strangely, but I didn't give up. I gave them everything they wanted and then I went looking for the girls and I told them as usually only 'cash'. They were surprised but they didn't say anything.

(Norton 2000: 126)

These two extracts are a sobering reminder of the diverse, multiple positions from which language learners are able to participate in social life and speak, and demonstrate how learners can, but sometimes cannot, appropriate more desirable identities that prompt them to take more opportunities to speak the TL. As Martina found, some identity positions may limit and constrain opportunities for learners to listen, speak, read, or write in the TL (e.g. immigrant, refugee, Muslim, working-class, broom), while other identity positions may offer enhanced sets of possibilities for social interaction and human agency (e.g. mother, primary caregiver, white, middle-class). To sum up, taking up the mother identity in the workplace provided Martina with more opportunities to speak English and to resist exploitation.

#### **2.4.2. Identity as a site of struggle**

The second important feature of identity is that it is a site of struggle. This means that identity is subject to contestation and debate. Identity is produced in different social sites where individuals are given different identity positions. Individuals, in turn, might be collaborating in as well as resisting the identities ascribed to them. The subject "is not conceived of as passive; he or she is conceived of as both subject of and subject to relations of power within a particular site, community and society: the subject has human agency" (Norton 2013a: 164). Agency can be conceptualised as the "strategic making and remaking of selves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources, and histories, as embedded within relationships of power" (Moje and Lewis 2007:18). As Butler (2004) elucidates, agency is action that is, somewhat paradoxically, made available by the discursive frameworks within which we all exist: "If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose" (p.3). In other words, agency is discursively constructed and driven.

The L2 discourse sometimes might provide language learners with positive, unique means of self-representation that prompt them to cross boundaries and assimilate into the TL culture. For example, Mai, a 21-year old Vietnamese immigrant in Norton (2000), was very much loved in her workplace. She was positioned as a highly competent worker and soon gained the respect of the management in the workplace. Because she was identified as a valued person and was given legitimacy, she regularly engaged in conversations with

her co-workers: “I speak a lot. [laughs] Some days they have to stop me...I was very quiet, and then later on- I get used to everything, those people, and I try to speak more and - Ya.” (p.82). Again, this extract shows how the opportunities to speak English are grounded in social relations of power which accepted and legitimatised Mai’s participation. It is important to note, however, that all the women workers in the factory were immigrants and non-native Canadians.

Yet in other contexts, language learners might be offered negative, unacceptable or incompatible identities with the identities they once occupied. The subject positions given to language learners cannot be separated from their identity aspects such as their race, gender, social class, religion or sexual orientation. This struggle often occurs in immigrant contexts where mature adults find themselves suddenly in a new context where their symbolic and material resources are not valued and they might be positioned as stupid, incompetent, inefficient or a burden. 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). Through human agency, some language learners might resist these negative, normative subject positions and even set up a counter-discourse which provides them with more powerful identities and hence more opportunities to learn the TL (Brown 2014; Giroir 2014a; McKay and Wong 1996; Norton 2000). We have witnessed how Martina set up a counter-discourse in her workplace by resisting the identity of an ignorant immigrant and taking up the mother identity. The concept of identity as a site of struggle seems of central importance particularly in multilingual contexts which are fraught with the tensions of identity politics, whereby many individuals experience a perpetual conflict between self-chosen and socially-imposed identities. Hence, it is not surprising that some scholars view all instances of language use or silence in multilingual contexts as “acts of identity” (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985).

#### **2.4.3. Identity as changing over time**

The concept of identity as changing is a logical extension of the position that identity is multiple, contradictory and a site of struggle. As Weedon (1997) argues, “the political significance of decentring the subject and abandoning the belief in essential subjectivity is that it opens up subjectivity to change” (p.32). The conception of identity as changing has important political implications for language teachers and educators; it opens up possibilities for educational intervention and change. It is important to point out here that language learners’ multiple identities are more subject to transformation and re-negotiation when they move into new communities of practice - when they cross the boundaries of their country, language and culture. Kanno (2000) notes that “it is not unusual for bilinguals to have different identities in two languages” (p.1). Identity changes have been

documented in numerous SLA studies investigating the reciprocal relationship between identity and language learning (e.g., Block 2007; 2012; Ellwood 2009; Gao et al. 2015; Giroir 2014a; 2014b; Kanno 2000; Kinginger 2004; Makubalo 2007; Pavlenko 2000; Sacchi 2014; Skapoulli 2004; Vasilopoulos 2015). This, nonetheless, does not mean that language learning is *always* a transformative experience or individuals do not change in their home countries. However, from the vast literature and from my own experience of being a newcomer in a linguistically and culturally new milieu, I would agree that L2 socialisation and participation in a new community of practice is to a large extent a journey of identity (re)construction (Norton 2000; Pavlenko 2000). This proposition leads us to the distinction between language learning and socialisation in the TL context and FL learning in the classroom setting (Pavlenko 2000), and also between language learners who stay in the TL country temporarily and will return eventually to their home country (such as students or workers) and those who intend to live permanently in the receiving country (such as immigrants or refugees). The two contexts and groups may involve different constraints on negotiation of identities. The focus of the current study is Syrian refugee language learners whose residence in the UK might be too long or permanent.

Having said that, it is worth noting that Block (2006a) cautions against the “uncritical” adoption of this post-structuralist take on identity by many researchers in Applied Linguistics. In fact, as we shall see in the following chapters, the blind rejection of nominal categories and essentialist and fixed identities might seem unrealistic sometimes, since

the cultural supermarket is not a completely free market where any self-identity under the sun can be assumed...there are social structures within which individuals exist (be these state governments, peer groups or educational systems) which constrain the amount and scope of choice available to individuals.

(Block 2006a: 36)

Migrants and/or refugees, for instance, struggle with how they can be categorised according to some externally defined criteria such as social class, religion, gender, race, and ethnicity.

Having looked at the characteristics of identity and its interrelationship with language learning, I now turn to discuss how power is implicated in language learning.

#### **2.4.4. Power, identity and resistance**

Another key contribution of the/this identity approach to SLA is that it seeks to better understand (1) the subtle ways in which power operates in society and the language classroom, constraining or enabling human action and (2) the relationship between power and identity. Identity researchers have recognised the importance of incorporating notions of power into theories of SLA:

If we avoid naming and confronting questions of power in social interaction, we may struggle to understand the language learning experiences of our students...Without incorporating theories of power in SLA, the nature of participation in communicative events may not only remain undefined, but unexplained.

(Norton 2000: 109)

Power, as Norton puts it, “references the socially constructed relations among individuals, institutions and communities through which symbolic and material resources in a society are produced, distributed and validated” (2013a: 47). Material resources refer to money, real estate, occupation and capital goods, while symbolic resources include language, friendship, recognition, knowledge and education. Power appears to exist at all levels of human activity and practice, from macro-level relations between governments to micro-level interactions between people on a moment-to-moment basis, interactions that are obviously produced by language (Foucault 1980). Yet although “power is everywhere” and “comes from everywhere” (Foucault 1998: 63), it is often invisible in that it frequently naturalises events and practices in ways that come to be seen as “normal” to members of a community (Foucault 1980). Following Foucault (1980), Pennycook (2007) takes the position that power is neither monolithic nor invariant. Rather, it must be understood as “contingent, shifting and produced in the particular, rather than having some prior ontological status” (p.39). Power could be conceived of as a source of social discipline and thus positive and necessary when it enables and empowers individuals to act as members of communities of practice and as negative when it disempowers and constrains the capacity to act (Block 2007).

That said, what is the relationship between power, identity and language learning? Researchers such as Weedon (1997), Bourdieu (1977), West (1992), and Cummins (1996) are particularly helpful in this regard. The control and distribution of material and symbolic resources are inextricably connected to each other, as well as to language socialisation and identity negotiation. The question “who am I?” cannot be separated from the question “what material and symbolic resources do I have access to?” (West 1992; Bourdieu 1977). People who have access to a wide range of material and symbolic resources in a given community will have access to privilege, recognition and power, which will in turn influence their relationship to the world and hence their identities and language learning. In return, individuals who have more linguistic and language learning resources will have greater social and cultural capital and thus more power (Bourdieu 1991). “Relations of power can serve to enable or constrain the range of identities that language learners can negotiate in their classrooms and communities” (Norton 2013a: 49). In the case of constraining, issues of resistance and agency will arise (Canagarajah 1999). The relationship between power, identity, resistance and language learning has become a compelling and interesting area of research in SLA. There has been a considerable body of research which acknowledges that power inequalities are reproduced in language classroom contexts and teaching

English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) practice is not value free nor apolitical (Kanno 2000; Majumdar 2010; Pennycook 2001; Rich and Troudi 2006). Yet, power is not one dimensional and it could be faced with elements of opposition (Giroux 1983). Interest has focused on how language learners might be subjected to othering and marginalisation with consequences to their language learning and how they act upon it.

For example, Talmy (2004) shows how long-term ESL students who had come to Hawaii in childhood were positioned as “non-native speakers” and mixed with “fresh-off-the-boat” (FOB) newcomers. This imbalance of power was exemplified through a class assignment in which students were asked to prepare presentations on holidays from *their own* country or culture. The proposal of two of the long-term ESL students to report on Christmas and New Year's was rejected by their American teacher as being unacceptable holidays for the project. “Christmas and New Year's belong to her, not *them*” (Talmy 2004: 160). However, the students challenged this claim and resisted being positioned as FOB out-group. They insisted on their project proposals as an attempt to reposition themselves as members of non-FOB in-group. They were ultimately allowed to focus on Christmas and New Year, which might be seen as a “victory”. Another compelling instance in Talmy (2004) of how classrooms are sites of cultural politics (Simon 1992) is when the same long term, more-proficient ESL students who resisted being positioned as FOBs then positioned a recently-arrived, lower proficient student, Issac, as FOB and plain stupid. In fact, positioning Isaac as FOB, or reproducing the very inequality of labelling, was another important form of resistance the ESL students employed to reject the stigmatising identity category imposed on them initially by their teacher. This study supports the findings of Toohey (1998) and Manke (1997) that the teacher is not necessarily always the centre of power, and corroborates what Foucault argues that power comes from everywhere.

Resistance to classroom practice and power inequalities in wider society can take a variety of forms: setting up counter-discourses (Giroir 2014a; McKay and Wong 1996; Norton 2000; Talmy 2004), rearticulating new subject positions (Giroir 2014a; Majumdar 2010; Norton 2000; Talmy 2004), silence (Skinnari 2014), playing dumb (Worth 2008), being passive and creating glosses in textbooks during class (Canagarajah 1999), feigning misunderstanding what the teacher told them to do (Manke 1997), making the discourse of the classroom “disorderly” through challenges, interruptions and disagreements (Fairclough 1995), claiming forgetfulness in completing or turning in an assignment (Talmy 2008), or refusing to follow the teacher's instructions (Miller and Zuengler 2011). However, rejecting strongly deterministic understandings of power, it is important to point out here that power is not always oppressive (Foucault 1980) and that practices of resistance do not always “lead to transformative change but can result in entrenched inequalities” (e.g., Canagarajah 1993; 1999; Talmy 2008) (Miller 2015: 462). Giroux (1983) cautions against

allowing the concept of resistance “to become a category indiscriminately hung over every expression of oppositional behavior” (p.110).

Adopting a micro-ethnographic approach, Canagarajah’s research (1993; 1999) among Tamil-speaking students who were enrolled in his English class at a Sri Lankan university demonstrates why L2 students’ oppositional behaviours are important foci for investigation and the inseparability of resistance, identity and language learning. The Sri Lankan students enacted their resistance most visibly by not coming to class and by being passive and reluctant to participate in communicative practices. This passivity, however, was contradicted by their active participation in the classroom “underlife” through creating “glosses”, which incorporated aspects of their lived culture in their textbooks during class. Canagarajah recognises that these glosses served as counter-discourses to the discourses implicitly advocated in the textbooks, discourses which made students feel “alien, incompetent, inferior, and powerless” (1999: 91). Canagarajah argues that students engaged in glossing because they could do so from a “safe distance” (1999: 95); glossing protected them from perceived threats to their identities and enabled them to maintain their cultural integrity.

Importantly, however, Canagarajah notes that students’ actions prevented them from learning critically and they are better described as escapist rather than transformative or interrogational. They themselves contributed to their own subjugation. As such, these oppositional behaviours do not align with Giroux’s (1983) definition of resistance as radical, politically informed acts. Canagarajah’s research serves as a good reminder for researchers interested in resistance, myself included, to develop a nuanced, critical understanding of resistance that goes beyond the traditional dichotomy of oppressed/resistance and includes notions of “escape”.

Understanding how power operates subtly and invisibly, and how language learners are positioned by relations of power and resistant to that positioning, is key to making sense of their stories of language learning and to paint a full, deep picture of what is *actually* going on in the classroom and beyond. A few studies, however, listened to the voices of language learners in both classroom *and* community settings (e.g., Giroir 2014a; Brown 2014). Studies focused either on learners in formal settings (e.g., Canagarajah 1993; 1999; Duff 2002; McKay and Wong 1996; Menard-Warwick 2007; Talmy 2004; 2008;) or in natural settings (e.g., Block 2006b; Darvin and Norton 2014; Norton 2000; Ray 2015). That realised, the current study will take a holistic approach through capturing the stories of the Syrian learners at the micro- (ESOL classroom) and macro-level (wider society). I believe in the inseparability of both sites to investigate the language being learned, the power being exercised and the identities under negotiation.

### 2.4.5. Investment

Investment, firstly introduced by Norton (Norton Peirce 1995), is now considered a central concept in Applied Linguistics and language education (Block 2007; Kramsch 2013). It is one of the four major concepts that underpin Norton's theory of identity: identity, power, investment and imagined communities and imagined identities. 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 2013a: 6). Learners who fail to learn the TL are not necessarily unmotivated. For this reason, and inspired by the work of Bourdieu (1984; 1991), Norton developed the sociological notion of investment to complement the psychological construct of motivation in language learning.

Investment, as Norton puts it, "signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it" (2013a: 6). It seeks to make a meaningful connection between the learners' desire to learn an additional language and their changing and contradictory identities. Norton Peirce (1995) takes the position that if learners *invest* in the TL, they do so 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. "This in turn provides for a wider range of identity positions from which the learner can speak or listen, read or write" (Norton 2016: 2). Hence, an investment in language learning is also an investment in a learner's own identity: "there is an integral relationship between investment and identity" (Norton 2013a: 6). Because identity is multiple, contradictory and frequently a site of struggle, "investment is also complex, contradictory, and often in a state of flux" (Darvin and Norton 2016: 20). Language learners hope to have a good return in their investment in language learning - a return which is commensurate with the time and effort expended on learning the TL.

Significantly, this understanding of investment is not equivalent to motivation which generally presupposes a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical language learner who learns a language for utilitarian or integrative purposes. In this view, motivation is a property of the language learner - a personality trait which pertains to the language learner rather than to the social context. The notion of investment, on the other hand, attempts to capture the dynamic relationship of the language learner to the changing social world. It seeks to understand the relationship between a learner's desire and commitment to learn a language, their changing identity, their imagined communities, and relations of power in

human interaction (Norton 2013b). Thus, investment should not be understood as a product of motivation because it paints a far more complex picture than motivation.

Investment serves as a “significant explanatory construct” (Cummins 2006: 59) and provides for a different set of questions associated with a learner’s commitment to learning the TL. In addition to asking, for example, “To what extent is the learner motivated to learn the target language?” the teacher or researcher asks, “What is the learner’s investment in the language practices of this classroom or community?” (Norton 2013a: 6). 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 is inconsistency between the language classroom practices and learners’ expectations of good teaching. Hence, the language learner might gradually be excluded and positioned as unmotivated or disengaged. Investment goes beyond the surface to capture the complex interaction of different forces affecting language learners’ desire and commitment to learn and practise the language to be learned.

Consider, for example, the investment of Eva, a 22-year-old Polish refugee who came to Canada for economic advantage and to study at college (Norton 2000). When Eva started working at a fast food restaurant, she was given the hard jobs such as cleaning the floors and clearing out the garbage. In her workplace there was a resistance to immigrants: “I don’t like working with people who aren’t Canadian” (a Canadian worker at Eva’s workplace, Norton 2013a: 100). Eva did not feel positive about herself, her job and her social relationships with her co-workers. Also, because she could not express herself well in English and defend her rights, she was exploited. Eva explains in her diary:

Another girl which works with me is nineteen years old, and she is little crazy. She talks all the time...All the workers are listening to her, and laughing with her...Instead of her, I have to do everything. They take advantage, because they know that I wouldn’t say anything...After a while, when I started to feel more comfortable in English, they didn’t notice it.

(Norton 2013a: 101)

Because Eva was marginalised, exploited and positioned as a “stupid uneducated immigrant”, she could not enter into the conversation with her fellows:

When I see that I have to do everything and nobody cares about me because - then how can I talk to them? I hear they don’t care about me and I don’t feel to go and smile and talk to them.

(Norton 2013a: 101)

In other words, she thought she is not a “legitimate speaker” of English with the “right to speak”. Her *seeming demotivation*, or *disinvestment*, cannot be understood apart from the identity subject imposed on her and the inequitable relations of power in her workplace. However, Eva did not submit to this marginalisation and exploitation without struggle. It

was a long and difficult process through which she negotiated entry into the social networks in her workplace. This success could be attributed to: (1) Eva's resistance and exercise of agency and (2) the kind of activities the workers engaged in inside and outside the restaurant. The management of the restaurant would sponsor an outing once a month for the workers. On these occasions, Eva was taken outside the workplace, where she had been positioned as a "stupid" person, only worthy of the "worst kind of job" to a context in which her youth and charm were valued symbolic resources. This helped to position Eva more favourably within her peer networks and a different set of relationships began to develop. Eva explained:

For example yesterday when we went out, the manager she said to me, because I am just one year younger than she, 'You look really different when you are not at work.' Because when I am at the work I, when I do the hard job, I don't know, I'm different than like here.

(Norton 2013a: 103)

These management outings and her subsequent reassignment to new tasks in the restaurant allowed her to participate more in social conversations from a new, more desirable position. Intelligently, Eva drew on her knowledge of Italian and other European countries, two valued symbolic resources, to contribute to conversations with her peers who were impressed. In so doing, Eva repositioned herself from an "ESL immigrant" to "a multilingual resource with a desirable partner" (Norton and Toohey 2001: 318). Eva's identity in the eyes of her fellow employees and boss became more complex, and their relationship to her began to change, opening up new opportunities for language interaction. As she gradually assumed the identity of a valued multicultural worker and the power imbalance was reduced between her and her peers, she became more and more invested. Eva's story illustrates the profound relationship between investment, identity and social relations of power, and the consequences of this for language interaction and learning opportunities. This is not to say, however, that language proficiency and language structures were irrelevant, but to stress that struggles over identity and affiliation are central to the processes of language learning and socialisation. This implies that "no single theoretical perspective will allow us to understand SLA adequately" (Atkinson 2011: xi) and that "letting all the [theoretical] flowers bloom" (Lantolf 1996: 738) is good practice.

Finally, I would like to add two comments about Eva's investment. The first is a concern of Norton and Toohey (2001) whether Eva would be a good language learner had she not been "blonde and white-skinned, slim, able-bodied, well dressed, and attractive to Western eyes" (p.318). The second comment is that after two years in Canada and the progress of her English, Eva did not have much opportunity to meet Canadians outside her work: "Because of my distinguishable pronunciation I am viewed as an immigrant by others and therefore I still feel like one" (Norton 2013a: 88). This again illustrates how opportunities to practice the TL with anglophones are a luxury not all language learners

have, and are grounded in social relations of power which do not seem to welcome supposedly “imposters”.

McKay and Wong (1996) also have drawn on the construct of investment to explain the English language development of four adolescent Chinese students in a California school, noting that the needs, desires and negotiations of students were integral to their investment in the TL. Investment helped McKay and Wong to understand their Chinese-immigrant students’ selective investment in one or a combination of the four language skills. They found out that the four language skills have “different values for the learner in terms of how his/her identities are defined and how well they help meet his/her social and academic demands” (p.604). Having explored investment, the next section discusses the last element of Norton's approach to SLA: imagined communities and imagined identities.

#### **2.4.6. Imagined communities and imagined identities**

An extension of interest in investment and identity is the imagined communities language learners aspire to when they learn an L2 (Norton 2001; 2013a; Pavlenko and Norton 2007). Drawing on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), Kanno and Norton (2003) propose that imagined communities “refer to groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination” (p.241). Simply put, imagined communities are where and with whom language learners imagine themselves to be in the future. Language learners can feel a sense of connectedness and community with people they have not met; imagined affiliations expand over time and place. “These 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” (Norton 2013a: 8). How does, then, the notion of imagined communities enhance our understanding of investment, identity and language learning opportunities? Norton (2001) argues that a learner’s imagined community invites an imagined identity, and a learner’s investment in the TL must be understood with reference to their imagined communities and identities. The following example may help to render this vision more concrete.

Norton (2000; 2001) describes the language experiences of Katarina, an immigrant from Poland who resisted participation in her ESL class. When Katarina expressed her wish to take a computer course, her ESL teacher discouraged her saying that her English was not “good enough” to take the computer course. Greatly insulted, Katarina dropped out of the ESL course after four months. She was a highly motivated language learner, but was not invested in her English teacher and the language practices of her ESL classroom. Katarina had been a veteran teacher in Poland, and although she could not find employment as a teacher (her imagined identity) in Canada, she continued to view herself as having a legitimate claim to professional status. When her teacher discouraged her

from taking the course, Katarina felt that she was positioned as a “mere immigrant” and that she was being denied an important opportunity to her imagined community of professionals. The teacher was not aware of the relationship between Katarina’s investment in learning English and her professional imagined identity. Katarina’s disinvestment resulted from a disjuncture between her imagined community and the teacher’s educational vision. It is interesting to note, however, that Katarina entered the computer course, where her future affiliation and identification were validated, and successfully completed it. Katarina’s imagined community thus was not simply wish-oriented where there is no possibility of action. Rather, it was hope-oriented. ‘Hope’ that, as Simon argues, “is constituted in the need to imagine an alternative human world and to imagine it in a way that enables one to act in the present as if this alternative had already begun to emerge” (1992: 4). In another study, Cooke (2006) points out how the lack of an imagined community and identity for an asylum seeker in the UK had a negative impact on his investment in learning English as his life was entirely dictated by a decision from the Home Office.

The notion of imagined communities has great implications for bridging theory and practice, for informing critical and transformative language pedagogy, and making sense of language learners’ stories. In this spirit, Early and Norton (2012) argue that one of the most important features for language researchers, teachers and schools in the 21st century is to link “language learner stories and imagined identities” (p.196). Imagined identities can be a rich resource which helps the teachers construct classroom activities that engage language learners and that contribute to their desired trajectories towards participation in their imagined communities. These issues have been explored by a vast number of scholars in different regions of the world. Examples include: Chang 2011 (USA); Cooke 2006 (UK). Darvin and Norton 2016 (Canada and Uganda); Friedman 2016 (Ukraine); Kanno 2008 (Japan); Kendrick and Jones 2008 (Uganda); Makubalo 2007 (South Africa); Norton and Gao 2008 (China); Norton and Kamal 2003 (Pakistan); Yim 2016 (South Korea). There is also a co-edited special issue of *Language, Identity, and Education* on “Imagined communities and educational possibilities” (Kanno and Norton 2003).

## **2.5. Identity dimensions and language learning**

As is clear from the discussion above, there is now a wealth of research that explores the relationship between identity and language learning, testament to the fact that issues of positioning, identity and power are being recognised as central to investment in language learning and the emergence of language learning opportunities. While much of this research explores the multiple and intersecting dimensions of language learners’ identities, there has been also an increasingly growing body of research that seeks to

investigate the ways in which particular social relations or identifications such as race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, religion, and age may impact the process of language learning. Innovative research that explores these issues does not “regard such identity categories as ‘variables’ but rather as sets of relationships that are socially and historically constructed within particular relations of power” (Norton 2013a: 11). It is necessary now to move on and explore in greater detail the research that addresses how language learning is intertwined with race, gender, social class, and religion respectively. Due to reasons of space and the constraints of a PhD thesis, only these four identity dimensions will be explored in this thesis.

### **2.5.1. Race and language learning**

As Omi and Winant (1993) argue, race has been shown to have neither a natural nor biological validity; rather, “race is socially and historically constructed and shaped by discourses that give specific meanings to the ways we see the world, rather than reflecting the illusive notion of objective, stable, and transcendent truths” (Kubota and Lin 2009: 3). This means that social representations are always in flux and contingent upon the social, historical and political processes. The term *racialisation*, “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed” (Omi and Winant 1994: 55), has been used in the literature when “the idea of race might contribute to an experience of Othering” (Rich and Troudi 2006: 615).

There has been an increasing interest in how issues of race intersect with language learning and education, reflected by the increasing number of publications addressing these issues (e.g., Blackledge 2003; Curtis and Romney 2006; Ibrahim 1999; McKay and Wong 1996; Kanno 2000; Kubota 2015a; 2015b; Kubota and Lin 2009; Kumaravadivelu 2004; Lee 2015; Miller 1999; Shuck 2006). The 2006 special issue of *TESOL Quarterly* (edited by Kubota and Lin) offered several articles investigating the relationship between race and language learning (Bashir-Ali; Rich and Troudi; and Taylor). All authors made the case that TESOL practitioners need to critically examine how their ideas about race and racial identities influence what they teach, how they teach and how they see their students. The 2015a special issue of *Multilingual and Multicultural Development* (edited by Kubota) also exposes, theorises, and problematises issues of racialisation and racism with regards to language teaching and learning in Canada and seeks anti-racist engagement in research and practice. Further, many studies documented the interplay between race and other identity aspects such as gender, religion, sexuality or age to marginalise and exclude learners (e.g., Polanyi 1995; Siegel 1996; Talburt and Stewart 1999; Rich and Troudi 2006; Taylor 2004).

Ellwood (2009) discusses the racial practices, or what she calls “acts of symbolic violence” (p.103), carried out by a teacher in an ESL programme in Australia. The teacher grouped the learners in her classroom into essentialised categorisations according to stereotypes of cultural identity circulating in Australian society. She seemed to align the Europeans with the greater capability to engage in critical thinking, and the Japanese with the lesser capability. She positioned the Japanese learners as lacking in critical-thinking skills and unlikely to speak up in class while the European students were placed in opposition to this. Such essentialised construction of students’ identities could lead to stigmatisation, generalisation, and inaccurate predictions about students’ capabilities (Kubota 1999; Spack 1997) and to “a deterministic stance and deficit orientation as to what students can accomplish” (Zamel 1997: 341) in terms of linguistic proficiency. In this study, these racialised normative discourses did have a productive function. Not only did the Japanese learners recognise themselves and take positions within these discourses, but also aligned with them in their negotiation for participating and intelligibility. And indeed, as Ellwood’s data shows, with regards to speaking up in class, the Japanese students were more participatory in the first weeks of classes than in later ones. This exclusion of the Japanese learners could be seen as a “social reality with devastating effects” (McLaren and Torres cited in Ellwood 2009: 109) on how they saw themselves and consequently on their language learning opportunities. It was not until the last assessment task when the teacher discovered that her pre-conceived views were *just* assumptions: “uh, surprisingly by the Europeans, the stronger Japanese had a good go at them, did better than I expected, so that shifted my perspective” (p.108).

The issue of race, however, is not only found in English-dominant contexts such as Australia, the USA, and the UK. In some contexts, it is whiteness which is problematised and marginalised and seems to impact language socialisation and learning. Examples include: Makubalo 2007 (South Africa); McKinney 2007 (South Africa); and Siegel 1996 (Japan). It is a sad fact that we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and race continues to have significant, if not devastating, effects on the understandings that people and groups have of each other and the relationships they construct with one another. Racialisation has been fuelled by recent political events in English dominant contexts such as the campaign of Brexit (British exit) in Britain (Travis 2016) and Donald Trump’s campaign (Reilly 2016) as well as the increasing numbers of people migrating from the Middle East to Europe to seek asylum. Concurrent with this is the apparent fear in Europe of a so-called “invasion” and of being “swamped” demographically by immigrants; social and news media play a role in this process of racialisation. All these factors have contributed to the rising levels of discrimination and hate crimes in Europe, provoking more and more interest in research into race and language learning.

### 2.5.2. Gender and language learning

The need for reconceptualising gender beyond essentialist and hegemonic perspectives has been supported by a number of scholars (Cameron 2006; Higgins 2010; Norton 2000; Norton and Pavlenko 2004; Park 2009; Skapoulli 2004). Their understanding of gender goes beyond the male/female dichotomy. Rather, they view gender as a complex system of social relations and discursive practices that are better understood as emerging in language learners' local social, cultural, political and ideological contexts. These social relations might intersect with other identity dimensions and social forms of oppression and privilege. To make the idea clearer, for example, black male immigrants may find it more difficult to integrate in a host society than white women immigrants; disabled men might be exploited more than non-disabled women in society; illiterate men probably are more likely to find settling into a new linguistic and cultural setting challenging and problematic than literate women; both Muslim men and women are more likely to be marginalised than other groups; both girls and boys from a working-class background might not have access to educational resources. To sum up, it is never that either men or women are all-oppressed or all-powerful; rather, gender is intertwined with other social factors such as class, education, religion, race and disability. It is this view of gender which is adopted in the current project.

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in the relationship between language learning and the (re)construction of (new) L2 gendered identities in new communities of practice (e.g., Davis and Skilton-Sylvester 2004; Fleming 2015; Giroir 2014b; Lee 2010; Lu and Luk 2014; Menard-Warick 2009; Norton 2000; Norton and Pavlenko 2004; Park 2009; Ray 2015; Skapoulli 2004; Taylor 2004; and Warriner 2004). As the new linguistic and cultural spaces provide new understandings of gender, they often lead to transformations of women and men migrants' discursive performance of gender. Some L2 learners may respond to the new gender discourses by assimilating or resisting existing ideologies of gender in either language and culture (Pavlenko 2001b). Some may selectively and strategically adopt and/or detach themselves from *specific* gendered practices in their own or the new language and culture (Skapoulli 2004). Some gender research also refers to the ways in which gender identity (re)construction creates new interactional opportunities for female and male language learners and provides opportunities for agency and choice in the performance of self (Giroir 2014b; Norton 2000; Pavlenko 2001b). However, other gender research problematises the ways patriarchal gendered practices structure women migrants' access to educational and interactional opportunities and future aspirations. Women who come from communities governed by patriarchal systems face gatekeeping practices that restrict and sometimes prevent their access to ESOL classes and interactional possibilities (Goldstein 1996; Norton 2000; Park 2009; Pavlenko and Piller 2008).

Skapoulli's research (2004) traces the ways in which a 16-year-old Egyptian immigrant girl, Nadia, situated herself within the different gender ideologies that she experimented with at home and in school in Cyprus. Being simultaneously a member of a conservative Egyptian Christian community and of a Western society inevitably created complications for Nadia's gender identity construction. She navigated this by selectively embracing linguistic and social aspects of both home and peer culture, which resulted in the emergence of a hybrid cultural and gendered identity. Despite her long presence in Cyprus (12 years) and high fluency in Greek, Nadia enacted a partial participation in the local Greek "linguistic and heterosexual markets" since complete identification was associated with certain gender practices that she refused to abide by. Further, through linguistic and cultural strategies, Nadia made the commonalities salient with her interlocutors in each social setting to ensure validation and acceptance. For example, she used "profanity" and a carefree speech behaviour with her peers or work colleagues but a reserved and modest speech style with people from the Coptic religious community, hence enacting different gendered identities in different communities of practice. These findings suggest that L2 users become agents of multiple, dynamic, and flexible identities. Although Skapoulli's findings were mainly about language and language use, these findings can be extended to language learning to illustrate (1) how language learners' linguistic and cultural choices can construct a new gendered self, and (2) how language learners' new gendered identities can shape their interactional opportunities and validation in their new communities.

Additionally, Giroir's study (2014b)<sup>6</sup> reports on how 3 immigrant women constructed and (re)negotiated their gendered identities as they discursively interacted with socially and culturally embedded discourses upon their arrival in the USA. The central finding was that social participation in a linguistically and culturally new environment and learning English led to new gendered and social identity positions and shifting worlds for the women; learning English was a critical and transformative experience which resulted in "non-linguistic" outcomes in the shape of identity changes (Benson 2004). In many ways, the women's narratives centered upon imagined identities and communities where they could renegotiate some dominant cultural, age and gendered narratives that were restrictive to their identities. It was the women's investment in these imagined and real communities that kept them invested in learning English. The data across the women's narratives illustrate how they negotiated the "disruption and reversal" that came with border crossings into spaces for identity expansion and personal growth, and how they succeeded in taking up empowered L2 gendered identities which offered them more English learning and speaking opportunities. That is, legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) was a positive

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<sup>6</sup> Giroir (2014a) and (2014b) take data from her larger research PhD project (Giroir 2011) that looked at the narrated experiences of nine adult learners enrolled in an intensive English programme in the United States.

space for these women in their path towards achieving more participation and engagement in their new communities (Lave and Wenger 1991). The study also brings to the fore how gender was inextricably linked to other identity inscriptions such as social class and culture, which shaped the women's sense of agency and participation patterns in their new milieu.

### **2.5.3. Social class and language learning**

This section begins by clarifying what social class is. It then examines how this construct has been taken up in Applied Linguistics research. Influenced by Marx's concern with the material bases of social life but far more by Weber's focus on status, Bourdieu makes the point that "class must be conceptualised not only in terms of traditional indexes of income, occupation and education, but also in terms of status and a range of social practices" (Block 2014:52). Bourdieu (1986) proposes three types of class capital:

1. economic capital, or material wealth, which includes income as well as all property and other possessions;
2. cultural capital, that is represented in embodied form (e.g. accent, body movements), objectified form (e.g. ownership of art, books, gadgets and musical instruments) and institutional form (e.g. taste in art, music and food, academic and other achieved qualifications); and
3. social capital, which is about connections to and relationships with equally or more powerful individuals and groups.

It is the interaction and combination (or lack) of all or some of these capital forms that determines how individuals position themselves and are positioned class-wise and shapes their social (dis)advantage. Block (2014) argues that while social class is "fundamentally an economic notion" (p.56), it also needs to be understood in terms of "class as lived experience" (p.58), or class as a cultural as well as social category. He adds that there is an ever-growing list of dimensions which interrelate and overlap to constitute an individual's class positioning in their communities. These dimensions include: wealth, occupation, place of residence, education, social networking, consumption patterns, mobility, spatial relations and symbolic behaviour (Block 2012; see Table 1 below). In his innovative and timely book *Social Class in Applied Linguistics*, Block makes the point that "in applied linguistics there has been far too little work on how the social class dimensions outlined above interrelate with each other, and above all, how they interrelate with identity and language learning and use" (2013: 33-34).

**Table 1. Key dimensions of class (Block 2012: 94)**

Dimension	Gloss
Property	This refers to one's material possessions, such as land, housing, electronic goods, clothing, books, art, etc.
Wealth	This refers to disposable income/money and patrimony (e.g. what owned property is worth in financial terms).
Occupation	This refers to the kind of work done across a range of job types, such as blue-collar manual labour vs. white-collar knowledge-based labour, or service sector jobs vs. manual jobs, etc.
Place of residence	This can refer either to the type of neighbourhood one lives in (is it identified as poor, working class, middle class, an area in the process of gentrification, or upper class?) or the type of dwelling (individual house, flat, caravan, etc.).
Education	This refers to the level of schooling attained and the acquired educational capital one has at any point in time. There is close link here to Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital.
Social networking	This refers to the often unspoken reality whereby middle class people tend to socialise with middle class people, working class people with working class people, and so on. There is a close link here to Bourdieu's notion of social capital.
Consumption patterns	This might refer to behaviour patterns like buying food at a supermarket that positions itself as 'cost-cutting' vs. buying food at one that sells 'healthy', organic and expensive products. Or it might refer to buying particular goods (e.g. food, clothing, gadgets) in terms of type and brand.
Symbolic behaviour	This includes how one moves one's body, the clothes one wears, the way one speaks, how one eats, the kinds of pastimes one engages in, etc.
Spatial relations	This refers to living conditions such as physical mobility (does the person frequently travel abroad?) or the spatial conditions in which one lives (size of bedroom, size of dwelling, proximity to other people during a range of day-to-day activities)

Still, there has been some research examining the interrelationship between the identity dimension of social class and language learning (e.g., Block 2007; 2012; Darvin 2018; Darvin and Norton 2014; 2015; Ellis 2008; Gao 2010; 2014; Heller 1999; Kinginger 2004; Shin 2014). An illustrative example of this interrelationship between class and language learning is the language experiences of Carlos (Block 2006b; 2012). Carlos is a middle-class Colombian man living in the UK. He held a PhD in Philosophy and had worked at a university in Colombia before migrating to London. He spoke Spanish in the house with his English wife and with his middle-class Spanish-speaking friends. His English was limited, which meant that he had to work in jobs far below his previous jobs in Colombia (e.g., a porter). However, he did not seem to have feelings of injury about this “occupational declassing”. This could be understood with reference to the fact that he and his wife, both in full-time employment, had a rich life as regards pastimes, relatively frequent weekend trips to Europe and their consumption patterns (e.g., food choices, shops, eating). They also had savings and owned two properties in London. Well-educated and not having financial problems, Carlos went through his life with the confidence “that comes with cultural capital and a middle-class habitus” (Block 2014:158). This appears very different

from Norton's (2000) participants, Felicia and Katarina<sup>7</sup>, who shared a certain feeling of shame derived from having none of the material and symbolic resources they used to possess in their home countries. This aspect of declassing, which is often a factor of migration, mediated their access to English-speaking social networks and consequently their English language development.

In the workplace, however, things worked differently for Carlos. All his colleagues were working-class white Englishmen who spoke Cockney working-class English. Carlos' middle-class lifestyle served to distance him from his work colleagues. Block eloquently explained this:

He [Carlos] could not identify with his workmates and he found himself relatively ill-equipped to be 'one of the lads'. This state of affairs was no doubt due in part to his somewhat limited English language skills, but it was surely also due to his middle class habitus, which kept him at a certain distance from the very interlocutors from whom he stood the best chance of learning the most English. However, it was also probably due to the fact that Carlos was not willing to invest too much effort in conversations with speakers of what he knew was a non-standard variety of English.

(2012:201)

It is also worthwhile to note that although social class was a factor that loomed large in understanding Carlos' language practices in the workplace and the outside world, there were other social factors involved in distancing him from his English workmates. He was a foreigner from Columbia, a country his colleagues associated with violence, poverty and drugs; he was of mixed African and Amerindian ancestry, with a different history and a different way of upbringing (Block 2015).

Another class-based research carried out by Block was his study (2007) with Silvia, a wealthy woman in her mid-30s studying English in Barcelona. This study takes the focus to the performance of social class identity in the language classroom. Silvia seemed to deal with her English teacher and classmates through her upper social class. She reported having an intense relationship with her English teacher and one of her classmates. Silvia criticised the teacher's overcorrection of her writing and the lack of positive feedback, which Silvia attributed to the fact that the teacher, as a native English speaker, probably thought that she knew better than Silvia did: "And you say: 'Well who do you think you are? You are just a teacher.' It's true. You might know a lot of English but I know a lot of other things" (Block 2007:129). Block (2007; 2014) interprets Silvia's ambivalent feelings towards her teacher as a reflection of her upper class. How can Silvia, with all her economic, social and cultural capital, be in a subservient position to someone who was

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<sup>7</sup> We have seen earlier how Katarina dropped out of the ESL class because her professional identity was not validated. For more information, please go back to Section 2.4.6.

“just a teacher”? Silvia’s need to be recognised by her teacher is inextricably linked to her upper-class identity and her desire to be heard in English.

Silvia also invoked class when analysing her conflictive relationship with one of her classmates for whom she expressed a degree of dislike and even disdain. Silvia explained the difficulty of dealing with her classmate by the fact that her classmate was not born wealthy; she was “self-made”. Because her classmate faced adverse circumstances before reaching the rich community of practice, Silvia believed that she ended up more aggressive and “demanding”. Thus far, I have examined two studies that dealt with how the privileged class backgrounds of two individuals had a restrictive impact on their language learning experiences. The next study, Kinginger (2004), adds new perspectives to the discussion of class by exploring the positive bearing that the working-class identity of a language learner had on her language learning and participation opportunities in her new communities.

Kinger (2004) traces the trials and tribulations of Alice, “a highly motivated learner who has overcome significant personal, social, and material obstacles to her learning of French” at home and abroad for over a period of 4 years (p.219). Alice was born in an American family characterised as lower-class. She went to France on a study abroad programme because she wanted to be able to join an imagined community of French speakers associated with the lofty ideals of liberty and cultural sophistication where her social options and identities would be negotiated and widened. “Her choice of France is a bid for access to a life of cultured refinement” (p.219). A series of factors in Alice’s life came together to construct her as a lower-class subject with middle class aspirations, which contributed to her relative success in gaining access to interactional opportunities with French-speaking people on an informal basis in France. As Block (2007) notes, this relative success came about partly because she was an outsider in her study abroad American group, someone who could not afford to participate in leisure activities such as travel and skiing. Coming from a poor family, she did not have the privileged upbringing and the middle-class interests of her fellow students, which made her exiled from a social life with her fellow Americans and encouraged her to develop deep and meaningful social contacts with French people. This in turn opened up more opportunities for Alice to negotiate and reconstruct her identities and reposition herself. Kinginger points out that Alice’s journey of learning French did not only involve a negotiation of her linguistic and social, but also gender and class identities in highly complex and interconnected ways. Kinginger sums up Alice’s development over the period of 4 years:

For Alice, becoming a speaker of French is a way of reorienting herself in the world...to upgrade her access to cultural capital, become a cultured person and share knowledge with others. In this sense, Alice’s efforts toward French language competence are just as much as ‘investment’ in social identity... Alice’s stake in language learning is also a bid to break free of the confining circumstances of a peripatetic, working-class childhood

and to become a person she can admire...Alice was not drawn to French because of its instrumental or utilitarian value, but precisely because of the prestige of that language in the United States as a language of culture.

(2004: 240)

Alice's story helps to elucidate the importance of social class, ideological and sociopolitical processes, and imagined communities in the understanding of learners' investment in language learning.

Significantly, the above discussion illustrates that "class matters" (hooks 2000: 7) as it can afford valuable privilege and/or cause great disadvantage (Vandrick 2014); consequently, it also illustrates how important the social aspects of SLA are. This relates to the key question this literature review addresses: "*who are language learners?*" and "*who do others think they are?*" This is not to disregard the cognitive/linguistic side of SLA, but to stress the importance of incorporating both social and cognitive/linguistic dimensions to deeply understand the complex process of SLA. However, no single study can explore both cognitive and social aspects of language learning. Thus, my study is taking on the social aspect of looking at Muslim Syrian refugees as they construct their identity and learn language in the North East of England - a research area, as will be clear, that is under-represented in literature.

#### **2.5.4. Religion and language learning**

It is obvious from the discussion above that interest in identity inscriptions and language learning is gaining momentum, with focus on some elements more than others. However, there remains an important identity aspect which is largely overlooked in Applied Linguistics, which is religion. 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 language learning in both formal and informal settings. In Norton (2013a) for instance, the second edition of her ground-breaking book, there is no mention whatsoever of religion, yet it discusses in detail many identity categories including ethnicity, race, sexuality, gender and social class (Darvin and Norton 2014; 2015; Norton 2013a; Norton and Toohey 2011).

This underrepresentation in the literature seems quite surprising considering the fundamental role religion can play in politics, the social organisation of communities and homes, and the identity formation of many individuals. With regards to Muslims, and all religious communities, religion is very important in shaping and developing identity (Howat et al. 2010; Iner and Yusel 2015). This has to do with the communal religion of Islam which places religion in preference to other identity elements such as ethnicity, race, colour, age,

gender, sexuality or disability of how an individual identifies herself/himself. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) during his last sermon said:

O people, your Lord is one and your father Adham is one. There is no virtue of an Arab over a foreigner nor a foreigner over an Arab, and neither white skin over black skin nor black skin over white skin, except by righteousness. Have I not delivered the message?

(Ahmad bin Hanbal 22978, 6/570)

The role of Islam in Muslims' lives can become more central in times of crisis, emotional stress, trauma, and displacement. McMichael (2002) gathered Somali Muslim refugee women's narratives about their lives in Australia and experiences of displacement and resettlement. Participants' talks were sprinkled with references to Allah and religious faith. "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). Data illustrate that Somali women demonstrated a diversity of Islamic ideologies and practices, which were "inseparable" from their culture. Hence, Islam is not a uniform identity category, and as it interacts with other identity elements and the social context, a diversity of religious ideologies and practices emerge. Islam is "a mosaic, not a monolith"<sup>8</sup> (Gregorian 2003). 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 secularised mainstream research agendas" (Bigelow 2018: 432). Therefore, there have been some calls for researching intersections between religion and language seriously and rigorously, and even building a subfield within Applied Linguistics to research and focus on religion and language (Han 2018).

#### **2.5.4.1. Islamophobic discourses and learning**

There are a few studies which explore some of the potential effects of religion and discourses of Islamophobia on the lived experiences and identity construction, but not explicitly on the language learning, of Muslim learners in Western societies (e.g., Majumdar 2010; Muir and Smith 2004; Norris 2011; Rich and Troudi 2006; Weller et al. 2001). Islamophobia, broadly defined as "an irrational fear, distrust or rejection of the Muslim religion and those who are (perceived as) Muslim" (van Driel 2004: p.x), is not an exclusively modern phenomenon (Muir and Smith, 2004). However, since the horrific 9/11 and 7/7 terror attacks in New York and London respectively, Islamophobia has increasingly found its way into academia, journalism, and all aspects of the media, and has been cultivated by much ignorance and fueled by a powerful public discourse that depicts all Muslims as extremists and fundamentalists (Bigelow 2008; Haque 2004; Said 2003). This increased attention on Muslims has resulted in their transformation from "invisible" to "glaringly conspicuous" (Salaita 2005: 149). Several researchers have argued that

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<sup>8</sup> It is the title of a book; therefore, no page number is provided.

Islamophobic discourses should be understood as involving more than straightforward discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation, and in particular they should be seen as increasingly racialised (Bigelow 2010; Rattansi 2005; Rich and Troudi 2006; Sheridan 2004). They argued that it is important to understand how Muslims post-9/11 might be victimised and “otherised” not only on the grounds of their religious affiliation, but also their physical appearance, colour, and their cultural norms and values.

By way of illustration, Rich and Troudi (2006) report the impact of discourses of “racialised Islamophobia” on five male Saudi MA TESOL students’ experiences in their learning community in the UK. The data suggest that Islamophobic discourses can create complex conditions for Saudi students in terms of how they are positioned in TESOL communities and wider society. Two participants noted specific academic TESOL practices which led them to a “shift from perceiving of themselves as *international students* to a marginalized and inferiorised position on account of their culture, colour, ethnicity, and nationality” (p.623). The findings also highlight how race intersected with other identity categories such as religion, gender, ethnicity, nationality and culture to create “new racisms, which use different metaphors to marginalize and exclude certain social groups based on more than just biological traits” (p.617). Additionally, post-9/11 discourses appeared to shape how these students saw themselves in relation to the larger L2 community. They had expectations of being treated unequally on the grounds of their religious and ethnic identity. This study makes explicit the impact of racialised Islamophobia on the Saudi students’ sense of self and learning experiences, but not on their experiences of participation or speaking opportunities in the wider UK community, which is part of the focus of the current project.

#### **2.5.4.2. Religion and school experiences**

Religion, in intersection with other identity dimensions, was examined in much more detail in Sarroub (2002; 2005) who presents an ethnographic study of how six hijabat (scarfed girls) Yemeni girls sought success and negotiated their American and Yemeni identities at home, in school, and within their ethnic communities. Despite restrictions on their appearance, movements, relations with men, and imagined futures and identities, the hijabat, like Skapoulli’s participant (2004), found creative ways to enact acceptable and valid cultural norms at school and at home. The hijabat’s American school life was constantly mediated by their religion. 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” (Sarroub 2002: 138).

In the cafeteria and/or halls, the hijabat did not sit next to Yemeni boys nor talk to them, and they shied away from all young men including their teachers because in these spaces “behavior was sanctioned by cultural and religious practices” (Sarroub 2005: 47). The hijabat, more than Yemeni boys, would suffer the consequences if they were seen conversing to boys. They attributed their conservative behaviour to shame or fear which was grounded in Yemeni culture and religion that “were intertwined in very elaborate ways” (Sarroub 2002: 139). The interaction patterns in the cafeteria and halls uncover how religion, culture and gender interacted to influence the conversations of the hijabat. By contrast, the classroom was the safest space within the high school that offered the hijabat a sense of liberation and a “sanctuary” from social, religious and cultural norms and pressures. In the classroom, the hijabat adopted different roles and ways of being as they interacted spontaneously and freely with Yemeni and American boys. It was unlikely that a parent or a community member would enter the classroom and see the hijabats interacting with boys. By temporarily adopting the student identity position and giving it simultaneously to their male classmates, the hijabat successfully maneuvered the classroom setting and rendered it into a safe place for them.

In the wake of 9/11 attacks, Sarroub noticed a substantial change in the hijabat’s roles in their community as they became the representatives of a religion accused of terrorism. One of the hijabat said: “We don’t know who we are anymore” (Sarroub 2005: 133). In the weeks following 9/11, the hijabat stayed at home and avoided public settings of non-Arab as they were verbally and physically harassed. A participant noted that the Yemeni and Yemeni Americans had become more conservative post-9/11 and had pulled their children out of schools and public spaces. The attacks provoked rage and fear among the hijabat as they tried to reconcile their Muslim and American identities. Nevertheless, all the hijabat were still passionately committed to their religion and hijab, even more after the attacks.

To conclude, I would like to add two comments about Sarroub’s work. Firstly, it is worth pointing out the hijabat 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, the hijabat possessed the symbolic capital which allowed them in part to successfully negotiate appropriate social and academic identities in and out of school. The question one must ask, then, is whether Muslim refugees and immigrants who come to Europe without any previous knowledge of the language and/or culture of the host country would be able to achieve such success or create in-between places as the hijabat did, particularly in times of crisis when political events happen such as terrorist attacks or Brexit. Secondly, the girls’ narrativisation was restricted to their home, school, and Yemeni communities such as Islamic lectures, Arabic schools, and wedding parties, but not the wider American society as the girls were rarely

allowed to be seen unaccompanied in public male domains. It would be interesting, then, to listen to the stories of Muslims, particularly Muslim women, while trying to belong and participate in the wider host communities.

Sarroub's ethnographic work has been influential in Bigelow's scholarship. Bigelow (2008; 2010) explores race, religion, gender, ethnicity and language as they pertained to Somali immigrant youth and their lives at school, among their families, and in their communities. Bigelow found out that Somali youth may be racialised by (1) Somali elders, (2) the police, and (3) school teachers and students. In the following quote, a female high school student reflected about her experience with her "racist" teacher:

Some teachers are racists, even the teachers say that some teachers are racist. They're racist, like they, they don't help you. I have this class, and then, she was the, she was, I think she was a racist people I ever met in my life. The comments she makes about Muslims. I didn't like that. I used to hate that class and then, it was required, so I had to take it, and I couldn't like—"Oh, man" and I couldn't wait that class...

(Bigelow 2008: 29)

As discussed earlier in this chapter, power inequalities in the outside world can be reproduced in language classroom contexts and immigrant language students might be subjected to othering and marginalisation in their classrooms with consequences to their learning (Pennycook 2001; Rich and Troudi 2006). The above quote also shows how "Islamophobia is a form of racism" (Bigelow 2008: 30). Bigelow highlighted these incidents and their impact on identity but not on language learning experiences and outcomes in the classroom. The tensions and struggles that Somali youth experienced at school were often complicated with being Muslim, particularly for hijabi girls. Schools "do not stand free from powerful discourses in (global) society that instill suspicion and fear of Muslims" (Bigelow 2010: 114).

The merit of Bigelow's research was its focus on a religiously and racially marginalised group with limited formal education and print literacy. It shows that the Somali youth's homes and schools were spaces where their religious and racial identities were questioned and otherised rather than welcomed, further complicating their identity work in a new social and cultural environment. Yet, Bigelow's discussion would have been greatly strengthened had she made more explicit connections between the Somali youth's identity work, racism and Islamophobia on the one hand and language learning processes and outcomes in and out school on the other.

#### **2.5.4.3. Islamophobic discourses and language learning**

Thus, there seem to be far fewer studies which look explicitly at the intersection between religion and language learning and how language learners' religious identification can impact their language learning processes and outcomes as well as their access to community resources and interactional opportunities. Giroir (2014a) explores the

processes by which two Saudi ESL learners were able to renegotiate their peripherality as Arab Muslim men in the USA through their ongoing interactions as novices in new L2 expert communities. Giroir's findings show "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). Although the stories of the two participants, Alim and Musa, diverged in critical ways, they both, adopting new, more desirable identity positions, were able to move from the periphery to the centre of L2 communities and to exercise agency.

Alim opened up about one of the critical, discriminatory experiences he had. Shortly after he had become a good friend with an American student, Alim was visited by the American student's father who was concerned about this friendship as the following interaction shows:

I said, "I have no idea...what Osama or other person say. But I have ideas. I mean, Islamic religion is a really good religion. It doesn't tell us to hurt people. They told us if you kill someone without any right it is equal to you kill[ing] everybody in this life. That is a really big sin if you did...I care about the real things." And [Stanley's father] is kind of like, "OK," I mean, he told me, "It was nice to meet you." And after...Stanley said, "[My father] wants me to be with you. He wants me to be with you. He told me, 'I want you to be with this guy.'"

(pp.49-50)

Although it was a normative discriminatory discourse, it was within this discourse Alim's legitimacy was recognised. How did he achieve that? According to Alim, attaching himself strongly and proudly to his religious and cultural identity and presenting his true identity of being a good person were the discursive acts through which he was able to influence and change his present circumstances. Alim used post-9/11 discourses and Quranic texts as cultural resources in constructing his stance toward the L2 community and in gaining the right to speak and be listened to. He, like many other Muslims in Western communities, found himself compelled to answer directly to unfair post-9/11 narratives that positioned Muslims negatively and created obstacles for participation. To sum up, peripherality here is considered a space of dynamic "possibility" rather than entirely "a space of exclusion". Despite this positive outcome, however, Giroir problematises this event, noting the broader societal discourses that "place the onus on L2 learners to negotiate for participation rights in expert communities", and that Alim "was able to achieve a legitimate status largely because he was granted the right to speak by a more powerfully positioned "expert"" (p.50).

Giroir also argues that a more critical reading of the participants' narratives of success would pinpoint other factors which helped them in obtaining entrance into the centre and resisting discriminatory social forces. They were Saudi men, literate, educated, from middle- to upper-class backgrounds, and sponsored by the Saudi government. In

other words, they possessed economic and cultural capital that other Muslim and Arab immigrants and refugees might not have. This also probably shaped their open-minded religious stance that in turn afforded them with more space and viable identities from which they could seek greater possibilities for social interaction.

The question one must ask here is: what about more marginalised groups such as Muslim refugees or asylum seekers who immigrate or seek refuge in European countries with very little economic and symbolic capital? How would they manage to construct their identity and learn language in anti-Muslim and anti-refugee English-speaking contexts? In the SLA/Applied Linguistics literature, there is very little research which explores how current exclusionary, Islamophobic, and sociopolitical discourses can create complex conditions for Arab and Muslim refugees and immigrants for language learning and participation in formal and informal settings in English-speaking contexts. More studies are needed to follow Muslim immigrants and refugees for long periods of time, exploring not only on how religion impacts on their sense of self and language learning and participation practices, but also how religion intersects with other identity elements and social and political factors and forces.

Addressing this gap in research becomes more imperative when one considers the migration and displacement patterns in today's political and economic landscapes. There has been a significant increase in the number of Arabs and Muslims migrating to Europe since 2011, when political uprisings spread across the Arab world and the authorities forcefully responded against them. More than 80% of those who reached Europe by boat in 2015 are from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, all of which are Muslim-majority countries (BBC 2016a)<sup>9</sup>. Syrians are the most critically affected and "undesirable" group, and they formed more than 50% (half a million) of immigrants to Europe in 2015 (Holland and Greece, UNHCR 2015)<sup>10</sup>. As a displaced Syrian myself who experienced war for three years, I can imagine the situation of Syrian refugees reaching Europe. They are doubly vulnerable and sensitive to rejection and social positioning due to their past traumatic experiences and memories, and the anti-refugee and anti-Muslim sentiments spreading across Europe, especially in the wake of terrorist attacks in Brussels, Nice, Orlando, Berlin, London and Manchester. The situation has been exacerbated by Donald Trump's controversial campaign promises, and enactment of them, on maintaining (as he sees it) the national security of the USA. In his first week of presidency and hours after meeting the British prime minister, Theresa May, Trump signed an executive order to stop

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<sup>9</sup> Although starting to date a little, these statistics set the scene at the project's outset, and underpin its rationale.

<sup>10</sup> It is crucial to note here that due to many reasons and safety concerns, UNHCR statistics do not seem always to be reliable. The real numbers are thought to be much higher. Thousands of Syrians and Arabs crossed to Europe illegally and thus they are unregistered. Still, these numbers are the only official figures to illustrate the seriousness of the situation.

all refugee arrivals for four months– and Syrian arrivals indefinitely. The order also placed a 90-day block on entry to the US from citizens of Syria, Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Libya and Somalia, all of which are Muslim-majority countries (Owen et al. 2017). These social and political changes undoubtedly make people more aware that “religion continues to play important roles in secular Western societies...[and] make the interdisciplinary study of religion significant and timely” (Han 2018: 434).

Opposition to immigrants and refugees has also been cited as fuelling the Brexit vote in the UK, which was followed by a spike in racist incidents against foreigners. An important figure here is that by mid-2015 there were only 117,234 refugees, 37,829 pending asylum cases and 16 stateless persons in the UK. That is less than one quarter of a percent of the UK’s total population (around 0.24%) (UNHCR 2015). Islamophobia is also now on the rise in the UK. According to Tell MAMA (2016), a confidential third-party reporting service for individuals who experience anti-Muslim hate incidents and crimes in the UK, there was a 200 per cent increase in offline Islamophobic incidents in 2015. 61% of all recordable victims were females. Additionally, during the course of fieldwork and data collection of this project, the Manchester and London terrorist attacks took place. Between March and June 2017, London and Manchester witnessed four attacks in which men used vehicles, knives and explosives to kill different sections of the public including children, tourists, Muslim worshippers, and a police officer. In the aftermath of the Manchester and London bridge atrocities, there was a spike in the number of anti-Muslim hate crimes in the physical and virtual worlds. Tell MAMA recorded a 475% increase in the number of offline anti-Muslim incidents reported in the week following the Manchester Arena attack (TELL MAMA 2018). All these exclusionary, sociopolitical happenings raise questions around the 20,000 Syrian refugees the UK agreed to receive under the VPR scheme (see Chapter 1). How would this doubly marginalised group of Syrian refugees learn English and integrate into the British society? Given this situation, this project will therefore focus on the current language learning experiences and the process of identity construction and negotiation of a particularly politicised and racialised cultural group: Syrian refugees in the North East of England. Clearly, the experiences of Syrian refugees need to be understood and more research is needed.

## **2.6. Research questions of the study**

This study will be guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How does the Syrian refugees’ investment in learning English intersect with their social positioning and changing identities?

- 2) How far and in what ways do structures of marginalisation and Islamophobia shape the Syrian refugees' identity construction and their subsequent investment in learning English?
- 3) In what ways, if any, do the Syrian refugees resist these structures and situate themselves in their new social milieu?
- 4) To what extent do the conditions within the ESOL College facilitate or constrain the Syrian refugees' negotiation of their identities and fulfilling their potential as English learners and novices in culturally and linguistically new communities?

These conditions include (1) how the Syrian learners are positioned in the ESOL classroom and (2) space for their identities to be expressed and valued.

Finally, I would like to finish off this chapter with four comments. Firstly, this ethnographic project of knowing and understanding Syrian refugees as they learn language and make choices about who they are, and who others think they are, has at its core the desire to be informed and inform others about how to support, encourage and advocate for a minoritised, vulnerable refugee population as they learn language, adjust to life and integrate in a society where there is racial and religious bias. It is hoped that the data and findings of this project will result in action. Secondly, another equally important aim is to contribute and enrich SLA theories about the complex and dynamic interplay between identity and language learning, and to keep SLA socially relevant and up-to-date with the real problems of our times. Thirdly, 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 project are of global relevance. Finally, as a Muslim Syrian woman myself who has been subjected to many social, political, and religious injustices throughout my life, my recent experience of moving into the UK undoubtedly has influenced the way I chose the research topic and framed the research questions and will likely influence the methodology of the project.

In the next chapter, I turn to an exploration of the research methods used to gather data for this enquiry.

## Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter starts by providing an account of the theoretical perspectives which shaped my thinking as a researcher and sets out the methodological landscape in which the project was designed and conducted over a period of 14 months. Then, I will take the reader on a narrative journey which describes in detail how I negotiated access into the research site and conducted the project with the participants. I shall engage in a reflexive account about the complexity of building trust with the Syrians, and how my methodological thinking was informed by my role as a volunteer classroom assistant in the college in which the Syrians were studying, the field dynamics and the participants themselves. The chapter then discusses my emotions and anxieties as an ethnographer. It concludes with the data trustworthiness and analysis and an overview of the following findings chapters.

### 3.1. Research design: ethnographic and interpretive

I utilised a broadly ethnographic and interpretive approach in this project. Initially, I had planned to use interviews and focus groups with the teacher and learner participants. However, having realised the complexity of verbalising ideas about identity through writing my own diaries and the impact of the researcher's presence on the situation and participants when data are collected over a short period of time (Hayre and Strudwick 2019), it soon became clear to me that these direct research methods on their own are not adequate in exploring identity, which is inherently "precarious, contradictory and in process" (Weedon 1997: 32) (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4). Therefore, ethnography became my methodology of choice to collect data from multiple sources. Ethnographies employ several research tools, which link findings together and allow for what Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) call "crystallisation". I was attempting to uncover and understand more about the multiple facets of the crystal of identity, as there is near-infinite variety.

The project's focus was to understand how a group of Syrians' experiences of learning English were socially constructed, and how their identities were (re)negotiated as they interacted with a variety of socially and culturally embedded discourses. The aim was not to place my own theories or test or challenge current theories of identity and language learning. Rather, I hoped to see the world through the Syrians' eyes, which would help me develop my interpretation of their experiences. This research hopes, therefore, to contribute to a growing body of research that draws upon *emic* perspectives on language learning. *Emic* perspectives are "the participants' meanings for social actions" (Davis 1995: 433). Among a number of philosophical orientations and approaches to qualitative research, an interpretive stance is the most appropriate for my project. Thus, the process of inquiry in this project is not to discover meaning and truth deposited *a priori*, but to explore how the social world is made meaningful and interpreted from *the perspectives of*

*Syrian learners*. I am interested in their meaning-making practices because they are what would shape their behaviour and stances. In interpretive research, there is no objective reality which can be discovered by the researcher (Walsham 1993); rather, “social reality is an interpreted world not a literal world, always under symbolic construction” (Altheide and Johnson 1994: 489). The emphases on interpretation and the social construction of meaning are common to the tradition of ethnomethodology (Emerson et al. 2011). Whenever possible, individual Syrian participants’ interpretations will be compared with those of other Syrians in the group, ESOL teachers and the ESOL college manager to help me develop my own interpretation of the Syrians’ experiences. My aim is to understand and present “multiple perspectives, multiple voices, and multiple interpretations” (Merriam 2009: 12).

For example, Jean, a female Muslim Syrian participant in this project (see later in the chapter), thought that being a hijabi (a Muslim woman who wears hijab or a scarf) constituted a barrier to learning English and fitting into British society. It was her interpretation, then, that shaped her behaviour. I am not interested if this reflects ‘the truth’ (for, from the perspective I am taking, this is difficult/impossible to ascertain). Rather, my focus is on how her interpretation of her religious positioning interacted with her language learning and identity negotiation, and how this interpretation emerged from social interaction over time. Thus, my goals for the project necessitated (1) ethnographic methods of data collection and (2) discourse analysis. As will become clear, these theoretical perspectives overlap and draw on the theoretical frameworks presented in Chapter 2 (i.e. poststructuralist theories of language, identity and positioning).

### **3.1.1. Ethnography**

Several key characteristics of ethnographic research include:

- a strong emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomena, rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them
- a tendency to work primarily with “unstructured” data, that is, data that have not been coded at the point of data collection in terms of a closed set of analytic categories
- investigation of a small number of cases, perhaps just one case, in detail
- analysis of...human action, the product of which mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role...

(Atkinson and Hammersley 1994: 248)

Reflexivity, which establishes the researcher’s integrity, is also a central feature of ethnographic research. It is the capacity to reflect upon one’s actions and values during the research, when producing data and writing accounts, and to view the beliefs we hold in the same way we view the beliefs of others (Arber 2006; Seale 2012). Through rigorous self-reflexivity, Kirsch and Ritchie (1995) urge researchers to “theorize their locations by

examining their experiences as reflections of ideology and culture, by reinterpreting their own experiences through the eyes of others, and by recognizing their own split selves, their multiple and often unknown” (p.8). Despite the prevalent assumption that self-reflexivity is the sole responsibility of the lone researcher, it can be, as we shall see, a collective practice with those being researched and with professionals in academia (Gilmore and Kenny 2015). Ways of enabling self-reflexivity include keeping a research diary (Arber 2006; Benson 2014; Ray 2015), being a good listener and observer, and conducting pair-interviews among researchers (Gilmore and Kenny 2015)<sup>11</sup>.

Critical ethnographers often recommend collaboration not only between researchers and participants but also between researchers and fellow researchers, and researchers and the institutions being researched. First, engaging in collaborative research with participants is understood as “a means of contesting the hierarchical relationship between “researcher” and “informants,” indeed rendering such distinctions somewhat arbitrary as both take on the role of researching and informing” (Horner 2004: 16). Secondly, collaboration appears to be methodologically consistent with the project’s poststructuralist belief in the social construction of knowledge and identity (see Chapter 2): “If we are serious about social construction of knowledge, it is important to authorize and practice collaborative methods for analysing and reporting our research as well as for collecting it” (Dautermann 1996: 257). A detailed account of how collaboration with the participants and the ESOL College was a key principle of the project will be discussed throughout the chapter.

Ethnographic research methods are growing in popularity within Applied Linguistics (Blackledge 2000; Canagarajah 1993; 2012; Danjo 2015; Giroir 2011; Goldstein 1996; Hall 2008; Rampton 2007; Toohey 2000). Researchers have made use of a variety of ethnographic research tools such as classroom observation, interviews, diaries, shadowing, researcher diaries, collections of background information, and photo narratives, some of which I will draw on in this study.

### **3.1.2. Discourse analysis (DA)**

Definitions of discourse are abundant in the field. According to Schiffrin et al. (2001: 1), however, all definitions fall into the three main categories: “(1) anything beyond the sentence, (2) language use, and (3) a broader range of social practice that includes nonlinguistic and nonspecific instances of language”. The last element appears to be important as it points out the “exhaustiveness” of discourse (Kress 1989) and its interrelationship with the social reality. Hence, my focus is not on the language itself as words and sentences; instead, “language used to do something and mean something,

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<sup>11</sup> With the aim of developing reflexive accounts of their ethnographic research, Gilmore and Kenny (2015) used the pair interview approach which involved interviewing each other using semi-structured questioning.

language produced and interpreted in a real-world context” (Cameron 2001: 13). Language is a site in which social meanings are formed and reproduced and social identities are (re)negotiated (see Chapter 2) (Tonkiss 2012). I primarily used discourses as signposts to help me organise the social and identity practices in the project: “Discourses delimit the range of possible practices under their authority and organize how these practices are realized in time and space. As such, a discourse is a particular way of organising meaning-making practices” (Norton 2000: 14).

Further, I employed Critical DA as I am concerned with how inequitable relations of power on the intra- and inter-level impacted Syrian learners’ investment in learning English. CDA sees language as an instrument through which power is exercised and reproduced within social relations and institutions (Tonkiss 2012). Discourses must be understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable, social, economic and political processes.

To illustrate the organising and exhaustive nature of discourses, take as an example one recurrent discourse which determined how some Syrian learners were positioned in different contexts, the discourse of ‘*the cleaner*’. This discourse included the learners’ sarcastic smiles, jokes, and angry comments whenever positioned as cleaners, their teachers’ well-intentioned focus on cleaning jobs, some learners’ understanding of the teachers’ good intentions, and the teachers’ and manager’ stances which were socially constructed. It also reached out to include how some learners thought of themselves when positioned as cleaners, how this discourse interrelated with broader social factors such as gender (some women liked the cleaning-focused lessons; see Chapter 7), culture and otherness, whether the learners accepted their positioning or resisted and set up a “counter-discourse” (Terdiman 1985), and how all this impacted the processes of English learning and identity negotiation.

This understanding of DA, which is consistent with poststructuralist theories of language identified in Chapter 2, fits well with my project. DA has been taken up increasingly to study identity and positioning in Applied Linguistics (Chang 2016; Giroir 2011; Kayi-Aydar 2012; McKay and Wong 1996; Norton 2000; Omoniyi 2011). A legitimate question arises here: why has DA been adopted to study identity? Pavlenko (2002) explains the tight connection between discourses and identities: “Identities are seen as constructed by and in discourses that supply the terms by which identities are expressed (identity performance) and assign differential values to different identities or subject positions” (p.284). As discussed in Chapter 2, language is constitutive of and constituted by our identities. The discourses we produce are shaped by our multiple identities while at the same time discourses shape and colour our multiple identities. Not only are identities

constructed through discourses, but also social categories and new meanings and knowledge.

### **3.2. Research process**

So far, I have presented the theoretical framework on which the project methodology was based. I now outline how this translated into research process.

#### **3.2.1. October 2016 to January 2017: negotiating access**

In October 2016, with the assistance of my supervisors, I started searching for a context for the project. A letter was sent to 4 ESOL institutions in the North East of England. The summary of the letter is that I would volunteer, and the ESOL institution would make use of my language and teaching skills. In the longer term, I would be looking to build links with the institution and its learners in order to undertake my PhD project. Out of the 4 institutions, only Northeast College<sup>12</sup> responded. Following a meeting with the college manager, I was given the initial go-ahead. I was reminded to help all learners from all nationalities and to conduct the interviews outside the college so that other student groups would not feel left out. As soon as the ethics approval came through, I was ready to recruit teachers and learners. However, it was the Syrian learners' willingness and readiness to participate that I was concerned about.

I hoped to volunteer prior to data collection for many reasons. Firstly, I needed to be in a role that would give me a legitimate reason to have substantial and direct contact with teachers and learners in the classrooms. This would be helpful for my acceptability to, and trust-building with, potential participants, particularly with the Syrians considering the politically complex conditions they and I came from. Further, volunteering was an ideal excuse to acquire an insider perspective of the dynamics and complexities of ESOL classes in order to refine my methodological considerations and identify what was viable to be researched in this language learning context. Finally, my volunteer role increased my opportunities of gaining the permission of Northeast College to conduct my project given the big number of Arabic ESOL learners in the college. The role of a researcher volunteer has been taken up by many researchers in Anthropology and organisational ethnography (Garthwaite 2016; Lawton 2000) and in Applied Linguistics (Danjo 2015).

#### **3.2.2. ESOL College and participants**

Before proceeding to reflect on my volunteering experience, I should first introduce the college, ESOL classes and the participants to the reader. The participants will be

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<sup>12</sup> All the names used throughout the study, including the names of research locations, participants and organisations are pseudonyms.

introduced at this stage because in the sections of volunteering and gaining access, some of the participants' names and quotations will be included. It is worth noting that the following participant summaries and perspectives emerged from their own accounts.

### **Northeast College**

Northeast College is part of an adult and community learning provider which runs, along with ESOL, an extensive range of apprenticeships and study programs for young people, disabled people, people with learning difficulties, family learning, with a vast choice of subjects across the curriculum from Languages, ICT, to Arts. It is located in a deprived area in the North East of England. It is noteworthy to mention that the wider setting in which the project was conducted, the North East of England, is known to be a white locality with a very low share of the UK's total foreign-born population, 1.6% (Rienzo and Vargas-silva 2017). This means that people in the North East are not used to or experienced in dealing with the increasing number of refugees.

Under the UK government's work and pensions mandated referral system, any individual who does not meet the Jobcentre's English language requirement is compelled to take English lessons and will lose their Jobseekers' Allowance (JSA) for non-attendance. This was the process through which Syrian refugees were sent to ESOL institutions. In the academic year (2016-2017), Northeast College had around 700 ESOL learners, 110 of whom were Syrians (see Table 2 below). 51% of its learners were in receipt of JSA. If learners were on benefits, their ESOL fees were paid by central government. If learners worked part-time, however, they had to pay 50% of their ESOL fees, which was a challenge to both learners and Northeast College. After being sent by the Jobcentre to Northeast College, learners take an initial assessment to be placed at the right language level. The academic year runs from mid-September to mid-July.

**Table 2. Nationality and percentage of ESOL learners in Northeast College in 2016/2017**

<b>Nationality</b>	<b>September</b>	<b>November</b>	<b>February</b>	<b>May</b>	<b>Aug 17</b>
Syrian	17%	14%	18%	22%	10%
Iranian	11%	18%	14%	20%	10%
Sudanese	10%	13%	10%	13%	7%
Bangladeshi	10%	14%	12%	16%	9%
Eritrean	8%	7%	6%	7%	5%
Chinese	6%	5%	4%	5%	3%
Pakistani	5%	11%	8%	7%	5%

The college had a crèche, a kitchen, a computer room, a big hall for events and markets, and a diverse café which combined learners from a variety of programmes and

countries. It also included a prayer room which was not only a place to pray and read the Quran, but also a unifying Islamic space where learners got to know one another. The college was strongly committed to safeguarding and to practices that protected young people and vulnerable adults from abuse, and it was against discriminating people because of their age, gender, religion, race or disability. The college ran a variety of events and markets such as a Christmas Market, Summer Market, and the Refugee Day event. The markets had stalls run by learners to celebrate diversity and help learners set up their own businesses and become self-employed. The college also had a registered charity, WELT<sup>13</sup>, which helped ESOL learners find work and volunteering opportunities. We shall see in Chapter 6 to what extent WELT was helpful to the Syrian learners.

### **ESOL classes**

The ESOL class levels run by Northeast College were Pre-entry, Entry 1 (A1, in the terminology of the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR)), Entry 2 (A2), Entry 3 (B1), Level 1 (B2), and Level 2 (C1). I volunteered and collected data in 3 classes: Pre-entry, Entry 1, and Entry 2. ESOL classes focused on the four skills - speaking, listening, reading, and writing - and addressed more than just the need for language, also supporting the whole experience of living among communities which were outside of learners' experience and to which they did not feel part. Enabling learners to be independent and confident were among the ultimate goals teachers aimed at. Learners went to ESOL classes from Monday to Thursday for two and a half hours, either in the morning or afternoon. There were 20 learners on average in each class. The curriculum was organised thematically and covered different themes such as transportation, employment, housing, jobs, health, community resources, and hobbies. In Entry 1 and Entry 2, there was an emphasis on giving learners information and vocabulary which would help them pass the exam ("exam-driven") whereas Pre-entry was work-driven or "Jobcentre-driven".

Lessons generally started with warming up and eliciting information from learners before introducing and explaining the new topic or grammar rule by teachers. This was followed by activities conducted individually, in pairs, or groups. Activities were designed to offer learners multiple opportunities to build vocabulary, improve pronunciation and listening comprehension and to interact in English. Developing phonological awareness, grammar and spelling were also important. The higher the level was, the less teachers talked. None of the teachers used a specific textbook; rather, they distributed handouts derived from different sources or designed by themselves. In Entry 1 and Entry 2, female and male learners worked together whereas in Pre-entry female and male students

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<sup>13</sup> A pseudonym for Work, Education, Learning, Training.

preferred to work separately. The conditions in all the classes I observed were comfortable and the relationship between the learners and the teachers was based on mutual respect and appreciation. Although there was no single approach or method implemented in the classrooms, a great deal of the practices could be categorised under the weak version of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), i.e. “learning to use English” (Howatt 1984: 279) rather than, for example, a strong version of CLT (“using English to learn it”) or approaches such as grammar-translation, audiolingualism, and other language teaching methods.

On Friday mornings, learners on JSA attended a job search session. The aim was to teach learners how to conduct job searches and find key information in job advertisements. Because most learners lacked ICT skills, teachers searched for jobs and printed off some jobs’ details, a great number of which were positions for cleaners. From these handouts, learners selected 5 jobs and filled out a form<sup>14</sup>. Pre-entry learners, however, just copied 5 jobs provided by the teacher. Learners were supposed to follow this up by contacting the people who advertised the jobs. We shall see in Chapter 7 how effective this approach was in practice.

To move up to higher levels, learners had to pass four exams in reading, writing, listening and speaking. In Pre-entry, teachers’ evaluation of learners’ performance determined if the student was ready to move up to Entry 1. ESOL classes were housed on the first floor of the institution building. Each class had four tables, a computer, a smart board, a normal board with markers to write on, a cupboard, and 20 chairs (see Figure 1 below). On the walls of the classroom were 1) language posters produced by learners, 2) safeguarding and prevention posters (see Figure 2 below), and 3) posters about safety and job search. It was easy to notice that the majority of ESOL learners were Muslims as can be concluded from Table 2. In the Pre-entry and Entry 1 classes that I observed, all learners were Muslim except for two Christian learners in Entry1.

### **The Northeast College manager and ESOL teacher participants**

#### **Toby**

Toby was the manager of ESOL provision in the college. He had a degree in Linguistics and a level seven qualification for teaching English. He had taught English in Indonesia and Russia and ESOL in England. His parents were not English, and he came to the UK 17 years ago. He was bilingual and could speak French and a little bit of Dutch. When asked if his non-English identity shapes his relationship with ESOL learners and college management, he said:

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<sup>14</sup> For an example of this form, please go to Appendix 1.

There's a lot of inequality in my [home] country so I grew up of a lot of inequality around me...I'm very very conscious of that...it's very important to treat people right...and I think the other thing is maybe just like the refugees or the ESOL students...I am also a foreigner here and that shapes very much...I can understand how people look at England because I look at England like that too...I think I understand better than others what it's like to be as a foreigner...I don't think you ever become a completely English...

(interview, 06/07/17)

Toby was extremely understanding and sympathetic with ESOL learners. All learners I met and talked with liked and respected him. Teachers occasionally spoke of him as "very patient" and even "soft" with learners, referring to his ability to make students comfortable.

### **ESOL teacher participants**

#### **Mary**

In her late fifties, Mary was the ESOL teacher of the Pre-entry level. She had lived with her husband and two children in China for 16 years. As she notes, her experience of being bi-lingual and bi-cultural informed her teaching and understanding of:

the dilemma and the problems that people face entering a new culture...I think I can empathise with a lot of learners from that point of view...

(interview, 02/06/17)

She trained as an ESOL teacher 6 years ago. All Syrian participants in her class expressed strong feelings of respect and admiration for what they saw as her humble and generous spirit. In the breaktime, she shared homemade sweets and coffee with learners and helped them with whatever she could: making calls and appointments, reading post, filling out forms and listening to their problems. The classroom atmosphere was very comfortable which Mary described as "a bit of playground not very academic". Because of the learners' beginner language level, Mary often used body language and pictures to communicate meaning. She had great talent to make learners laugh and learn at the same time. All the regular learners in the class were Muslims, mainly from Syria and Sudan. Mary attended social gatherings with her female learners every other Friday, which seemed to have a positive impact on her relationship with the whole class (see Chapter 7).

#### **Hazel**

Hazel was the ESOL teacher of Entry 1. Approaching 60, she trained as an ESOL teacher 6 years ago. Before joining ESOL, she spent ten years running a small charity which she had established in the North East of England to promote health and well-being among asylum seekers and refugees. She also conducted a project on the experiences of refugees in England and published a collection of their stories of loss and rebuilding. Her father was an ESOL teacher who came to the UK as an unaccompanied Jewish minor refugee, a fact which Hazel thinks shaped her relationship with her ESOL learners. For her, the ultimate goal of teaching ESOL was that "all my students eventually can live independently and operate outside of the classroom and understand and be understood",

Figure 1. A picture of the Entry 2 classroom, taken from the front of the class (07/07/17)



Figure 2. Examples of posters in the ESOL classrooms and in Northeast College



which would certainly help with their integration and reduce their vulnerability (interview, 28/06/17). She was very much respected and loved by her learners and admired by her colleagues. Although being understanding and sympathetic with learners, Hazel was serious about the classroom rules such as being on time, respecting each other, not using mobile phones in the classroom, and doing homework.

### **Gemma**

Gemma, the ESOL teacher of Entry 2, had a degree in French, an MA in Archaeology, and a PGCE with a specialism in English Language and Literacy. She spoke French and German. On her decision to join ESOL, she said:

I had been a manager of a bookshop for years and I'm really interested in that side of adult literacy and as my family background my grandparents who are refugees from Vienna they're Jewish refugees and I know their situation when they came over. They were told they had to speak English but there were no English classes...so they had to learn with friends...that always really interested me...I thought yeah this is what I'm going to do.

(interview, 03/07/17)

The classroom atmosphere was warm and relaxed, and humour was injected by Gemma as well as by the learners. Gemma replaced the main teacher who had gone on a maternity leave in March 2017. Jean, the only Syrian participant in the Entry 2 class, said about Gemma:

Entirely unlike the previous teacher...she works hard on delivering information and feels very happy when we ask her questions...it doesn't feel like she's a teacher...she's more like a friend...she keeps encouraging me.

(interview, 20/05/17)

### **Samira**

Samira was the ESOL teacher responsible for assessing newly-arrived ESOL learners so they would be placed at the right language level. I did not observe Samira's Entry 1 class as the two Syrian learners in her class did not agree to participate in this study. I did however interview Samira to gain some understanding of the assessment process and to enquire generally about the challenges that the ESOL learners and teachers faced. Samira had been working in Northeast College as an ESOL teacher for 20 years. She recounted that her parents were Arabs and that her father arrived in the UK at the age of 18. This, according to Samira, provided her with an "amazing insight" of how difficult life could be for refugees and their children. Many Syrian participants expressed strong feelings of admiration for Samira, seeing her as having a warm and humble attitude towards ESOL learners.

## **Syrian learner participants**

14 Syrian refugee language learners in Northeast College agreed to take part in the project (see below Table 3 for an overview of the learner participants.). The participants were of both genders, 8 females and 6 males, and between the ages of 19 to 49. Amongst them were three couples, a mother and her daughter, and an aunt and her niece who was her daughter-in-law as well. 13 Syrians came to the UK from Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq under the VPR scheme while one participant took the dangerous journey from Syria to Britain. The circumstances of those who came from Lebanon particularly were appalling. They were subjected to racism and had endured many indignities.

As discussed in Chapter 1, VPR prioritises women and children at risk, people in severe need of medical care, survivors of torture and violence, disabled people, vulnerable elderly people, and victims of sexual torture. It is not surprising, then, that all the learner participants were vulnerable and had health problems. The common vulnerability was that they were all survivors of war managing the disruption and unfamiliarity that came with living in a new culture with no language. They had come to Britain over the two years prior to the study and were housed mostly in deprived areas and some in problem houses. Each VPR family was allocated a support worker who was supposed to help them for the first year to cope with the demands of their new life<sup>15</sup>. The participants came from various cultural, socio-economic, and religious backgrounds and had different linguistic abilities. While 10 Syrians received 6 years of schooling or less, only 2 had university degrees. 10 participants did not know any English before arriving in Britain while 4 knew very little. None of the Syrian participants had the experience of living in a non-Arabic speaking country. All learner participants were Muslims and all women were hijabis. Table 3 below presents an overview of the learner participants.

### **Nadeema**

Born in Damascus in 1975, Nadeema was illiterate as she had needed to look after her mother who had been severely burnt with boiling oil. Also, literacy was not regarded a necessity for females in her village at that time. She was married and had five children; the oldest son was married to her niece, Leen (a participant in this project). Nadeema reported that she had been constantly ridiculed by her family-in-law because of her illiteracy, which appeared to contribute to her low self-esteem. Accompanied by her family and niece, Nadeema left Syria for Jordan in 2012 and moved to England in 2015. Nadeema noted that she was deeply unhappy about coming to England which was entirely her husband's decision. All her family members had good English and made quick

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<sup>15</sup> To have a look at the responsibilities of the support worker, please go to Appendix 2. This was a handout distributed in one of the meetings held by the Council when I was shadowing the Syrians.

Table 3. An overview of the Syrian learner participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Language level	Highest level of education	Mother tongue	Previous English knowledge	Previous work experience	Previous residency	Date of arrival
Nadeema	42	Female	Pre-entry	Illiterate	Arabic	None	Housewife	Jordan	2015
Leen	24	Female	Pre-entry	Primary school	Arabic	None	Housewife	Jordan	2015
Fatima	47	Female	Pre-entry	Primary school	Arabic	None	Housewife	Lebanon	2016
Mariam	19	Female	Entry 1	High school	Arabic	Basic	None	Lebanon	2016
Hassan	49	Male	Pre-entry	Primary school	Arabic	None	Grocery delivery driver/chef	Lebanon	2015
Hiba	44	Female	Pre-entry	Primary school	Arabic	None	Housewife	Lebanon	2015
Adham	31	Male	Pre-entry	Primary school	Arabic	None	Shawarma chef	Lebanon	2016
Rania	26	Female	Entry 1	Secondary school	Arabic	Little	Housewife	Lebanon	2016
Omar	40	Male	Pre-entry	Primary school	Arabic	None	Businessman/ Carpenter/builder	Jordan	2016
Samra	34	Female	Pre-entry	Primary school	Arabic	None	Housewife	Jordan	2016
Jean	35	Female	Entry 2	BA in Education	Kurdish	Basic	school teacher	Iraqi Kurdistan	2016
Waad	47	Male	Entry 1	BA in Arabic Literature	Arabic	Little	School teacher	Syria	2016
Amaan	28	Male	Entry 1	Primary school	Arabic	None	Pastry chef	Lebanon	2016
Sami	32	Male	Entry 1	Primary school	Arabic	None	Businessman	Lebanon	2016

progress with learning English. Although she was not a shy person, she was quiet in the classroom and reported being bullied in the ESOL classroom. We shall examine later how her illiteracy and social positioning interacted with her investment in learning English.

### **Leen**

Born in Damascus, Leen finished primary school and got married at 22. At 25, the time of the project, she had three children. Like her aunt, she opposed the idea of coming to England as she felt concerned about bringing up her children in a non-Muslim country and not being able to visit her family in Jordan. She often expressed how lonely and isolated she was feeling. Her husband, a fluent speaker of English, found employment 6 months after arriving in England and became very busy. I was impressed by Leen's intelligence and determination to learn English despite her responsibilities as a young mother of three children. In the classroom, Leen was attentive, but sometimes chatty and got distracted by her mobile phone. She indicated that she felt confident to speak English and aspired to be a hairdresser in the future.

### **Fatima**

Fatima was born in 1970 in Damascus where she finished primary school. She had to leave school to look after her siblings after her father had died. Fatima's seven siblings and relatives were all educated, which seemed to undermine her. She was married to an educated man and had three children. Her husband and elder son, aged 15 then, had been arrested in Syria, and her son lost some of his hearing while being tortured. Her husband developed a chronic brain disease after he had seen many of his friends beheaded. The family came to England in 2016 after living in Lebanon for 2 years. All Fatima's family members, including her daughter Mariam (a participant in this project), were good speakers of English. She was very happy about coming to England and hoped to become an independent woman, go to university and find employment.

### **Mariam**

At 19, Mariam was the youngest participant. She finished high school in Lebanon and was optimistic about her future in Britain. She was placed in Entry 1 with her father in the same class so she could look after him. Most of the class were Syrian men and there was constant tension between the teacher<sup>16</sup> and the students. Mariam was greatly motivated to learn English and hoped to study at university. She considered the lack of opportunities to interact with British people as the main barrier to improving her English. By her own account, she was the most fluent speaker of English in the house and she jokingly described herself as "the executive manager". Being the only person in the family required

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<sup>16</sup> I did not observe any of Mariam's lessons because her teacher did not agree to participate in the project. Everything mentioned and discussed about Mariam's classroom will be from her own perspective.

to work by the Jobcentre, she frequently complained about the constant pressure on her to find employment.

### **Hassan**

At 49, Hassan was the oldest learner in the Pre-entry class and in the Syrian participant cohort. He was born in Daraa and had received primary level education. Struggling financially, he had worked in several Arab countries even before the revolution started in Syria. He came to England in 2015 with his wife, Hiba, and five children after living in Lebanon for 3 years. Contrary to his experiences of humiliation and poor treatment in Arab countries before arriving in the UK, Hassan reported that he felt highly valued in England. He was very attentive in the classroom and willing to learn, but he never participated voluntarily. All his children picked up the language quickly. He actively searched for jobs, but he remarked that he was constantly refused work because of his language level and age, which put a great deal of pressure on him. Hassan's family was luckily allocated a British woman volunteer who visited them weekly to introduce them to British ways of life and culture<sup>17</sup>.

### **Hiba**

Hiba was born in 1973 in Daraa where she finished primary school. She was not enthusiastic about coming to England because she was concerned that her relationship with her children would be ruined in a European non-Muslim culture. However, it did not take her long to change her whole attitude about England which she thought was far more welcoming and hospitable than Arab countries. Hiba noted the difficulties she was experiencing in learning English because of the burden of domestic responsibilities which she placed as a high priority. Unlike Hassan, she was a confident learner who participated regularly in the class and took every opportunity to interact in English in the wider society within the limits of her English.

### **Adham**

Adham was a 31-year-old Syrian who reported having received 6 years of schooling. He often missed school, which resulted in his low-literacy in Arabic. He came to England with his wife, Rania, and three children in 2016. They escaped from Syria to Lebanon in 2012 after two major massacres had happened in Damascus where they lived. As a chef, he owned his own restaurant in Syria for ten years. Although fun-loving and dynamic, classroom observation showed that he initially seemed anxious and lost in the Pre-entry classroom. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, his low-literacy in Arabic appeared to have an impact on his learning of English. Thus, he started to depend on Rania, whose English

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<sup>17</sup> Despite the continuous complaints made by Syrian refugees during the meetings held by the Council about the social isolation, Hassan's family was the only family who was listened to and allocated a volunteer.

was more advanced than his, to run the household and preserve the continuity of the family life. By his own account, he felt undignified when interacting with English people as he was unable to express himself. He aimed to have his own restaurant and settle down in England which he thought was welcoming and friendly.

### **Rania**

In her mid-twenties, Rania was born in Damascus where she finished secondary school. Her father had been arrested 6 years ago and she had heard nothing about him since then. Having little knowledge of English, she was placed in Entry 1. Rania was shy and quiet inside and outside the language classroom. Because of Adham's limited English, Rania commented that she did most of the organisation of the house and the paperwork of settling into a new country. She was generally pleased about living in England, yet she reported feeling lonely, isolated and homesick. She hoped that some day she would go back to Syria.

### **Omar**

Omar was born in Damascus in 1977 and received 6 years of schooling. He reported having a great deal of work experience in Syria and his previous jobs as a plumber, an electrician, a builder, a carpenter and a businessman who owned a chain of carpentry shops provided him with plenty of economic and social capital. He indicated that he had enjoyed a very high standard of living in Syria. He was married to Samra and they had 3 boys and a girl who suffered from hearing loss caused by a tank blast in Syria. In 2012, the family fled to Jordan after Omar had been arrested and tortured harshly. Omar was very proud of his Muslim identity which he asserted on many occasions throughout the project. As we shall see in the following chapter, not only was he a very attentive learner, but also the most vocal student in the Pre-entry class. Unable to find employment because of his limited English, he was under a great deal of emotional stress. In the future, he hoped to return to Syria or settle down in an Arab country.

### **Samra**

Samra was a 33-year-old woman who came to England with Omar and her children, albeit reluctantly. She reported that coming to the UK was utterly Omar's decision. She stated that not being able to visit her family in Jordan made life in England unbearable. It was Omar who took over the public tasks and did most of the organisation of the family. By her own account, she was always accompanied by Omar and they were in the same Pre-entry class. In the class, Samra was a confident learner who participated regularly. Like Omar, England was not the country where she hoped to stay permanently.

## **Jean<sup>18</sup>**

Jean was a 35-year-old Kurdish woman who came to England with her husband, Ali, and two children in 2016. Before arriving in England, the family spent 3 years in Iraqi Kurdistan where Ali had a kidney transplant. In Syria, Jean had been a primary school teacher for 15 years and Ali was an English teacher. Jean came from a wealthy family and received a very good university education. She felt at home in England and was very optimistic about her future. She found employment as an Arabic teacher and Ali as a support worker. She was an extremely studious and enthusiastic language learner with a great sense of humour. Although she had little knowledge of English, in 2 years she moved from Pre-entry, to Entry 1, Entry 2, Entry 3, to finally Level 1. When asked about Jean, her teacher, Gemma, replied:

She's really invested...I know she does self-study at home because she has an aim...she wants to work as a teacher in the UK. Because of this, she has the perfect reason so she's really focused...she's really motivated...

(interview, 03/07/17)

## **Ward**

Born in Daraa in 1970, Ward had a BA in Arabic literature. He taught Arabic for 15 years and worked as a calligrapher and a farmhand to support his poor family. He arrived in the UK in 2016 after taking a dangerous journey from Syria to Britain, a journey that he described as "suicidal". His wife and five children were reunited with him in 2017. When I met Ward, I was struck by his vast knowledge and thirst for learning. He liked poetry, playing sports and was fond of doing crossword puzzles. He was a confident and hardworking language learner who was proud of his cultural and religious identity and did a great amount of independent learning. Having little English, he was placed in Entry 1 and then moved up to Entry 2.

## **Amaan**

Approaching 30, Amaan was born in Homs and owned his own shop as a pastry chef at the age of 16. In 2012, Amaan was arrested and subjected to savage torture. Two months later, he won his freedom, but, as he reported, his mind was never free. He fled with his parents to Lebanon where he was the bread winner and the carer to his sick parents. He was extremely hopeful about coming to England. He came to England with his parents, wife and two children in 2016. He was a highly enthusiastic language learner who was desperate to talk with British people and thought that lacking the opportunities to speak and mingle with English people was the main obstacle to learn English. In one year, he progressed from Pre-entry, to Entry 1 and then to Entry 2. He hoped to have his own restaurant in the future and live with "dignity".

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<sup>18</sup> Jean is a Kurdish name chosen by the participant.

## Sami

In his mid-thirties, Sami was born in Damascus and attended primary school. He came to England in 2016 with his wife, two children, and his two younger brothers and mother. His father remained in Syria, which was worrying to the whole family. Sami stressed that the family enjoyed an opulent lifestyle and a high social class in Syria. In 2012, the family escaped to Lebanon after Sami and his two brothers had been arrested. Sami set up a profitable business in Lebanon and he was well-liked by his Lebanese friends who called him “the boss”. He was cautiously pessimistic about coming to the UK as he was worried about losing his social class capital. He was placed in Entry 1 and so were his brothers, but in a different class, and by the end of the academic year he was moved up into Entry 2. He was a confident man with a strong sense of self-worth.

Having presented Northeast College and the participants, I now move on to reflect on my volunteering experience and the complexity of building trust with Syrian language learners.

### 3.2.3. January to March 2017: getting in and volunteering

Following a meeting with Mary, the Pre-entry teacher, I started volunteering in Northeast College in January 2017. Mary put me in touch with 4 ESOL teachers teaching higher levels in the college. I hoped to encounter a more diverse group of Syrian learners to see if there were any differences in how learners of different language levels and different educational backgrounds approached language learning and adjusted to a new culture. Three teachers out of four agreed to have me as a volunteer after reading a summary of the project<sup>19</sup>, while Mariam’s teacher, Amber, who had the highest number of Syrians, declined. She was concerned that my presence in the classroom would encourage Syrians to speak more Arabic. I ended up volunteering in 4 ESOL classes, but most frequently in the Pre-entry class (see Table 4 below).

**Table 4. ESOL classes I initially volunteered in**

<b>Class</b>	<b>Number of Syrians in class</b>	<b>Teacher name</b>	<b>Class time</b>
Pre-entry	8	Mary	1:00 pm - 3:30pm
Entry 1	4	Hazel	9:30 am -12:00 pm
Entry 1	2	Samira	1:00 pm - 3:30 pm
Entry 2	3	Gemma	9:30 am -12:00 pm

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<sup>19</sup> A copy of the project summary is attached in Appendix 3.

Teachers introduced me to the learners as a volunteer and as a PhD student. How and what I offered varied considerably from one class to another due to the class level, the number of Arabic learners, teaching style, and how comfortable the classroom atmosphere was. My volunteering work included helping learners when engaged in practice activities and pair/group work. Learners who were illiterate in Arabic, vulnerable or had learning difficulties were the learners who received the most help and support from me. Other volunteering tasks included interpreting inside and outside Northeast College, clarifying some cultural and religious issues to teachers, helping with exams, and helping learners around the college within the range of my capability. On average, I volunteered three days a week and some other days if I was needed from late-January to late-March prior to collecting data.

#### **3.2.4. From an outsider to insider: building trust**

As Gable (2014) argues rapport “is the tool that allows you to acquire ‘knowledge’...Indeed, one would not be wrong to say that productive ethnography is almost always portrayed as entailing rapport or empathy, usually both” (p.241). Thus, volunteering was the tool through which I hoped to build trust with the Syrian learners and better appreciate and understand their experiences.

Prior to volunteering, I fully realised that my being a Muslim Syrian woman would not necessarily make me readily an insider in the Syrian community in Northeast College. Although I shared a number of similarities with the Syrians such as religion, history, culture, language, settlement in England, and being survivors of war, we were different in many ways which contributed to positioning me initially as an outsider. Additionally and more importantly, given the politically complex environment the Syrians and I came from and the difficult circumstances we both experienced, it was inevitably hard for the Syrians, including myself as the researcher, to start from the basis of trust as this translated<sup>20</sup> entry from my research diary (RD; to be discussed in more detail later) shows:

Some are treating me with a bit of suspicion...it's no surprise to me, though. I can understand what they've been through and I probably have more or less the same feelings. I'm being careful with them...I find it difficult to mingle with them in the breaktime. I really do like helping learners and being around Syrians but I feel umm stranger is not the word...uncomfortable or cautious maybe being in a new setting. Some conversations would dry up when I show up. Besides, I'm an object of curiosity to them...a single Syrian woman who is not a refugee, with no family, and living with an English family...I think it's time what we all need...

(07/02/17)

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<sup>20</sup> All the researcher's diaries and the learner participants' data are translated from Arabic into English.

At this stage, my identity as a researcher was not disclosed to the learners because I thought this would further complicate the process of trust development. Indeed, it was through self-reflexivity and my diary that I came to realise that trust and insecurity were issues to me as much as they were to Syrian learners. Self-reflexivity was accompanied by having insightful, non-judgmental conversations with fellow researchers and ESOL teachers in Northeast College. Interactions with learners themselves also further enriched the process of reflexivity and analysis and made me more aware of what was going on.

My own experiences of trauma in Syria and my own journey from Syria to the UK added to my own rather reserved personality. In terms of this study, however, this was problematic as noted by Adham:

We know nothing about you apart from your academic and professional identity.

(RD, 28/02/17)

Having realised that learners were concerned about who I was rather than what I wanted to do, I made the decision to open up more about myself and take the initiative and mingle more with them. As I started to be more open, learners began to ask more questions and we both started to relax somewhat. This quite early example illustrates that self-reflexivity is not an individual endeavour of the alone researcher. Rather, it is a “collective practice” and a collaborative effort of people in the research context as well as people in academia. This is what researchers refer to as “collective research” where the “research subject, is inescapably involved in the co-construction of meaning during the process” (Gilmore and Kenny 2015: 59). It is also important to stress here that, at this stage, my role as a classroom assistant tremendously helped with my acceptability and approachability in the college. Learners, particularly in Pre-entry class, were very appreciative of my help:

When Amina is in the classroom we understand everything, but when she’s absent we struggle.

(Nadeema, shadowing<sup>21</sup>, 11/05/17)

I had also built up a very good relationship with the manager and teachers who appreciated my help:

I was happy to be cc’ed today in an email from Mary to Toby. Mary said that I’ve been ‘a very helpful assistant’ and Toby was really pleased all is going well.

(RD, 20/02/17)

Further, the social events held at Northeast College had a positive impact on the relationship between the Syrians and myself. We had the opportunity to mingle in an informal and relaxed atmosphere. Encouraged by these social events, some Syrian women decided to meet every other week and Mary and I were invited. Mary apologised

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<sup>21</sup> Shadowing will be discussed later.

and I was reluctant as social gatherings seemed overwhelming to me at that time, early in the project. However, as Arber (2006) argues “the researcher requires a degree of self-management and, sometimes, emotional labour to fit into the research setting, manage relationships and deal with untoward situations with some skill” (p.156). Thus, I accepted the invitation and Mary was encouraged, I think, by my attendance and joined in later social gatherings. It was made clear by the Syrian women that they needed my interpretation skills in these social gatherings which were immensely constructive in building rapport not only between the Syrian women, Mary and myself but also among the Syrian women themselves and between Syrian and non-Syrian women. Interestingly, this shows the inevitable impact an ethnographer’s presence has on the research context and participants (Emerson et al. 2011).

Finally, building trust with the Syrians cannot be adequately discussed without talking about the role of our shared religion. My own religious identity was represented in the college through several ways: I wore/wear a scarf, I performed prayers with learners, I sometimes observed voluntary fasting and I greeted with the universal Islamic greeting “Assalamualaikum”. Many Syrian learners made positive comments about the way I practised my religion. The role of religion in building trust with *some* learners was further confirmed after conducting the final interview with Amaan:

When I saw your dad’s picture on WhatsApp...growing a long beard and he looks like Sheikh<sup>22</sup>, I was very much relieved.

(RD, 04/10/17)

However, it is noteworthy to point out that I was just being myself and I did not do anything that I would not normally do. The more time I spent volunteering, the more I became accepted as an insider. By the end of March, I was given ethical approval for the study from Northumbria University, and I thought it was now the time to get the project underway.

I would like to conclude this section with two comments. Firstly, not only was volunteering helpful with building trust but also it helped me realise the complexities of ESOL classes and the gap between my naïve methodological assumptions about doing research and what was practically viable with these learners. I began to realise that the project could prove to be much more complex and challenging than I had expected. Secondly, trust development was a continuous, cumulative, and two-way process from the very first day of volunteering until the last day of the project. It was something that participants and I co-worked on all the way through the research.

I have provided so far a discussion of (1) the theoretical perspectives of the project methodology, (2) an overview of Northeast College and the participants, and (3) the

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<sup>22</sup> Although the term can have different meanings, in this context it is used religiously and means a person who is knowledgeable about Islam and sometimes educates people about its rules.

process of trust development. I now turn to take the reader on a narrative journey which describes how I recruited the participants, the “messiness” of collecting data and the twists and turns which shaped the project methodology.

### **3.2.5. Recruiting participants and maintaining ethical standards**

Following discussions with Northeast College staff, I approached 20 Syrian learners in 5 ESOL classes<sup>23</sup>. ESOL classes were approached at different dates because of exams and the level of trust achieved. In some classes trust took longer to be built than in others. I explained about the project in detail and what it took to participate, and then distributed written consent forms in Arabic<sup>24</sup>. I asked the learners to take the form home, think about it and discuss it with their families. I emphasised several times that participation was voluntary and anonymous, and they could withdraw at any time without giving any reason. I also stressed that, regardless of their decision, I was going to keep helping all learners. I encouraged them to call me if they had any questions because I was aware that Nadeema was illiterate and Adham was low literate, but they chose not to reveal that to their classmates. I did not want to single them out or marginalise them by not giving them written forms in front of the other Syrians or even disclose that I knew. Initially, 12 agreed to take part, while 8 expressed their unwillingness. However, following initial scepticism and refusal, two Syrian learners, Hassan and Hiba, changed their mind and opted to participate in the project after Hassan had done more questioning about what it meant to agree to take part. Most learners who volunteered to participate expressed their agreement orally and did not bring the consent forms back. Their agreement was later recorded at the beginning of the initial interviews. Table 5 gives the distribution of the learners who did not agree to participate across classes and their reasons even though I did not ask for any justification. This list of reasons is just further evidence of why volunteering was crucial and why that much space in this chapter was allocated to reflect on trust-building.

The idea of participating in research in itself was something very new to many Syrians and recording their voices appeared to be threatening to some. This could be understood considering the fact that most of the Syrians I approached were not educated and few were illiterate or low literate. In summary, as Table 6 below shows, 14 Syrian learners, 8 females and 6 males, generously volunteered to participate. 4 ESOL teachers and the manager agreed to be interviewed and audio-recorded after they had been invited. While approaching the Syrians, I intended to ensure as diverse a cohort of participants as possible, diversity that would enrich the data. I included males and females, VPR and non-

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<sup>23</sup> Even though Amber did not agree to take part in the project, I approached three learners in her class. I would not be able to observe them, but I still could interview them and invite them to write diaries.

<sup>24</sup> Please find the Arabic copy of the consent form and the English alternative attached in Appendices 4 and 5 respectively.

VPR Syrians, educated and illiterate people, Syrians of different ages and at different English levels, participants who were members of the same family grouping and those that were not, and finally those who appeared to be enthusiastic about coming to the UK and those who were less enthusiastic. This was a further benefit of volunteering as it provided an opportunity to get to know the Syrians prior to approaching them.

**Table 5. Reasons provided by the Syrians for not participating**

<b>Class level/teacher</b>	<b>Learners</b>	<b>Reasons</b>
<b>Pre-entry/Mary</b>	<b>Hassan and Hiba (couple)</b>	They, Hassan particularly, were skeptical about my identity and what I wanted to do. They were scared that participation would get them into trouble.
<b>Entry 1/Samira</b>	<b>Ahmad and Ayman</b> The only Syrians in Samira's class.	Ahmad was worried that my studentship was sponsored by the Syrian government and thus I was a supporter of the regime.  Ayman did not give any reason, but the way he behaved showed that he might have had the same worry as Ahmad.
<b>Entry 1/Amber</b>	<b>Mohammed and Basset</b> Mohammed's wife and daughter (Fatima and Mariam) agreed to participate.  Basset's wife and mother (Leen and Nadeema) agreed to take part in the project.	Mohammed did not like the idea of keeping diaries and said it was not a cultural thing.  Basset was a busy dad who worked part-time.
<b>Entry 2/ Gemma</b>	<b>Khaled and Abdul</b> Both are graduates of university.	They worked part-time and had no time to participate.

**Table 6. The teacher and learner participants**

<b>ESOL classrooms</b>	<b>Teacher name</b>	<b>Number of Syrian learners</b>	<b>Learner name</b>
Pre-entry	Mary	8	Omar, Samra, Fatima, Leen, Nadeema, Hiba, Hassan, and Adham
Entry 1	Hazel	4	Sami, Amaan, Waard, and Rania
Entry 2	Gemma	1	Jean

### **3.3. Getting the project underway: data collection**

This was a 14-month ethnographic project of 14 Syrian learners' experiences of language learning and identity (re)negotiation inside and outside the ESOL classroom. Data collection ran from February 2017 to April 2018. Data sources included interviews with learners, teachers and the manager, classroom observations, field notes, audio-recordings of classroom events, learner diaries, learner shadowing, researcher diaries, and a collection of documents (see Table 7 below). Collecting various sources of data allowed me to understand the multiple and complex aspects of the Syrians' negotiation of their identities. Further, "the multiple sources of data served as a means of triangulation, each a tool by which to clarify and corroborate findings that emerged from other data sources" (Giroir 2014b: 307). The following presents a detailed description of the process of data collection and decision-making over the period of 14 months.

#### **3.3.1. Classroom observation and field notes**

Gold (1958) outlines 4 modes through which observers can gather information according to their degree of involvement in the setting: as a complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant, and complete observer. Although there was often a mix of roles in the classrooms, I primarily adopted the participant-as-observer or what Alder and Alder (1998: 85) call "active membership role" in which researchers are "involved in the setting's central activities, assuming responsibilities that advance the group, but without fully committing themselves to members' values and goals". Classroom observation has been adopted by numerous scholars to understand how language learners (re)negotiate their identities and how that shapes the process of language learning (Canagarajah 1993; Ellwood 2009; Giroir 2011; Iddings and Katz 2007; Kayi-Aydar 2012; Sacchi 2014; Talmy 2004). The following questions, inspired by Kayi-Aydar (2012), Iddings and Katz (2007) and Giroir (2011), guided my observation and field notes:

- 1) Which learners, if any, represent power in the classroom? Who often answers the teacher's questions? Who participates voluntarily and who does not?
- 2) What can be concluded about each participant in the classroom?
- 3) To what extent are participants invested and comfortable in the classroom?
- 4) How do learners position themselves and other learners? How do they think they are positioned by other learners and their teachers?
- 5) Who prefers to work with whom? Who helps whom in the classroom?
- 6) What discourses are implied in the classroom?

**Table 7. A timeline and a description of the data provided**

<b>Methods</b>	<b>Data collection period</b>	<b>Data collected</b>
Classroom observations	February to July 2017	Fieldnotes on 69 lessons 172.5 hours of observation
First learner interviews	April to May 2017	Audio-taped and recorded interviews 14 interviews in total Average: 1.5 hours each
Learner written diaries (Jean and Mariam)	April 2017 to February 2018	24 written diaries (11 Mariam and 13 Jean)
Learner phone diaries (Omar, Samra, Adham, Rania, Nadeema, Leen, Mariam, Hiba, and Fatima)	May 2017 to April 2018	35 phone diaries in total 23.5 hours of phone diaries  Adham/7 diaries/ 4 hours Rania/3 diaries/ 1.5 hours Nadeema/1 diary/ half an hour Fatima/2 diaries/1 hour Omar and Samra/8 diaries/ 9 hours Leen/6 diaries/3.5 hours Mariam/7 diaries/3.5 hours Hiba/1 diary/ half an hour
Learner shadowing	February to December 2017	18 times of shadowing in total  4 social women gatherings 3 visits to the Jobcentre 4 women shopping 4 times around the college (reception and the cafe) 2 food hygiene courses 3 events host by the college 1 WELT organisation 2 meetings held by the Council
Learner final interviews	July to December 2017	Audio-taped and recorded interviews 14 interviews in total Average: 1:17 hours each
Manager and 4 ESOL teachers' interviews (initial and final)	June to December 2017	Audio-taped and recorded interviews 8 interviews in total
Documents	January to December 2017	classroom handouts, learners' notebooks, job search forms, papers sent to learners by the Jobcentre, and copies of handouts and leave behinds distributed to Syrians at events and meetings
Research diaries	January 2017 to February 2018	30 written diaries, 11 recorded supervision meetings, and 13 recorded diaries

Classroom observation started with the first day of volunteering and detailed notes were taken; these notes prompted some questions in the learners' initial interviews. Audio-recording in three ESOL classes started after the agreement of *all* learners had been obtained. Teachers were understandably protective of their learners:

If *one* learner did not agree to have recorders, then no recorders in the classroom.

(RD, Hazel, interview, 09/05/17)

Although all learners agreed on the use of audio-recorders, for the first two weeks every time I turned on the recorders I double-checked with learners. Different classes were observed for different periods of time as illustrated in Table 8. If I noticed or heard something interesting during observation, I would mark down the time in order to reflect on it later.

**Table 8. The ESOL classes being observed**

<b>Class level</b>	<b>Class time</b>	<b>Classroom observation period</b>	<b>Data collected</b>
Pre-entry	01:00-3:30	31 <sup>st</sup> January to 14 <sup>th</sup> July	Fieldnotes on 38 lessons 95 hours of observation
Entry 1	09:30-12:00	15 <sup>th</sup> March to 6 <sup>th</sup> July	Fieldnotes on 18 lessons 45 hours of observation
Entry 2	09:30-12:00	27 <sup>th</sup> March to 5 <sup>th</sup> July	Fieldnotes on 13 lessons 32.5 hours of observation

I often sat at the Syrian students' tables and tried to move between them as much as I needed. However, adopting the dual role of a researcher volunteer proved sometimes to be challenging and meant that occasionally I would not be mindful of my responsibilities as a researcher. I was observing classrooms which I was affecting by my presence and help. Evidently, I was "in there" in the context I was observing. However, the fact that there was an audio-recorder on each table in the classroom seemed to relieve some pressure on me and if I felt I missed something I would check with learners during their breaktime. Further, diaries proved to be useful in this respect as many learners reflected on their classroom learning experiences. Recordings were transferred and stored on the university server.

### **3.3.2. Initial learner interviews and lessons learnt**

Most categorisations identify three types of interviews in accordance with the degree of structure inherent in each: structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). Although the Syrian informants' viewpoints on a list of issues were desired, I was also interested in any emergent issues and ideas that would enrich the investigation.

Thus, semi-structured interviews seemed an appropriate option for the project. Interviews were a mix of more and less structured questions.

Semi-structured learner interviews were conducted at the beginning and end of the project, and they were audio-recorded. 14 initial learner interviews were held from early April to late May 2017. 11 interviews took place in the homes of the Syrians and three in Northumbria University. They lasted between 40 minutes to two and a half hours. The aims of the initial interviews were grouped under three main areas of enquiry<sup>25</sup>:

- a) to get to know the Syrians in terms of their immigration journey, their educational and professional backgrounds, how they were settling in, their initial impression of coming to England, and if they faced any discrimination
- b) to explore their language learning experiences inside and outside Northeast College, language contacts, investment in learning English, and their inspirations for the future
- c) to enquire about identity changes, if any, that the Syrians felt or experienced

Kayi-Aydar (2012) and Norton (2000) provided preliminary ideas to form the interview questions. Further, I asked about issues noticed in classes, such as why women and men worked separately, why some learners changed their seating, etc.

Some Syrians led the interview themselves through talking spontaneously about what impacted their language learning. For instance, Nadeema introduced herself and then talked for 20 minutes about how her illiteracy coloured her investment in learning English. I consciously let the participants lead the interviews because my thinking was that this would enable me to identify what was central for each learner, and it proved to be fruitful. Hence, the questions were more general, flexible and exploratory, and more like a conversation (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). I aimed to adhere to a policy of conducting *interviews* between participants and myself (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) “in a dialogical and ‘research-as-conversation’ manner” (Engstrom 2010: 47).

All the interviews were conducted in Arabic, which is considered one of the notable strengths of the project as learners and the researcher were able to elaborate and delve into quite complex issues. Giroir (2014b) acknowledged in her study of how three women (re) constructed their gender identities in migration contexts (see Chapter 2) that “one noteworthy limitation of the study is that the participants reported on their experiences in their second language” (p.307). Not only did I share the language with the Syrians, but also the culture, religion and the experiences of being displaced and trying to integrate in a new culture. This probably encouraged them to open up about issues I had doubted they

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<sup>25</sup> To have a look at the questions of the initial learner interviews, please go to Appendix 6.

would comment upon when speaking to people from other backgrounds. Three participants disclosed stories and details about their lives which, according to them, no one had ever known or heard of. To put it differently, had the project been conducted by another researcher from a different culture and speaking a different language, the same data evidently would not have been collected. Also, the same data would not have been obtained had I not volunteered before actual data collection. Therefore, myself and the data collected are inseparably interconnected. Although this perspective of *who I am in relation to the data collected* might be perceived by some as a limitation of the project, it did prove fruitful and it should be made explicit to the reader. However, these shared experiences between the Syrian participants and myself raised other issues which were discussed in the section of building trust.

Two participant couples (Samra and Omar/ Adham and Rania) preferred to be interviewed jointly so I asked the same question twice. Interestingly, I noticed that Samra and Rania repeated what their husbands had said or answered very briefly. Consequently, men had much more voice than their female counterparts. Notably at the end of the interview with Adham and Rania, Adham said:

I told Rania in the morning not to contradict me so we have the same answers (laughs)  
(RD, 01/04/17)

Adham appeared to be joking, but in fact there was some truth to his joke. This was an issue which needed to be addressed in the final interviews. During the initial interviews, I had the opportunity to gain more familiarity with the learners' domestic lives, their neighbourhoods and more importantly their relationship with their children.

### **3.3.3. Diaries**

According to Bailey and Ochsner (1983), "the central characteristic of diary studies is that they are introspective" (p.189). Diaries are considered a useful tool for introspection on experiences of language learning and teaching. They can come in many different formats and be used to fulfil different purposes. They could be oral or written, focused or unfocused, naturalistic or non-naturalistic, kept by teachers or learners, completed in the participants' first or foreign language (Hall 2008). Researching identity and language learning, many scholars have made use of diary studies (Brown 2014; Giroir 2011; Granger 2004; Kanno 2000; Kayi-Aydar 2012; Kinginger 2004; Norton 2000; Sacchi 2014).

At the end of the initial interviews, language learning diaries were discussed with the Syrian participants. I indicated that I hoped diaries would provide greater, richer insight into the conditions under which they were learning and/or speaking English and any identity changes they felt. Detailed guidelines were given in Arabic to prompt them on what to reflect upon. The Syrian participants had the choice to (1) write or (2) record diaries

electronically on WhatsApp which was the main way of communication with them. Initially, all participants agreed to keep diaries. Three (Mariam, Jean and Waard) chose to write diaries, while the rest selected to record them on WhatsApp. The three participants were given notebooks and it was agreed that they would take photos of the diaries and send them to me on WhatsApp. Notebooks were left with participants to “encourage a sense of ‘ownership’ of the diaries, as both a process and a product” (Hall 2008: 116).

Following the initial interviews, Mariam and Jean started writing diaries regularly. Waard abandoned the diary study shortly after his initial interview and none of the participants who agreed to record diaries on WhatsApp actually sent any. On the one hand, this was a real worry as I knew diaries would be very enriching to the project. On the other hand, it was understandable that diary-keeping was not a common habit for most Syrians. However, when some participants were talking with me over the phone to sort out some issues with regards to the college, they started naturally reflecting on their language learning experiences. Here, I realised that the participants might need someone to keep the reflection going on, or someone to prompt them on what to reflect or to listen to them. Phone diaries, therefore, seemed to present a possible solution to this dilemma. The learners could reflect on language learning over the phone, and phone diaries would be then an open, two-sided dialogue between the participants and myself. 8 participants (Omar, Samra, Adham, Rania, Nadeema, Leen, Hiba and Fatima) agreed to provide phone diaries which were recorded on my mobile phone through ACR, a free call recorder application. The phone diaries were then transferred and stored on the university server. We usually chatted on WhatsApp to schedule the time before I called them or they called me. This is a further example of how researchers’ vision and thinking are shaped and formed by the interactions with the people they study. Researchers need to honour their commitment and debt to those being researched and acknowledge the collective nature of research practice (Gilmore and Kenny 2015). The idea of phone diaries responded well to the critique levelled at ethnographers, urging them “for reimagining research projects as ‘praxis,’ responsive to the local research site and those residing there in its origination, implementation, and representation” (Horner 2004: 14).

In total, 10 Syrians volunteered to keep diaries (2 written<sup>26</sup> and 8 phone), 8 of whom were women. There was a consensus among all learners that they would keep the diaries in Arabic. Their decision almost certainly resulted in more insightful data because keeping diaries in English might possibly affect the quality and the quantity of the diaries and the participants’ ability to articulate their ideas clearly. It was agreed that the diary study would finish with the final interviews, yet most learners continued to provide diaries after the agreed time. It seemed that diary recording turned into an engaging and worthwhile activity

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<sup>26</sup> For an Arabic and a translated sample diary of Jean, please go to Appendices 7 and 8 respectively.

for them - a platform through which their voices were heard. With regards to written diaries, Jean provided 13 diaries and Mariam 11. Yet, Mariam was versatile in the way she provided diaries; she used WhatsApp messages, her own notebook, and phone diaries. In terms of phone diaries, they varied in number from 1 or 2 for some learners to 8 for others, and they lasted between 15 minutes to one and a half hours. Omar and Adham gave the most detailed and rich diaries, while Nadeema, Hiba and Fatima said the least. This variation in data means inevitably that the voice of some participants would be louder than others within the diary study. Although this was a concern, phone diaries seemed to be the only feasible way through which the experiences of “difficult-to-reach” participants were accessed.

The diaries, which started in April 2017 and ended in April 2018, proved to be a valuable research tool. The participants opened up about aspects of their language learning and identity negotiation which were not accessed otherwise; the women in particular tended to feel much more comfortable over the phone. The main reason is that in interviews family members and children were around, and the female participants were possibly embarrassed to discuss some issues. In Nadeema’s only phone diary, she professed:

Honestly what I’ve just told you...it’s something I’ve never ever shared with anyone...no one I swear to God...I feel it myself but I don’t share it with anyone...

(08/07/17)

#### **3.3.4. Shadowing**

There are different modes of shadowing research which serve different purposes. Shadowing was deployed in this study as a means to attempt to see the world from the Syrian refugee language learners’ point of view (McDonald 2005). Shadowing has been adopted in Applied Linguistics under different names such as “additional informal observations” (Giroir 2011), “observation outside of class” (Sacchi 2014), or “participant observation” (Gordon 2011).

Although shadowing was discussed with my supervisor as a possible research method during the preparatory stages of the project, it was not included in the consent form as it seemed likely to be impractical given the complex relationship with the Syrians and their unpromising and busy conditions. However, during the data collection process many participants asked me to help them outside the college. Then, the choice of shadowing as an ethnographic research method seemed to become legitimate and connect well with my dual role as a researcher volunteer. All learners (except for Amaan and Sami) agreed to be shadowed around and outside Northeast College. This again highlights how through collaboration with my participants I gained additional insights by

getting to know them in the context of their daily lives (Kirsch and Ritchie 1995). Shadowing happened more often with Pre-entry learners with whom I volunteered the most and they obviously needed more help. Shadowing took place around the college, the Jobcentre, the benefits office, WELT, women social gatherings, shopping, meetings sponsored by the Council and events host by Northeast College.

Not only did shadowing provide the potential opportunity to see the world through the Syrians' eyes, but also it enabled me to attend to "intersituational variation" - intersituational variation is "the ongoing movement among social contexts that marks the lives of all but those encapsulated in total institutions" (Trouille and Tavory 2016: 2) - and observe the Syrians as they moved among different sites and used the language under different conditions. Trouille and Tavory (2016) argued that intersituational variation "broadens and deepens the researcher's ethnographic account as well as affording important correctives to some common inferential pitfalls" (p.1). Shadowing showed different aspects of the learners' identity which were not accessed otherwise and enriched my meaning-making of situations they had already described. Additionally, shadowing produced a first-hand, detailed and multidimensional picture of the participants being researched (McDonald 2005). My role in shadowing varied from one shadowee to another. With Pre-entry learners, I was a "participant observant" who was engaged and part of the social interactions which the researcher part of myself was observing. With more advanced learners, however, I only observed. Notes were taken immediately after shadowing. In some cases, I had the opportunity to record some shadowee language learners during or after shadowing when they were discussing interesting issues about their learning of English, identity work or the challenges they were facing. Examples of recorded shadowing situations included a meeting sponsored by the Council to explore the challenges faced by Syrian refugees, some Syrian learners' gatherings in the college café, and reflections made by some learners after shadowing them in the Jobcentre, WELT, or in the food markets.

### **3.3.5. Final learner interviews**

Final learner interviews were conducted from late-July to early-December 2017 after ESOL classes had finished in mid-July. 12 interviews took place in the homes of the Syrians and 2 in Northumbria University. The couples agreed on having separate interviews, but the men were still around when I interviewed the women. When circumstances permitted, interviews were held in a separate room so that participants would feel more comfortable. The final interviews had three main aims: (1) investigating how the Syrians' language learning experiences, identities and perceptions of themselves as language learners and newcomers in England changed over time; (2) asking the Syrian learners to clarify some unclear issues; (3) and checking the researcher's interpretations and sense-making of

some of the data and events with the learner participants. Before conducting the final interviews, all the data with respect to each learner were reviewed and initial interpretations were formed. While a good amount of the interpretations seemed plausible to the learners, they confidently disagreed with some and provided their own justifications for comments and reflections previously made. The Syrian participants/collaborators felt confident and empowered when they had co-constructed meanings and understandings. Such an approach of non-hierarchical and collaborative research actively helps to overcome the researcher domination and the simplistic assumptions about power dynamics between the researcher as the powerful and the researched as relatively the powerless (Cunliffe 2003; Fluehr-Lobban 2008). As was obvious through this chapter, not only the Syrian collaborators were partners with interpreting the data but also with building trust and designing the project methodology.

### **3.3.6. Interviews with the manager and ESOL teachers**

Interviews with the college manager and 4 ESOL teachers were conducted to get to know them in terms of who they were, their work experience and perceptions of ESOL and the Syrian learners, the challenges they faced in ESOL, and their views of certain happenings which occurred in the college. I also enquired about assessment, job search, and safeguarding. Further interviews were conducted with Toby, Mary, and Hazel to follow up some issues which emerged out of the final learner interviews and diaries. All the interviews were conducted and audio-recorded in Northeast College.

### **3.3.7. Researcher diaries**

As illustrated through the chapter, researcher diaries were an effective tool to reflect on the research and to keep a record of my thinking, experiences and feelings as the research process unfolded. "This contributes to research rigour, providing a context for decisions, problems, solutions and opportunities for reflection on progress" (Snowden 2015: 36). There are no rules on how research diaries can be constructed. I kept a record of my research diaries in a notebook, but when I felt tired I recorded my thoughts. Additionally, all my supervision meetings were audio-recorded to help me reflect on the alterations and decisions involved in the methodology design and observe how I developed as a researcher.

### **3.3.8. Documents**

The clear difference between this data source and the previous ones is that documents are produced for reasons other than the research questions under investigation. Thus, one of the notable advantages of documentary material is "its stability. Unlike interviewing and observation, the presence of the investigator does not alter what is being studied" (Merriam 2009: 155). Documentary data of this project included classroom handouts, notebooks of

some learners, documents provided by the learners such as the job search forms and papers sent by the Jobcentre, and copies of handouts and leave behinds distributed to the Syrians at the events and meetings when I shadowed them. Documents enabled me to further understand the context of the project and the conditions under which the Syrian participants were learning English and negotiating their sense of self.

Having discussed in detail how I collected data, I will now review my emotional journey as a researcher and its place in this project.

### **3.4. The place of my emotions and anxieties in this research**

Given the relatively long time I worked with the Syrians, both as a volunteer and as a researcher, my emotional journey throughout this time needs to be reflected on. From my own experience, not only are the researcher's emotions and anxieties inevitable and integral components of the research journey, but they are also central to the kind of meanings and findings that participants and I co-constructed during this project. Furthermore, being attentive to my own emotions is part and parcel of my self-reflexivity about and throughout the whole project. The role of researchers' emotions and anxieties in their research has received increasing attention in social sciences and organisational ethnography (Arber 2006; Benson 2014; Brannan 2011; Cunliffe and Karunanayake 2013; Garthwaite 2016; Gilbert 2001; Gilmore and Kenny 2015; Rager 2005; Tracy 2004), but this focus has the potential to enrich ethnographic research in Applied Linguistics and language studies.

Initially, I felt excluded, powerless, and was concerned that the Syrians might not agree to take part in the project. Further, enacting the roles of an ethnographer and a volunteer proved at times to be challenging on a physical and emotional level and in terms of prioritising my research responsibilities. I often questioned my dual role as I sometimes felt worried that my researcher role was taken over by that of the volunteer. It was not easy to separate the roles out; they were interconnected (Garthwaite 2016). That said, helping ESOL learners who were mostly refugees was very rewarding. Teachers and learners possibly sensed my passion for helping learners. This might have to do with the fact that I am myself a displaced person and two of my siblings are refugees in Turkey. Inevitably, perhaps, given the long time I spent with the teachers and the learners, I developed a sense of attachment and belonging to the college. I developed strong feelings of admiration for all the teachers I observed, and for the manager, who were all immensely passionate about their work. My sense of inclusion was perhaps intensified by my own absence from my family and the uncertainty about when I will be reunited with them. Being around Syrians during this project made the difficulties of missing family and friends slightly easier and gave me a sense of warmth. However, this sense of attachment with the college

was unsurprisingly not stable; there were times when I felt as a stranger, outsider, or even invisible.

Along with these feelings of belonging and attachment came a strong sense of guilt when the classroom observations had finished, and I had to leave the college. For this reason, I decided to keep volunteering one day each week. Further, a sense of guilt and discomfort arose when I had to wear my critical, researcher glasses and reflect on the learners and the teachers. I felt I carried a heavy responsibility on my shoulders. To what extent was analysis reconcilable with the trust relationships I had developed? Feelings of guilt emerged out of the trust and rapport I forged and worked hard to build with the teacher and learner participants. Many ethnographers have confessed to similar feelings of guilt (Brannan 2011; Gable 2014; Garthwaite 2016; Gilmore and Kenny 2015; Lawton 2000).

Throughout the project, reliving the trauma of war by listening to the Syrians' stories was the strongest and most painful feeling, leading at times to tears and reviving feelings of homesickness. Sharing the same experience with the Syrians seemed to heighten my feelings, but at the same time, it strengthened my connection with them. I was unprepared for this intensity of emotions the project had triggered. The main strategies which helped me manage emotionally while conducting the project were: 1) volunteering at the college, (2) my project through which the Syrians' voices would be heard, (3) the insightful readings<sup>27</sup> I did about the emotionality of the researcher, (4) recording my feelings (5) talking things over with my supervisors and a close friend, and (6) a complete change of my lifestyle (sleeping, diet, and exercise).

I was clearly wrong to initially believe that these emotions and anxieties were to be suppressed. Having read Gable (2014), along many others, I discovered that these emotions, whether pleasant or disturbing, are a product of the encounters and conversations I had with the participants not a "litmus test" of their characters or of mine (p.238). In acknowledging my emotions, I hoped to convey to the reader that the researcher is not always, at a certain level, in power and control of the research. It is worth noting here that, at the point of writing, I am still in contact with most of the teacher and learner participants; our friendship has extended beyond the project. We have a mutual interest in keeping our friendship and developing our personal relationships.

Thus far I have presented the theoretical framework on which the project methodology was based, how this translated into research process and my emotional journey through the project. I now turn to discuss the procedures taken to achieve data trustworthiness.

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<sup>27</sup> I read Arber 2006; Gable 2014; Garthwaite 2016; Gilbert 2001; Gilmore and Kenny 2015; Pickett et al. 1994; Rager 2000; 2005.

### **3.5. Data trustworthiness**

In order to ensure and achieve the trustworthiness of the data, data collection and analysis entailed the following 4 processes: (1) “prolonged engagement” and “persistent observation” in the research site, (2) triangulation of the data, (3) member checks, and (4) peer debriefing.

#### **3.5.1. “Prolonged engagement” and “persistent observation” in the research site**

One of the strategies to augment data trustworthiness was “prolonged engagement” and “persistent observation” of the participants (Guba 1981). By volunteering and spending extended time with the participants inside and outside the ESOL classrooms, I was able, as discussed in Section 3.2.4, to develop trust with the teacher and learner participants, learn about the ESOL classrooms’ culture and complexities, and to realise what was practically viable in terms of methodological considerations. Persistent observation allowed the participants to get used to my presence, which might have increased their comfort with me and the quality of data they provided. It also allowed me to identify what was “critical” to focus on and what was “irrelevant” to eliminate (Guba 1981).

#### **3.5.2. Triangulation of the data**

In order to achieve a “holistic understanding” (Mathison 1988) of the topic under investigation, I used multiple data collection tools as a means of triangulation. Each of the methods of data collection were tools through which to clarify and cross-check findings and interpretations that emerged from each of the data sources. Initially, interesting issues and salient themes that emerged from the classroom observations and social gatherings were addressed in the initial interviews. Subsequently, interesting data and/or contradictions that arose from the initial interviews were pitted against classroom observations and shadowing as well as diaries. Conversely, salient information and contrasting data gleaned from the classroom observations, shadowing and diaries were addressed in the following interviews. Finally, as argued by Guba (1981) and Brewer and Hunter (1989), the use of different research methods in tandem compensates for their individual shortcomings and exploits their respective benefits.

#### **3.5.3. Member checks**

“The process of member checks is the single most important action inquirers can take, for it goes to the heart of the credibility criterion” (Guba 1981: 85). Therefore, member checks were conducted in three formats in the current project. Firstly, they were incorporated through my ongoing interaction with the participants during the period of data collection. As broad categories and themes began to surface, I utilised the ongoing diaries, classroom observations, and shadowing to check my understanding with each of the participants.

Secondly, as discussed in Section 3.3.5, one of the main aims of the final interviews was to verify that the findings reflected the participants' intended meanings (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Each learner was presented with an overview of how I interpreted their story of identity development and language learning, and the learners either enriched or modified my interpretations. Finally, I conducted formal member checks with 10 learner participants and one teacher while the findings were written up and presented. Checks with the learners were conducted over the phone while the ESOL teacher was interviewed in Northeast College. All the phone calls with the Syrian learners were recorded after the permission of the learners was granted. With some learner participants, two calls were needed. Some of the information provided by the learners in the member check calls changed my understanding of some points and the way the data was presented. For instance, in the member checks with Hiba and Hassan, they added new and detailed information about their social classness in Syria in a way that enabled me to contrast them with another cohort of learners and made the social class chapter (Chapter 4) more insightful and informative. As will become apparent in the following results chapters, the data gleaned from the member checks was presented under the name "member checks" and the dates were provided.

#### **3.5.4. Frequent debriefing sessions**

Debriefing sessions aim to provide researchers with the opportunity to "test their growing insights and to expose themselves to searching questions... to expose their thinking to this 'jury' of peers and to deal with whatever questions they may pose" (Guba 1981: 85). During and following the period of data collection, I was in constant contact with my supervisors. In our monthly meetings, my main supervisor gave me practical ideas on data transcription, analysis, and interpretation and challenged me with questions that helped me to discover biases I had as a displaced Syrian Muslim woman and to distance myself from the participants while presenting findings. Further, my secondary supervisor who is Syrian had access to various pieces of raw data and checked my translation and interpretation of multiple quotations. The main purpose of these monthly meetings was for me to present the broad categorisations and conclusions I was drawing from my analysis of the data and my supervisors offered comments about my interpretations of the findings and pointed out areas in need of further consideration. Additionally, I had multiple opportunities to discuss my interpretation of some data with a friend in academia who held a PhD in social sciences which allowed for an "external audit" (Glesne 2006: 38). My friend challenged me with questions I had never thought about in terms of conducting ethnography and enriched my understanding of how I understood some events in the data. In the next section, I describe in more detail the process of data analysis.

### **3.6. Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process of making meaning out of raw data to answer the proposed research questions (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). Data analysis was primarily an ongoing, collaborative, comparative, and inductive process (Danjo 2015; Davies 1999; Giroir 2011; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The findings of this project were the product of three basic stages of data analysis: (1) preliminary data analysis, (2) formal and intensive data analysis, and (3) the writing up stage. It is important to note that these three stages do not suggest that data analysis was a sequential process. Rather, it was a “non-linear” procedure that entailed “simultaneous, recursive, and reiterative processes” (Danjo 2015: 73) – I went back and forth, alternating between data collection, my notes, and the emerging analysis. In the following sections, I will describe these three stages of data analysis and conclude with an overview of the finding chapters of the thesis.

#### **3.6.1. Preliminary data analysis**

The first stage of data analysis started simultaneously with data collection. “The process of analysis is intrinsic to all stages of ethnographic research, and not something that begins once data collection is complete” (Davies 1999: 193). Going through my observation notes and research diaries regularly as well as transcribing segments of the data set that was thought to be responsive to answering the research questions became the primary processes of analysis whereby broad categories and themes of meaning began to surface. Initially, striking and important issues that featured during observation inside and outside the ESOL classrooms were evoked during the first interviews, and salient issues that came up during those interviews were checked out in the phone diaries and the following interviews. This initial and basic stage of data analysis was important to the data collection and analysis processes in two ways. Firstly, it offered a sense of continuity and shared knowledge in my interactions with the participants. Secondly, it contributed to stronger and more valid interpretations from the data because I was able to address areas that were unclear or incomplete in follow-up interactions with the participants and allowed for a collaborative process of data interpretation in which the participants were engaged. Due to the sheer volume of data and materials, I was aware that it was impossible to capture every single word of the recordings. However, I attempted to provide a verbatim transcription because the details were important for accurate interpretations. 300 hours were spent just on transcribing the learner and teacher interviews, the learner phone diaries, and the recorded shadowing. Transcriptions were typed using Microsoft Word to facilitate analysing and organising data and codes.

### 3.6.2. Formal data analysis

After the data collection period drew to a close and all the data was in, formal and intensive data analysis began. In this stage, I was organising and refining rather than beginning data analysis. My approach to the formal analysis was based on the “constant comparative method” (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This approach involved the discursive procedure of constant going back and forth through the data and coding it for various themes that emerged; it required moving back and forth between the concrete and raw data and my abstract theoretical knowledge, “between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation” (Merriam and Tisdell 2016: 202). This stage began with basic categories that the participants and I had constructed collaboratively through data collection and with the theoretical knowledge that I had formed through extensive reading and writing Chapter 2 (Literature Review). For instance, I had read and written about social class in Chapter 2 and was aware of potentially broader patterns in case this identity dimension was evoked in the data. When social class featured heavily in the data, I had a good sense of understanding and familiarity with it. Employing the constant comparative method, differences and similarities across some learner participants from different class backgrounds emerged. This overarching theme of social class was further nuanced, and revised, through diving into the participants’ histories in Syria and comparing it to their status in England. As clear regularities and irregularities recurred across the participants, categories expanded and became more nuanced and sub-categories emerged. As those subcategories were compared and contrasted, new relationships between categories emerged and became the basis for the discussion of social class. I also compared the social-class-based categories with the studies that I had included in Chapter 2. Once I was satisfied with this category, I moved to other categories that emerged in the data such as religious, gender, refugee, cleaner, and novice identities. When I felt I reached “saturation” – the point at which I realised no new categories or themes were forthcoming (Merriam and Tisdell 2016: 210) – I moved into the last stage of data analysis, i.e. writing up the findings.

A final word should be said here. Given that categorisation of data is, in fact, part of the interpretive process, I encountered a “creative friction or continual feedback between data and theorizing” that Davies (1999: 194) described as part of ethnographic analysis. As researchers distance themselves both physically and intellectually from the data during the formal analysis period, the process involves a “creative tension”:

...the process of ethnographic analysis involves a constant and hopefully creative tension between the necessary, if risky, processes of generalizing and explaining, and the ethnographic knowledge of real people, their actions and interactions gleaned through the experiences of field research.

(Davies 1999: 193-94)

I was seriously challenged in navigating between the big picture (the “forest”), and the “particulars” (the “trees”) (Merriam and Tisdell 2016), between the abstract and my knowledge of the participants. At some points during data analysis, I struggled to reach the “view” of the mountain of data (Dey 1993) and was more focused on the narratives of the individual learners. Rigorous analysis, from a distanced position, was important to the study’s credibility, as it involved a process by which “disparate, incompatible, even apparently contradictory information” (Merriam 1998: 193) was transformed into a theoretically driven narrative. My approach to this “creative tension” was to converse with the data continuously, remaining “in it” at different points and time and at different levels. I worked hard to link interpretive findings clearly to the data from which they derived. Further, my supervisor played a crucial role in this stage through his constant reminders of the purpose of the project and how important it was to attempt to answer the research questions rather than being lost in the trees and the struggles of the participants.

### **3.6.3. Writing the findings**

The last stage of data analysis was writing and representing the findings. The writing process was a further level of interpretation in the process of data analysis as it involved (1) a revision and reorganisation of how categories were linked together while taking a broader view of the whole project and (2) checking the final findings with the participants. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) pointed out that categories and themes are not the data themselves but abstractions of the data. Providing description and form to these abstractions was yet another means of adjusting the data (Giroir 2011). As a result of the conducted data analysis, I decided that the findings would be best presented in 4 chapters to answer the proposed research questions.

Chapters **4** through **6** will answer the first research question:

- How does the Syrian refugees’ investment in learning English intersect with their social positioning and changing identities?

The first three chapters discuss respectively how specific identity aspects, namely social class, religion, and gender, are implicated in the Syrian learners’ sense of self, learning of English, and participation in intra- and inter-communities of practice. These particular identity inscriptions will be discussed because there was an interesting overlap between what emerged from the data on the one hand, and both well-researched identities (e.g., gender) and inadequately-researched identities (e.g., religion and social class) on the other. As will become apparent, intersectionality of these identity categories is a recurrent theme in the data. The discussion will also include critical defining moments and incidents where the participants realised a disconnect, rupture, shift, or reconnection in their identities; some of these moments and incidents propelled them to take agentive and

strategic moves to change the conditions under which they learned, spoke or were positioned, ultimately leading to their understanding of their moves as signifying a new project of coming to understand themselves as legitimate learners, speakers or members.

Chapter 7 is intended to answer the following research question:

- To what extent do the conditions within the ESOL College facilitate or constrain the Syrian refugees' negotiation of their identities and fulfilling their potential as English language learners and novices in culturally and linguistically new communities?

These conditions include (1) how the Syrian learners are positioned in the ESOL classroom and (2) space for their identities to be expressed and valued.

Chapter 7 provides a discussion of the facilitative as well as restrictive role that Northeast College had on the Syrian learners' experiences of identity negotiation and language learning.

Each chapter will include the main themes that emerged out of the data and pertain to the research question(s) under investigation. However, the boundaries between the research questions are not always clear-cut, and the discussion of a particular theme in a specific chapter may have relevance to the discussion in other chapters. Such overlaps will be cross-referenced within the chapters that follow. Therefore, the answers to the following two related research questions will be found and discussed in chapters 4 through 7 as they interrelated with the previous research questions:

- How far and in what ways do structures of marginalisation and Islamophobia shape the Syrian refugees' identity construction and their subsequent investment in learning English?
- In what ways, if any, do the Syrian refugees resist these structures and situate themselves in their new social milieu?

The chapters include incidents and situations where the Syrian learners were positioned as novices, inferior or Others, and how they varied considerably in the way they resisted or responded to these marginalising discourses and how this in turn affected their sense of self and linguistic and interactional learning opportunities.

There are two approaches taken to writing the findings. Firstly, in Chapter 4, part of Chapter 5, and Chapter 6 I focus on individual cases as coherent stories to discuss the main themes under which they are classified. Although it might seem that I am recounting the participants' experiences as they occurred, these narratives are, in fact, the product of the constant categorising and comparison approach taken in the data analysis and they are co-constructed according to our (the participants and myself) interpretation of how

themes that emerge across all of the cases relate to and/or contrast one another. Further, some narratives are worth examining more closely as they capture so many of the experiences brought up by the cohort of the Syrian participants. Secondly, in Chapter 7 and parts of Chapter 5, the narratives are thematically organised through the categories that emerged across the participant cases.

### **3.7. Conclusion: what can this chapter tell us?**

Finally, I would like to finish off this chapter with three comments. Firstly, not only does the importance of this project lie in its findings and implications, but also and equally in the way it was conducted, its discussion of issues which tend to be played down in our field, and the way vulnerable and difficult-to-reach learners were approached. Secondly, through conducting this 14-month project I discovered that methodology is far from fixed and methodological considerations should be rather participant- and context-driven. "Methodology is most effectively envisaged as fluid or like shifting sand and not easily contained, rather it settles according to its environment" (Benson 2014: 93). Thirdly, the journey of this project was not solely a journey of collecting data; it was also a journey of tears and joy, a journey of discovering and rediscovering myself, and more importantly a journey through which my researcher identity has evolved and developed; something I easily noticed when I compared between the initial and final learner interviews.

In this chapter, I have discussed the theoretical methodological framework in which the project was both designed and conducted and how my insider identity as a Syrian Muslim woman resulted in different dynamics and politics of representation. I also explored how I increased the data trustworthiness and managed the data analysis. The next chapter will provide a detailed and rich discussion of how the identity dimension of social class interacted with the Syrian refugees' sense of self and the processes and outcomes of learning English.

## Chapter 4 - Social class and language learning

This chapter examines how 5 Syrian refugee language learners' affiliation to different social class positions in their home country directly and indirectly impacted on their (non)investment in learning English in and outside the ESOL classroom on arrival in the UK. Although the learners clearly had multiple identity inscriptions, their own accounts prioritised some more than others; in the case of the 5 participants (Omar, Sami, Waard, Hassan, and Hiba) in this chapter, social class emerged within the data as a crucial identification for them. As discussed in Chapter 2, there are different forms of class capital: economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital. The 5 participants prioritised the (non)possession of particular forms of class capital more than other participants, yet their narratives captured so many of the experiences brought up by the cohort of the participants. For these two reasons, their stories are worth examining more closely. While Omar's and Sami's narrativisation focused on their economic capital, Waard frequently identified himself with his cultural capital. On the other hand, Hassan and Hiba confirmed their lower socioeconomic status.

The chapter contains three sections. It starts with the stories of Omar and Sami whose lives were disruptively transformed through the change from their identity of successful businessmen and breadwinners of their families in Syria and their interim<sup>28</sup> countries into refugees living on Jobseekers' Allowance (JSA) in the UK. This is followed by the experiences of Waard who was more positive than Omar and Sami as he managed to rework and mobilise his cultural capital and previous teacher identity in his new communities of practice. Then, I interweave the narratives of the couple Hassan and Hiba whose attempts to gain access within host English communities of practice were met with some success. The couple's stories bring into focus how a lack of class capital in their original, Syrian context could afford learners with more language learning opportunities in the UK. In the three narratives, affordances and constraints of the participants' class backgrounds on their learning of English and participation behaviour will be discussed. Wherever applicable, I shall link the stories to each other in an endeavor to formulate a comprehensive account of what bearing the class identity of language learners had on their language learning experiences.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that the participants' class-categorisation in this thesis emerged within the data from how they informally positioned themselves and others on the basis of a particular combination of class capital, and their relative weight, all of which are highly sensitive to values and beliefs prevailing in Syria (Andrew 2010); the social class rankings outlined in this chapter draw upon Syrian class-based

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<sup>28</sup> The countries in which the participants lived after leaving Syria and before arriving in the UK.

categorisations. That is, what is considered middle-class in Syria might not be in the UK or Western countries. For example, Sami mentioned many times that he owned a luxurious car in Syria and Lebanon as a way to play his class-consciousness. Owning a car in Syria is not as common as in the UK and is somehow restricted to people with high income. Besides, there is a high correlation between wealth and class categorisation in Syria. Another example is that Waard emphasised his love for reading and distinguished himself from Syrians who did not read. Reading in Syria is not a popular pastime and it is somehow restricted to educated people. Among the participants, Waard was the only participant who reported that he was an avid reader. Hence, his reading, surely along other markers (see later in this chapter), was considered a middle-class marker. In what follows, I set the scene of the discussion by describing the impact of the loss of economic capital on Omar's and Sami's sense of self.

#### **4.1. Omar and Sami: from breadwinners into JSA**

Omar's and Sami's identifications with the middle-class in Syria emerged from their own accounts of their economic capital (material possessions of several properties, jobs with high income, consumption patterns of expensive products, the spatial conditions in which they lived, where they travelled on holidays) and social capital (powerful social networks). Among the participants, Omar and Sami seemed to have the highest levels of economic capital in Syria. My understanding of their class capital drew on the data they provided, my observation during home visits and the ESOL classrooms, and other participants' positioning of Omar and Sami. The shift from the identity of the primary breadwinner of the family to a refugee living on JSA benefits characterised all the Syrian male participants' narratives of identity, but Omar and Sami reported the transition as particularly humiliating and difficult.

Omar reported having a great deal of work experience in Syria and his previous jobs as a plumber, an electrician, a builder, a carpenter and a businessman who owned a chain of carpentry shops provided him with plenty of economic and social capital which contributed to his very confident and assertive character:

I had worked with both influential and uninfluential army officers, normal people, and people in authority I didn't care...my confidence came from my work experience...At work, I was the boss...my father was my partner but when I spoke he kept silent because I was the experienced guy...

(Omar, member check, 04/10/18)

After Omar had been arrested and tortured in Syria (see Chapter 3), the family fled to Jordan where he worked as a carpenter and earned a living. In the very first sentence of his first interview, Omar accentuated the crucial role of job in his identity formation:

My job is my sense of self...my life is all about work...I love to work, I just love my job, but when I came here my life was turned upside down. I became a prisoner behind the bars of language...English is restricting my capabilities...

(01/04/17)

His limited English meant that he was unable to work and play out his work experience and skills in the UK - his symbolic resources in the form of work experience and business skills were muted. Omar expressed feeling devalued for living on JSA benefits and distanced himself from “opportunistic” Syrians:

I want to show my teacher that I didn't come here to be a burden on her or this country...or take charity...I want to earn money by the sweat of my brow...I noticed Syrians are opportunistic...they just want to take.

(Omar, interview, 01/04/17)

Being a Pre-entry learner, however, the only employment Omar found locally was a cleaner in Arabic restaurants. When he gave up on finding a job in carpentry or building, he sought the help of the Jobcentre:

I said to the Jobcentre that I'd like to do voluntary work, I don't want money all I want is to improve my English, they said no...Then, the Jobcentre would ask me if I'd found a job. For God's sake, what am I supposed to work?! They say cleaner! They drive me crazy when they say cleaner...I AM not a cleaner!! Some people don't mind cleaning dishes because this's their job, excuse me. For instance, Hassan might accept to clean dishes because he's used to this kind of job...I don't want to bury myself alive cooped up inside four walls with dishes to clean, neither interacting with English people nor improving my career...

(Omar, phone diary, 11/07/17)

In these excerpts, the L2 discourses offered Omar powerless and restricted identities (unskilled, incompetent) which he had resisted strongly as they were “unacceptable or incompatible” with those he had occupied in Syria and Jordan (Pavlenko 2002: 285). Further, this range of subservient identities did not afford Omar any access to English linguistic resources and interactional opportunities. In the above abstracts, Omar indirectly made reference to his self-ascribed high-class position through (1) distancing himself from “opportunistic” Syrians who only wanted to take and (2) indicating that cleaning and washing dishes could be appropriate to Syrians like Hassan but not for him.

Like Omar, Sami's real estate business with his father in Syria seemed to provide him with an array of material and symbolic resources:

I owned everything you can imagine.

(Sami, interview, 08/05/17)

Escaping with his family to Lebanon following arrest and torture in Syria, he sold some of his property in Syria, started a successful business in Lebanon, and developed powerful social networks and the identity of a successful businessman. Nevertheless, finding Lebanon unsafe for Syrians, he came to England. Initially, he opposed the idea of coming

to England due to worries about losing his social class capital, yet under the pressure of his mother and brothers and hoping for a safe life for his children, he reluctantly migrated. For Sami, his previous valued identity as an astute and well-liked businessman appeared to have no value in his new social milieu:

I'm starting all over again to get established here just like a little child... Everything has changed literally everything... socially and financially. I've become another Sami... the British Sami (laughs). I'm a sociable person by nature, but there are no people to interact with here. Back in Lebanon, I had many shops and all people loved me...

(Sami, interview, 21/09/17)

The loss of economic and social capital and his limited English factored into Sami's sense of self - he began to see himself as less of who he was in Syria and Lebanon and perceived himself as a dependent child who was starting over and did not have the power to impose reception (Bourdieu 1980). Sami's comment captured a particular aspect of the migrant experience: "a life reversed" (Giroir 2011: 170).

Sami drew a distinction between 2 groups of Syrian refugees in class terms:

Some Syrians were dead in Lebanon and Syria but came back to life here. I'm the other way round, though... here I lost the meaning of life. Those people were probably porters or even unemployed and their financial situation was extremely appalling... That's why when they came here, they're not bothered about English or how they're treated... Some Syrians have a thick skin and they don't get hurt if people frown at them. But I'm very sensitive. I swear by God if someone [from the Jobcentre] gives me a disrespectful look or speaks with me meanly, I would never go again... I'd rather live on the streets... The problem is that the Jobcentre don't differentiate between VPR Syrians and smuggled Syrians. They don't distinguish those who've been here for ages from...

(interview, 08/05/17)

Like Omar (above) and Block's participant, Silvia (2007; see Chapter 2), Sami displayed a degree of class-consciousness. Sami's theory seemed to be that English and social positioning were luxuries for lower-class individuals; as long as their basic needs were met, what else would they ask for? By contrast, English was seen as a life necessity for "sensitive", middle-class people, like himself, as it was a tool to bring them back to life. We shall see later when discussing Hassan and Hiba how sound his argument appeared to be. Sami also made reference to his sensitivity as an element of his class identity. As the data will show, his sensitivity seemed to influence his experiences of learning English.

Living on JSA benefits was particularly declassing to Omar and Sami as it put them in a subservient identity position and took away all the class prestige they had enjoyed in their previous lives. The act of distancing that they both exercised over fellow refugee Syrians seemed to allow them to exert a superior identity position. The question that matters here is: how did the transformation in their social class identity affect Omar's and Sami's investment in learning English? I will start out by outlining the positive impact that the disruptions in their social class identity had on the processes and outcomes of learning

English. That said, the boundaries between the positive and the negative impact are not always clear-cut, as we shall see.

#### 4.1.1. Social class identity as a motivational factor in learning English

This section outlines how the decline in Omar's and Sami's class identity positively mediated their commitment and opportunities to learn and speak English. Outlining why he was eager to learn English, Omar said:

When I was in Jordan, I would sell when I speak Jordanian Arabic, but when I didn't speak their language I didn't sell...English is like a mother, the glue that would hold us together with people...Once I learn English, I would be free and I would be able to work and provide the needs of my children...I don't want to become a burden on English people as if they're giving me charity. No, I want to earn money by the sweat of my brow...I don't need any more favours...this puts stress on me to learn English...It takes time, but time is eating out of my body<sup>29</sup>...I want to work I like money let's say...In Syria I established myself but it's all gone...

(interview, 16/09/17)

This echoes Simpson's (2016) argument that "one of the most pressing reasons learners invest in English is for employment. ESOL students bring with them a wide array of qualities and attributes which would normally give them status in society" (pp.183-4). As a businessman who had successfully invested in the dialect of Jordanian Arabic, Omar was fully aware of the material and symbolic resources that he would obtain from learning English, which would in turn entitle him to occupy more powerful and privileged identity positions (Norton 2000). Knowledge of English would enable him to take up again the identity of the breadwinner of the family and free him from the normative, negative positioning of refugees as a "burden". The word "burden" was mentioned 5 times in Omar's data. Language learners' investment in learning English can be mediated by other investments which either facilitate or constrain the language learning process. Omar's investment in his previous social class identity, particularly the economic capital, and his identification as the breadwinner was a key factor in enhancing his journey of learning English. English was perceived as the tool to regain the economic and social power that he had lost, and to retrieve his former high social class status and identity:

If learners "invest" in language and literacy, they do so with the understanding that they will attain a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will, in turn, increase the value of their cultural capital and social power...As the value of their cultural capital increases, so learners' sense of themselves, their identities, are reassessed. Hence there is an integral relationship between investment and identity.

(Norton 2013b: 104)

Hence, Omar's investment in learning English was as much as an investment in his social class identity.

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<sup>29</sup> It is a literal translation of the Arabic quotation. It means that Omar is very impatient with the time that learning English might take. The Arabic text is: "القصة بدھا وقت بس هادا الوقت عم ياكل من جسمي..."

Like Omar, Sami noted that English was a key component in the pursuit of his middle class:

I'm learning so I can get on with life and work...English is the only way, yet the problem is this way is difficult. This made me feel hopeless. There's a sense of frustration because it's gonna take long! When will I be able to do all the stuff?...It's normal I'm not going to run my projects in Arabic. I can do nothing without English...

(interview, 21/09/17)

Elsewhere, he said:

My dream is that the Jobcentre stops pressurising me so that I can learn English and follow my dreams...All Syrians dream of a job that isn't a cleaner...I hope to reach Entry 3...so that I can teach my daughter...

(interview, 08/05/17)

Sami's incentive to learn English is inextricably linked to his desire to run his business projects and follow his dreams of being a successful, sociable and well-liked businessman, which would take him back to his middle-class identity and his role as the primary provider for his home. Sami's wife knew no English and did not go to ESOL college. Like Omar, time was an issue of concern to Sami in his journey of learning English. He appeared to be resentful of the fact that due to immigration and limited English, he was ascribed less powerful and prestigious identities, albeit temporarily. To accelerate the process of learning English, Sami reported doing a great amount of autonomous learning: watching English lessons on YouTube, learning new grammar rules, using multiple mobile phone apps, watching English movies, revising at home what he had taken in the class, and studying for hours.

#### **4.1.2. Agency as an element of class identity**

Throughout the project, Omar and Sami projected a high sense of agency which can be partly understood with reference to their previous middle-class identities. Omar's middle-class identity appeared to index how he positioned himself relationally to other Syrians who were more advanced in English, and how this identity practice impacted on his opportunities to speak English. This can be explained in the following diary extract where Omar renegotiated the imbalance of power with his 11-year eldest son, Ibrahim:

I've noticed recently that Ibrahim is like 'dad I'm interpreting for you' it's like you know nothing without me. But look what I've done! The other day on the way to school I told him to let his schoolteacher know that he and his siblings aren't coming tomorrow because they have a hospital appointment. However, when we got there, I changed my mind and didn't let him speak. Instead, I did speak to the teacher. Ibrahim was surprised and said 'dad you know how to speak English! Why do you say you don't?!' Do you see my point? I want to show him that I'm not that bad with English. When I ask you [his son] to help me, it's because I want you to become more confident not because I need you...I can manage without you...I don't need you...

(Omar, 22/06/17)

Omar described becoming a strategic agent and repositioning himself because he felt that his identity as the household head was threatened and that his son, as a language and cultural broker, had begun to exert power over him. Yet, through reframing the relationship with his son and moving from the identity of the dependent father to that of the independent, he claimed the right to speak and imposed reception as a legitimate speaker of English (Bourdieu 1991). In a further example, Omar reported deliberately teaching his children new vocabulary that they did not come across at school to show them that he was making progress with learning English like them. Omar also recounted that after his uncle accompanied him to the bank three times, he started going on his own so that he did not feel inadequate. All the above examples of class-derived agency provided Omar with numerous opportunities to speak and practise English. Due to his great investment in his middle-class identity, he resisted feelings of inadequacy or insufficiency which he was not used to. Thus, he projected an enhanced sense of agency and initiative and claimed more powerful identities (i.e. legitimate speaker of English, independent father and nephew) from which he was able to speak English and be audible. We can also see here an inter-relationship between social class and gender as Omar aimed to assert his identity in ways appropriate to his beliefs about his social class and gender.

Further, Sami, like Omar, projected a high sense of agency and independence. He claimed feeling “silly” when depending on people with regards to the language:

The school [his daughter’s school] sent me a form of 3 papers and 60 questions. It took me three hours to translate it...I feel shy to call Amina and ask her for help. All people go and ask my [Syrian] neighbour...I’ve never asked him. Oh God it feels ridiculous. I feel silly.

(interview, 21/09/17)

Sami’s high sensitivity, which he earlier linked with his class identity, provided him with more motivation and opportunities to practise and learn the language in the pursuit of independence and power. A man who used to possess an excess of material resources certainly refused to be inferior to other Syrians who happened to have more symbolic resources (i.e. English proficiency) than him.

Finally, it is worth noting that despite Omar’s and Sami’s dedicated efforts to exercise agency, they both expressed that they sometimes felt powerless to do who they were in the outside world. Describing this, Omar said:

I feel powerless and weak, I can’t explain to the person in the Jobcentre that I can’t work now...Outside the classroom, I feel powerless, truly powerless.

(interview, 16/09/17)

Sami also referred to his hesitance to speak English and linked it to his sensitivity which was an element of his identification with middle-class:

I've been advised to speak English even if I make mistakes. Yet, I don't speak unless I'm sure it's correct so I don't get embarrassed in front of people. It's OK for some people to speak and make errors they don't care, but I'm very sensitive.

(interview, 21/09/17)

This discussion needs to be understood not only with regards to Omar's and Sami's class identification, but also with reference to the contradictory nature of their identities (Weedon 1997) and their beginner language level. Omar was Pre-entry and Sami was Entry 1 level. This sense of partial powerlessness felt by Omar and Sami in the wider society due to their language proficiency, however, contrasted with their practices and identity performance in the classroom as the following sections illustrate.

#### **4.1.3. Reworking social class positively in the ESOL classroom**

In this section, I reveal how Omar and Sami identified themselves as "confident" and "top" students respectively in the ESOL classroom, part of their response to the ways in which their previous middle-class identities were sometimes not validated in their new communities of practice. I shall examine the influence of such identity practice on their language learning as they invested strategically in the linguistic capital of English to deal with the loss of their power and status and to carve out a new voice and an audible identity in the classroom.

##### **4.1.3.1. Omar: self-confidence and acute awareness of power dynamics**

In the ESOL classroom, Omar demonstrated a high level of investment in learning English. Classroom observation showed that Omar was extremely confident, focused and always sat at the front table. He was the most participatory student who never seemed afraid to take risks or ask/answer questions. Omar's confidence which he had attributed to his vast work experience (see Section 4.1.) seemed to provide him with more social space to project meaningful and legitimate identity positions, which in turn offered him enhanced possibilities for learning/practising English. Omar was described as a smart, confident, and hardworking learner as the following extracts suggest. Adham, another student, noted:

I like to sit at the same table with Hassan and Omar, but I don't like Hassan to give me the answers because I know there'll something wrong. However, most of what Omar says is correct, because if he's unsure about something, he would either ask the teacher straight away or use Google Translate...

(phone diary, 18/05/17)

Omar's wife, Samra, positioned him similarly:

He's been trying so hard and participating with Mary [Pre-entry teacher]. Poor him, he just wants to see a result.

(interview, 16/09/17)

About Omar, his teacher said:

Omar is very confident he's got all of work experience and obviously he's very dominant in the class because he likes to talk...He's quite quick to pick up some of the rules in English...

(Mary, interview, 12/07/17)

Classroom observation also showed that Omar possessed a high level of awareness of how he was positioned within the power dynamics in the classroom. When there had been a focus on cleaning jobs, he was the most resistant and critical student of this identity position imposed on learners. He often made jokes in Arabic and problematised it:

Mary: I'm going to read you a story. Can you please listen and put the pictures in the right order? [see Figure 3 below]

Omar: According to what you listen [translating the teacher's instruction to his classmates]

Mary: Carlos is from the Kongo in Africa. He goes to class at Northeast College.

Omar: To learn cooking and cleaning (sarcastically talking to Hassan and Adham)

Mary: He wants to be a cook or a cleaner.

Omar: You see! I told you. That's what you're [College] good at! (laughs) Teaching us cooking and cleaning (laughs)

(classroom observation, 09/05/17)

Another example is when the teacher presented British values and the Pre-entry learners were asked to do a poster about British values (see Figure 4 below), he was the only learner to question the concept:

Amina: British values means القيم البريطانية

Omar: We also have values it's the same...it's not something exclusive to them (laughs).

(classroom observation, 09/05/17)

Omar was also offended by Mary's use of "shhh" when the class became noisy:

Can you tell Mary about 'shhh'? Tell her 'Omar thinks it's impolite'. If I knew how to say it in English, I'd politely tell her myself that it's disrespectful. Didn't they teach us to say 'please' every other word?! In return, she can't say shhh to us...pardon me we're not children.

(interview, 01/04/17)

In the Syrian culture, "shhh" or "hshhh" could be used to stop animals while walking, which explained Omar's resentment with this sound. (We should note that Mary was very understanding of this cultural nuance and she in fact stopped using it when Omar's concern was passed to her).

Figure 3. An exercise about cleaning in the Pre-entry class



Figure 4. A poster created by the Pre-entry learners about British values



The above examples of Omar's approach to learning English, participation behaviour, and critical stance in the classroom could be attributed to his confidence and assertiveness that came with being a member of the middle-classes (Bourdieu 1984; 1993). Through agency, Omar resisted being positioned as inferior to British people and their culture and values and sometimes set up a counter-discourse (Giroir 2014a; Norton 2000; Talmy 2004; see Chapter 2); he resisted the "cleaner and cook" discourse which denied his occupational identity that formed "his sense of himself" and positioned him as incompetent. Omar equated himself with the teacher and imposed his own cultural rules in the same way his teacher did. His middle-class capital and confidence enabled him to violate the typical rules of use between supposedly "legitimate" speakers of English and "imposters" (Bourdieu 1977), and challenge the identities traditionally ascribed to refugees. In these accounts, Omar seemed to be concerned with one issue: how he was positioned in the classroom. His resistance and performing as "the most knowledgeable" and "confident" student in the class protected him from potential threats to his social class identity and simultaneously increased his language learning and participation opportunities. Omar's comments touch on issues similar to those found in Block (2007) when his participant, Silvia, dealt with her teacher and one of her classmates through "class-consciousness" and was concerned about how she was treated by her teacher (p.136).

#### **4.1.3.2. Sami: competitiveness and superiority**

Like Omar, Sami appeared to be extremely invested in the ESOL classroom and devoted a lot of time at home to do revision. Classroom observation showed that he seemed invested in the classroom practices he encountered, was keen to progress quickly, and willing to ask the teacher questions for clarifications, but was also impatient with his own mistakes. About Sami and his regular classroom partner, Amaan, the teacher said:

They started with enormous enthusiasm which is wonderful...They're quite competitive which is fine. I think there's a frustration on their part that they can't proceed more quickly...they are very attentive very very attentive and Sami in particular asks questions a lot, where a lot of the others would just accept what you say...he doesn't accept, he was 'but why but why'. I have to say they are a delight to teach...

(Hazel, interview, 28/06/17)

It was also observed that when Sami was assigned to pairs and groups, he would assume the identity of the "knowledgeable student" or "teacher", in his classmates' accounts, and would explain what the exercise was about without being asked by his classmates. His classroom performance could be understood with reference to the identity position that he claimed as the "top" student in the classroom, which did not seem to represent the reality:

Hazel (teacher): There has been some disappointment particularly on the part of Sami... [because he was not moved up to Entry 2. Yet, he was eventually]

Amina: Sami seems to have high expectations of himself. He said that he's the number 1 student in the classroom...

Hazel: He's not number 1...

(interview, 28/06/17)

Someone like Sami, similar to the experiences of Block's participant (2007), Silvia, who had enjoyed having an excess of economic and social capital and was called the "boss", would not accept anything but a superior position in the class. From his self-ascribed identity positions as the number 1 and knowledgeable student (in contrast to the teacher's views), Sami seemed to be very invested in the classroom practices and competed with his classmates. This pushed him to invest more in learning English and be attentive and provided him with more opportunities to practise English. In other words, Sami's competitiveness, attentiveness and superiority were attempts to construct valued and legitimate identity positions that he no longer enjoyed as a result of immigration and his limited English in the outside world. However, Sami's classroom performance also seemed to influence how he was perceived by his classmates, which will be the focus of the following sections.

To sum up, Omar's and Sami's performance of class-inflected identities in the classroom gave them a sense of security and entitlement that they did not have access to in the outside world, and pushed them further to commit to learning English. The analysis underscores how they carved out audible and powerful identity positions in the classroom as opposed to the powerlessness they sometimes felt in the outside world. The language classroom was not only a space to learn English but also served as a social site for learners to have a voice and do identity work in a safe place. The importance of this social site was intensified considering the scarcity of social capital in the refugee learners' lives as expressed by Omar:

Students aren't to blame when they talk in the class...because I'm living like a prisoner, when I start talking with Adham, I forget that I'm in the class...the college is much much more of a social place...

(phone diary, 22/06/17)

#### **4.1.4. Repercussions and complications of class performance in the ESOL class**

This section presents a discussion of the down side of Omar's and Sami's class-mediated participation and behaviour in the ESOL classroom.

##### **4.1.4.1. How was Omar positioned by his classmates?**

As discussed earlier, Omar brought his middle-class identity to the classroom, which impinged directly on how he positioned and was positioned by others. However, the impact was not wholly positive. It was observed that Omar acted like a teacher in his interactions with his classmates and his ESOL teacher, and took on leadership roles to renegotiate his identity and reinvent himself. Examples included: (1) telling his classmates what to do by

translating the teacher's instructions (see the British values example), (2) paraphrasing and translating their answers to the teacher, (3) his display of knowledge and previous work experience, (4) answering questions without being called by the teacher, and (5) knocking on the desk when the class got loud. As his teacher notes:

He's very dominant in the class because he likes to talk (laughs) you know. He's not shutting up (laughs).

(Mary, interview, 12/07/17)

The teacher sometimes ignored Omar's answers and made no eye contact with him to give other learners the opportunity to participate. His dominating behaviour seemed to distance him from *some* Syrian class members and created a social conflict. When paired up with Hassan, for example, Hassan participated unwillingly or refused to work with Omar, thereby limiting his and Omar's learning opportunities. Eventually, Hassan left the Syrian male table and moved to the Sudanese male one (classroom observation, 14/06/17). Similarly, when Nadeema was asked about her seating preferences:

Not with Omar, he's arrogant. When a question arises, he immediately starts answering...He doesn't give you the opportunity...even if he gives a wrong answer. He just wants to show you that he understands and knows better than you...

(phone diary, 08/07/17)

Omar's stories, albeit in different ways, are not dissimilar to Block's participant (2012), Carlos, whose generally middle-class habitus put him at a distance from his working-class English workmates in the workplace, thus limiting his opportunities to further improve his English (see further similar examples in Kayi-Aydar 2014).

According to Omar, it was hard for him *not* to speak and participate in the classroom:

I work with the teacher and feel like I'm the most knowledgeable student in the class...all students say 'you do participate in the class'. I thought to myself 'why do I do this? Why do I participate while I'm powerless outside the class?!...My point is that I participate with the teacher *unconsciously*. It's something *unconscious*.

(Omar, interview, 16/09/17)

Participation in the class for Omar was not solely about speaking and dominance. Rather, it was an act of identity; a quest for a lost but valued identity. His need to be listened to and valued in the ESOL classroom was inextricably linked and intertwined with his ongoing struggle to be respected in his new social and cultural milieu. Further, Omar's reaction towards how he was perceived by his classmates seemed also to be indexed by his higher-class identity. He did not seem to be concerned that his dominant behaviour might have been interpreted as inappropriate or that he was limiting his classmates' opportunities to participate or speak. He did not acknowledge the adoption of a teacher-like identity position that he had no entitlement to in the context of the classroom. Rather, his concern was the

discrepancy between his performance in and outside the class. When Hassan refused to work with him, Omar commented that “It’s his problem not mine” (interview, 01/04/17) and asked Mary, or myself, to work with him. Omar positioned some class members as slow to understand and “easily distracted” and criticised some behaviours as culturally inappropriate such as leaving the class without permission.

Although Omar’s representation of his social class in the classroom which was read by others as “showing off” was a core factor which contributed to excluding him from some activity in the class, there were two additional factors at play. Firstly, Omar’s language and comprehension skills seemed to be better than most learners in the Pre-entry class:

I think Omar is way way ahead of me...even of Hassan...he understands more than we do...

(Adham, phone diary, 18/05/17)

This discrepancy was threatening to some learners who perhaps saved face through positioning him as a non-member of the classroom community or “arrogant”. Further, it is worth noting that the two learners, Hassan and Nadeema, who strongly distanced themselves from Omar were shy learners, and they reported that they felt inhibited to participate in the classroom (as we shall see later in this chapter and Chapter 6).

#### **4.1.4.2. How was Sami positioned by his classmates?**

When asked about the students he preferred to work with, Sami indirectly invoked social class:

Honestly what’s happening in the class is that we’re all putting on airs...I don’t like to work in pairs and groups...Once I work with students they begin to boastfully show their information. We’re all on the same boat we know nothing...

(interview, 08/05/17)

In this excerpt, Sami referred to what seemed to be a question of his middle-class identity. Through his two interviews and classroom observation, Sami strongly manifested a sense of superiority over his classmates. Working in pairs/groups could threaten his identity as the “top” student. When Sami was sometimes paired up with Sudanese peers in class, he was not fully engaged and his tone was authoritative. He distanced himself from some Sudanese learners and made reference to their race and classroom social and cultural behaviour. I understand the above examples as a reflection of Sami’s high sense of class-consciousness, worth and superiority. How would an important person like Sami learn from refugees who “know nothing”? Sami appeared to strongly deny the fact that immigration and the classroom conditions placed him in a less powerful position where other students might have known better than him.

Like Omar, Sami’s class identification appeared to shape how he was positioned by his Syrian classmates. His three Syrian classmates, Waard, Rania and Amaan,

professed a tenuous relationship with Sami. When I asked Amaan which students he liked to work with, he described Sami as “very sensitive” (interview, 06/06/17). Amaan also criticised Sami’s continuous complaining about the situation of refugees in the UK. Sami and Amaan were close friends, but the strong relationship started to change over time. Sami’s continuous “showing off” contributed to the change in their relationship. Rania also reported trying to avoid working with Sami in the classroom. As the classroom observation showed, she answered Sami’s questions with yes or no without elaborating. When asked Rania why, her husband, Adham, responded as follows:

I asked her not to work with him. He’s nosey and takes up the role of the teacher.

(member check, 14/12/18)

Aligning with Omar, Sami appeared to adopt identity positions that he had no right to in the classroom. This ultimately shaped how he was positioned by his Syrian classmates and constrained his possibilities for interaction in the classroom. In this regard, his class identity was a constraining social discursive frame. The analysis suggests that “social class is alive and well in the language classroom or, in any case, in students’ understandings of what is going on in the language classroom with regard to their relationships with fellow students” (Block 2014: 154). Social class shapes learners’ understanding of who they are in relation to the classroom community and hence their experiences of learning English.

#### **4.1.5. Concluding remarks**

As evidenced in the data, Omar’s and Sami’s social class was “multilayered and sometimes contradictory” especially in terms of how they positioned and were positioned in and outside the ESOL classrooms (Shin 2014: 99). It was their class identity that greatly motivated them to learn English so they could leverage it to occupy more valuable and respected identity positions, but it also sometimes put them at a distance from their classmates and denied them English learning and belonging opportunities. Thus far, I have discussed Omar and Sami for whom the *financial* capital was the main marker of their middle-classness. I turn now to present the story of Waard who basically identified himself with *cultural* capital. I set out with a panoramic view of his life in Syria and the UK. This is followed by the advantages and disadvantages of his cultural capital on his sense of self and experiences of learning English.

#### **4.2. Waard: an emphasis on cultural capital**

Waard said that it was his cultural rather than economic capital that gave him unique means of self-representation and respect in his village in Syria where people were very impressed by his vast knowledge. In his interviews, Waard placed value on the following aspects of his life in Syria: his university education, his profession as a teacher for 15 years, his love of reading and books (“a book worm”), his way of talking and social

presentation, his vast knowledge of poetry, history, geography and Arabic literature, his calligraphy and woodworking skills, his drawing and playing multiple sports. His intellect was the most salient identity inscription that he referred to:

I spent my whole life gathering and memorising general information in addition to studying Arabic language...

(interview, 18/04/17)

He mentioned the word “knowledge” 11 times in his data. In contrast to Omar and Sami who were middle-class in terms of wealth, Waard was more middle-class in intellectual, educational and occupational terms.

Following a critical incident in which Waard reported that his teacher identity, an important aspect of his self-concept, was humiliated, he decided to leave Syria:

Every human being has dignity, and especially teachers!...Loads of experienced school teachers were queuing up to get paid and then an army soldier shouted in an insulting way ‘you bloody animals stand in the queue’...Here, I thought it’s time to leave..

(interview, 18/04/17)

Like Sami and Omar, albeit from a different perspective, Waard considered himself to have a superior identity position due to his teacher identity. He argued that teachers had more dignity and should have been treated with more respect than other people:

Not everyone can be a teacher.

(interview, 06/12/17)

Waard then took a three-month “suicidal journey” from Syria to the UK. A year later he was united with his wife and 5 children. Among the participants, Waard and his family lived the longest time in Syria in the war (4 years), and had already lost their economic capital by the time they left for the UK. Thus, moving to the UK was not a devaluing of their financial conditions. Rather, they were appreciative of the safety and the living conditions they were granted here. In contrast to Omar and Sami, Waard expressed disapproval of the Syrians who complained about their material, and refugee, status and called it “arrogance”. This indicates what was important to Waard’s notion of identity; during interviews, he emphasised that money was never a priority for him.

#### **4.2.1. Mobilising cultural capital: “Knowledge is better than wealth”**

Waard distinguished between economic and cultural capital, and maintained that cultural capital was far more beneficial and central to his sense of his own identity:

As Ali Ibn Abi Talib<sup>30</sup> (Prophet Mohammad’s cousin) says: ‘Knowledge is better than wealth. You have to guard your wealth, but knowledge will guard You. When knowledge

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<sup>30</sup> The Arabic quotation is:

مثل ما بقول علي بن أبي طالب العلم خير من المال، العلم يحرسك وانت تحرس المال، العلم يربو على الانفاق والمال ينقصه الانفاق بمعنى انو انا المعلومات عندي مخزنة بصندوق الذاكرة فاني اينما انتقلت و اينما حلت...انا مضيت حياتي بين الكتب يسموني بودة الكتب...

is distributed it increases, while when wealth is distributed it decreases'. What I mean is that knowledge is stored in my mind no matter where I go...I spent my whole life reading books. I was called a book worm...

(interview, 06/12/17)

Waard's religiously-based argument was that: even though he moved into a linguistically and culturally new community of practice, his previous symbolic capital that he had accumulated could still serve as assets to him. The question is: how did Waard's sense of identity, built around the value that he placed on his mobilised cultural capital, impact on his disposition and approach to learning English?

Waard was extremely invested in learning English and made use of every opportunity to progress. He perceived English as another "sporting challenge" which required passion, time, gradual progress, "mental preparation", hard work, and patience before one could reap the result (interview, 18/04/17) - a very different stance from that of Sami and Omar who expressed their disappointment in the time required for learning English. According to Waard, English was more than a medium of survival and interaction; rather, it was (1) the means through which his identity as an educated and intellectual man and a proactive seeker of knowledge would be constructed and expressed and (2) the tool to reposition refugees from the normative position of ignorant and a burden to that of educated and productive:

My friend asked me when I'll be top in English...I said when I can do crossword puzzles, a big challenge!...when I can deliver a lecture in English...I have a message that we Syrian people are active and productive not ignorant. How would I deliver this message without English? If my [ESOL] teachers and I happen to stand in front of maps of Europe and Britain, for instance, I probably know much more than they do, but my information is in Arabic not in English.

(Waard, interview, 18/04/17)

Not only was English a form of symbolic capital and social power, but, more importantly, it was a site of identity construction, negotiation, and reconstruction (Weedon 1997). Waard's imagined sense of self in English was highly ambitious, including scenes of giving a lecture and doing crossword puzzles, which required a high level of English. While the most salient concern in Omar's and Sami's accounts was the loss of their power, independence and wealth, it was the loss of voice and the desire to be heard in Waard's case. To sum up, because Waard had a great sense of investment in his intellect, he was extremely invested in learning English; his symbolic capital was the underlying motivation which encouraged him to learn English and set ambitious goals and be patient.

Another different, and more concrete, way Waard's identity as an intellectual and educated man positively enhanced his experiences of learning English was through transferring the skills that he had deployed while studying the Arabic language into learning English. He reported following an analytical, systematic approach in learning English which

involved, for instance, seeking information from several sources and comparing them and selecting the most trusted one. Having these study skills enabled Waard to do a great amount of independent learning, which was recognised by his teacher:

Waard is a little bit different [from Sami and Amaan]. I think because of Waard's background as a teacher of Arabic very different way of learning. I think he's doing an awful lot of learning independently...because he's way ahead of the others...

(Hazel, interview, 28/06/17)

Waard thought that the other students were not making the required progress because they did not do autonomous learning (shadowing, 09/10/17). Influenced by his analytical study of the Arabic language, Waard reported an interest in analysing the English grammar and comparing it with the Arabic one:

Some people might say English conversation is good, but I like to understand what I'm saying I like systematic studying...why they say this not this I mean grammar...I don't like shallow studying.

(interview, 18/04/17)

When lessons focused on grammar rules or spelling, it was observed that Waard became very participatory and enthusiastic. English for him was a language of thinking. By contrast, Omar and Sami often complained about the difficulty of learning English, particularly grammar and writing, because, by their own acknowledgement, they did not know *how* to study. Thus, Waard's intellectual identity and cultural capital made the transition to the UK setting and learning English easier for him than for Omar and Sami. Waard seemed to be more reconciled with the disruption that occurred to his identity as his transferable cultural capital gave him a degree of enoughness and resilience. Finally, his previous teacher identity contributed positively into his acceptability and approachability in the ESOL classroom, which will be examined in the following section.

#### **4.2.2. Performing (his) teacher identity in the classroom**

In the ESOL classroom, Waard's previous professional identity as a teacher was acknowledged and respected by his classmates and teacher:

Some people like studying. Look at Waard he studies hard and he's a very educated and lovely man. He loves to study and knows the grammar of Arabic...

(Amaan, interview, 06/06/17)

Waard explains to me...he's very respectful. He explains, talks and presents his opinions in a respectful manner...

(Rania, phone diary, 08/06/17)

She [the teacher] asks him to write on the board so that he can remember his old days of being a teacher (laughs)

(Sami, classroom observation, 05/09/17)

Classroom observation showed that Waard demonstrated a confident and professional way of explaining grammar and spelling to his Arabic-speaking classmates at his table. His voice was heard, respected, and appreciated. This was different to the experiences of Omar and Sami whose teacher-like positioning was not always accepted. This may be linked to the fact that Waard had been a teacher for 15 years and, although he sometimes took on teacher-like roles, he did not seem to violate the classroom rules such as answering without being called by the teacher or translating or explaining without being asked by his classmates. The fact that Waard's teacher identity was validated and acknowledged by his classmates appeared to have a positive impact on his sense of self:

Sumayya [his Iraqi regular partner in the classroom] sometimes asked me questions. Her spoken language is very advanced, yet she asked me questions 'why is this?' I thought to myself 'who am I to be asked by her?' This raised my spirits and confidence.

(Waard, member check, 20/01/19)

This positive positioning in turn increased the prospects for Waard to forge the identity of a successful language learner and stimulated his engagement and investment in the classroom practices and in learning English.

Unlike Norton's participant, Katarina, whose professional identity was not acknowledged by her English teacher (2000), Waard expressed an awareness and an appreciation of his teacher's acknowledgement of his teacher identity. This, consequently, motivated Waard to prove that he deserved this added value and respect:

She [the teacher] once said to my classmates at the table 'I'm responsible for the class and Waard is responsible for your table he was a teacher'. This lifted my spirits...I feel that she [Hazel] respects the fact that I was a teacher. Thus, I should not let her down...I need to reward that respect through being attentive and respecting her...I should work hard...

(Waard, interview, 06/12/17)

As noted earlier, Waard had great investment in his teacher identity, "the word 'Mr' is priceless" (Waard, interview, 06/12/17). It was important that his professional identity was acknowledged by his ESOL teacher, a fellow professional and a member of his imagined community when he was no longer an actual member of this community. This validation had a positive impact on his investment in learning English; he worked hard to prove that he was entitled to this respect. The social conditions created by his teacher through incorporating aspects of his class capital into the classroom facilitated his social participation and made him more engaged in learning English; they were "investment-inspiring" (Block 2007: 108). This demonstrates that "the historically and socially constructed identity of learners influences the subject position they take up in the language classroom and the relationship they establish with the language teacher" (Norton 2013a: 179). Compared with Omar and Sami, Waard seemed to be more successful in mobilising his class capital and developing a personal and coherent narrative of membership in his

ESOL class where he inhabited a desirable identity position that leveraged directly from his cultural capital in Syria: “knowledge is better than money”.

#### **4.2.3. Restrictive effects of class on learning English in the ESOL classroom**

Waard’s symbolic capital, however, appeared to have restrictive effects on his learning of English. As a reflection of his teacher identity and interest in grammar, he seemed to be more invested in accuracy rather than fluency, which explained his initial hesitance to speak as pointed out by his teacher:

Because of his background as a teacher one of the interesting things is his reluctance at the beginning to just try out a sentence. He had to get it right before he was prepared to it...Whereas some of the other students they would try it out and they’re not embarrassed or feel ashamed if they’d made a mistake...

(Hazel, interview, 28/06/17)

It was also observed that Waard overused the word “sorry” in the classroom. If he mispronounced a word or answered a question wrongly, he would say sorry in an emphatic way implying that errors should not be made. The social meaning of Waard’s initial reluctance to speak and his overuse of “sorry” must be understood with reference to his image of a teacher. A teacher, from his perspective, should be prepared to answer *all* students’ questions to avoid the embarrassment and “humiliation” of not knowing. “I’ll check” or “It could mean” were not phrases that he used as a teacher. Speaking from the identity of the teacher rather than the student, Waard was conscious of his errors and overused “sorry” in the ESOL classroom. Furthermore, unlike Omar and Sami, when Waard did not understand something, he did not ask the teacher to repeat or re-explain. He found it difficult to show his lack of knowledge in front of a fellow professional - “my dignity is precious” (Waard, interview, 18/04/17).

Having examined Waard’s investment in the classroom, the next section extends the line of argument by discussing how Waard acted regarding the marginalisation that he was faced with outside the ESOL classroom.

#### **4.2.4. Where cultural capital was not enough: “deaf and dumb” in the outside world**

Although Waard’s voice seemed to be heard and respected in the classroom, he narrated two stories where he was made to feel devalued and powerless in the outside world because he could not express himself. The first incident was when he got on the bus with his baby pushchair full of shopping. The driver got angry and another passenger spent the whole journey criticising angrily Waard’s “backward” behaviour. Neither could Waard understand everything they said nor was he able to defend himself:

They think that we’re ignorant, backward, uneducated or we don’t think...If I could speak English, I might have defended myself and explained why I did what I did.

(Waard, shadowing, 13/06/17)

It was not only the language barrier...Let's suppose that I confronted that grumpy passenger, what would happen then? He's a native English man and I'm a foreigner...We're foreigners here and that's why he crossed the lines.

(Waard, member check, 20/01/19)

From the identity position of an illegitimate community member or a foreigner in someone else's country, Waard felt that he did not have a rightful place in certain speech acts, such as confronting and defending himself. The identity of the foreigner or the outsider denied Waard the right to speak. Waard was acutely aware of the power imbalance and was afraid of the consequences. Further, his limited speaking skills further complicated his inferior identity positions. Waard's articulation of the "ignorant", "backward", and "foreigner" identities was an example of "how identities are produced in collaboration with others" (Giroir 2011: 175). These identities were neither exclusively Waard's invention, nor explicitly generated, in this instance, by the bus driver and the passenger on the bus. Rather, they were an interaction of identity positions prioritised in Waard's identity work (educated and intellectual) and essentialised identities embedded within the larger social discourses around immigrants and refugees (ignorant and foreigners).

The second incident that Waard described was when his daughter got lost and he called the police. The police treated him as a suspect and searched the house from top to bottom. Waard commented:

I wished I hadn't come to the UK. They suspected me as a complicit. My daughter was lost and I was burning inside...

(interview, 06/12/17)

In these situations, Waard reported feeling like he was "deaf and dumb", a figurative motif that he used to convey the disorientation of identity that he felt as a result of his limited English and the inequitable normative discourses around refugees. Like Omar and Sami, these feelings of powerlessness, inaudibility, and illegitimacy stood markedly in contrast to the powerful and respected identity positions that he had established in the ESOL class.

#### **4.2.5. A summary of cases**

Ultimately, an examination of Omar's, Sami's and Waard's great sense of investment in learning English can only get us so far if our goal is to arrive at a thorough understanding of them as "classed" language learners (Block 2014: 154). Social class was a two-edged factor which offered them both affordances and constraints to their trajectories of learning English and identity negotiation. The classroom became an important and fertile ground for them to perform their class identities safely, while their identities were rendered sometimes powerless, inaudible, or seemed to be on hold in the outside world. They sought refuge in the classroom that multiplied implicit, indirect opportunities for class identity performance and provided opportunities for agency in the expression of self.

Having discussed Omar, Sami, and Waard who were identified as middle-class individuals, the chapter moves to report the experiences of the couple Hassan and Hiba who came from a working-class background in Syria. I set out with a panoramic view of their lives in Syria and Lebanon, followed by a picture of the bearings, disadvantages and contradiction their class identity had on their sense of self and their stake in learning English. I finally present some scenes from the classroom and briefly discuss the intersectionality of social class with other identity elements and the contradiction that the performance of social class entailed in Hassan's learning of English.

### **4.3. Hassan and Hiba: from unvalued to valued human beings**

From a background affording little in terms of economic, social, and cultural capital, the couple reported living a humble life in Syrian, in a small village with a population of less than 1000. The main occupations in the village were farming, animal husbandry and petty trading. The village had primary and secondary schools but not a high school. Both Hiba and Hassan had had 6 years of schooling and so had all their siblings. Although Hassan worked "day and night", Hiba noted that he could not provide all the family's needs and the family was "in debt" (interview, 30/04/17). Thus, Hassan immigrated to work in Libya and Lebanon, where he expressed feeling devalued and humiliated. The family immigrated to Lebanon in 2013 after the situation worsened in Syria, joining Hassan who had already been working there. By their acknowledgment, they lived with their 5 children in one room which worked also as a kitchen and a bathroom in a predominantly Shia area, which placed extra constraints on them as Sunni Muslims. Like all the participants who came from Lebanon except for Sami, the couple reported that the Syrians were racialised and perceived as "nothing" and "outcasts" in Lebanon. Hassan and Hiba provided many examples: the struggle to find cemeteries which took Syrian bodies including those of children; beatings; being spat at; arrests of Syrians and cursing their Sunni religious beliefs; blaming Syrians for the death of Lebanese fighters in Syria; and the straining of resources and tempers in Lebanon. From the identities of outcasts and nothing that were socially imposed on them, Hassan and Hiba expressed feelings of non-entitlement/illegitimacy to voice any form of agency or resistance in their lives prior to coming to the UK.

For Hassan and Hiba, unlike Omar, Sami and Waard, coming to England did not involve a restriction or reduction of their identities; rather, they recorded it as a massive reinvention and expansion of their sense of self:

I feel I AM a human being here I'm respected no more no less...In Syria, you have the name of a human being, but you're not. You're a slave to the person you're working for.

(Hassan, interview, 30/04/17)

In Syria, we lived a very very simple life...life here is as different as the earth from the sky...

(Hiba, phone diary, 01/02/18)

Hassan's appreciation of his value as a respected "human being" with rights in the UK was mentioned 10 times in his interviews. Hiba agreed with Hassan:

We had no rights in Syria.

(interview, 30/04/17)

Both Hassan and Hiba were remarkably hopeful about their future in the UK and were the only participants who stated that British people were far friendlier than Syrian people - a very different viewpoint from that of most participants, particularly Sami and Waard, who were proud of their Syrian national identity. Hiba confirmed:

If a woman bumps into you on the bus, she would give you a smile...people are friendlier...women, men all people smile at you...People here are better than in Syria and Lebanon.

(interview, 30/04/17)

To summarise, due to the increase of the couple's material resources and social acceptance, their sense of self was extended and reassessed. New ways of being and doing were offered to them in their new communities of practice - they were more of a "human being".

#### **4.3.1. Linking investment in new communities of practice with learning English**

Hassan's and Hiba's class-inflected identity shift from unvalued to valued human beings resulted in a strong stake in their new community, which seemed to have a positive impact on their investment in learning English. When asked about this, they said:

Firstly, let me clarify that I did love this country and my main aim of learning English is to find a job.

(Hassan, interview, 29/08/17)

My wish is to understand people when they talk to me... honestly I loved all British people yeah all of them...I want to talk and understand people and be understood...

(Hiba, interview, 29/08/17)

The couple highlighted a strong link between their love for England and British people and their motivation to learn English, the language that would connect them with the society that offered them valued and expansive identities that they were deprived of as members of a low class in their home country. English would enable Hassan to find a job where he would not be treated as a "slave" "with no rights". This positive, enthusiastic disposition towards learning English contradicted Sami's class theory, which we noted earlier (see Section 4.1):

Some Syrians were dead in Lebanon and Syria but came back to life here...Those people were probably porters or even unemployed and their financial situation was extremely appalling...That's why when they came here, they're not bothered about English or how they're treated...

(interview, 08/05/17)

In fact, it was the change from rightless working-class individuals into respected members that made Hassan and Hiba enthusiastic to learn English; they were "bothered about English".

#### **4.3.2. Creating interactional opportunities from "novice" and/or "foreigner" identities**

Additionally, Hassan's and Hiba's class background mediated how they positioned British people and how they positioned themselves relationally to British people, and influenced the identity positions they took up. As discussed earlier, the couple felt very valued and respected in England, and this positioning made them extremely enthusiastic to become part of the host community. Hassan and Hiba took up the identity of a novice or a foreigner whose responsibility was to interact and integrate in the host community and this class-related identity position informed their participation behaviour and integration trajectory. They maintained that the only obstacle to integrate with British people was language; had they spoken English, British people would be more than happy to talk with them:

Hassan: Once you learn English, you can integrate in community. By the way they [British people] like people who talk...If you talk with them, they would talk with you! I was sitting in the city centre park when a man sat next to me and started talking. I couldn't understand everything. If I could speak English, he could possibly become my friend and introduce me to the area. Once one learns English, life will change for the better...

Hiba: It's just the language, just the language.

(interview, 30/04/17)

Aligning with the Acculturation model (Schumann 1978; 1986; see Chapter 2), Hiba and Hassan were the only participants who placed a heavy onus on themselves and other immigrants to integrate and maximise contact with British people who were thought to be happy to invest in talking with them. Hassan noted that British people were very collaborative and tried hard to understand him and make themselves understood, and that blame should be laid on immigrants or foreigners who were unworthy of participation and interaction:

How would they interact with you if you don't speak like them? I don't blame them. When your neighbour knows that you can't understand him, he<sup>31</sup> won't talk to you...

(Hassan, interview, 29/08/17)

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<sup>31</sup> In Arabic, the pronoun "he" can be used to refer to both genders in general.

A legitimate question arises here: what was the relationship between the identity position that Hassan and Hiba adopted and learning English? The identity position of the “novice” encouraged Hassan and Hiba to show initiative to create relationships with British people, which afforded them, as we shall see, more opportunities to speak English. For them, it was the responsibility of the novice/foreigner at the periphery rather than the expert community to negotiate the right to speak. If the onus was on immigrants, then, Hiba and Hassan should take an action, and that was what they did. They were keener than any of the participants in this study to negotiate participation rights in their host community. They narrated how their “grumpy” English neighbour, Jo, initially did not say hello or even smile at them. However, like some participants in Giroir (2014a), Kinginger (2004), and Norton (2000), the couple was not discouraged by that marginalisation. Instead, they both started cooking and sending food regularly to her. Hiba added that she gave her neighbour gift vouchers that she could not use for religious reasons. Since then, the relationship took a turn for the best and Jo became the family friend:

After we started sending food to her, she began to change for the better. The other day I was carrying lots of shopping and a big bag of onions...she ran for me and carried with me the onion bag. I swear by God food makes miracles (laughs). I should send her food every day (laughs)...she tries to speak with me...I understand some...

(Hiba, phone diary, 01/02/18)

Through food, a non-linguistic tool, Hassan and Hiba became accepted members and successfully gained the right to speak and be listened to by their neighbour. Food rather than language was the discursive practice through which they were able to influence their present circumstances and created more speaking English opportunities. This can be regarded as a simple example that integration can happen even when immigrants have not yet mastered the language of the host community. Integration efforts may involve language, but it is not limited to it. The couple also reported fostering good neighbourly relations with another English male neighbour who talked with them whenever he saw them. Further, Hassan described how he often offered the bus drivers fruits and food and was delighted that he was never turned down.

In addition, in an interview with the BBC<sup>32</sup>, Hassan complained about the lack of interaction opportunities due to their identities as outsiders with limited English:

I said to the presenter I've been here for a year, from home to college and from college to home. I want to mingle with English people in order to be part of community. I've come to this country to integrate with society...Then, they assigned us a lady. She's lovely and respectful...she's like a tourist guide...

(interview, 30/04/17)

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<sup>32</sup> The BBC is a British organisation which broadcasts programmes on radio and television. BBC is an abbreviation for 'British Broadcasting Corporation'.

The British volunteer visited the family each Saturday, introduced them to the culture, city and her family, and helped Hassan looking for jobs. They travelled and shared food, and Hiba expressed great happiness and excitement that the British volunteer loved her food. Social outings with the volunteer, and sometimes her family, opened up greater possibilities for social interaction for the couple and their family. On outings, Hassan boasted that he sometimes offered British people food and they accepted it. This helped the family develop a sense of acceptance and belonging and allowed them some social capital. Through taking up a position of accountability and initiative, Hassan and Hiba succeeded to some degree in achieving a positive and transformative stance of their previous positioning in Syria and Lebanon. They repositioned themselves from unvalued low-class members with no rights into accepted members who had the right to speak and be listened to. "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" (Pavlenko 2001a: 319-320).

Thus, the couple's strategic manoeuvres are a sobering reminder of the diverse, multiple identity positions from which language learners are able to participate in social life and speak, and demonstrate how learners can, but sometimes cannot, appropriate more desirable identities that prompt them to integrate into the new community and take more opportunities to speak English (Norton 2000). Like the participant in Kinginger (2004), the couple's strong stake in their host communities and learning English could be understood as a quest to break free of the confining chains of their previous lower social status and class identities and to "reorient" (and in some ways reinvent) themselves in the world (p.240). It is interesting how Hassan's and Hiba's low-class capital in Syria and Lebanon granted them more opportunities to gain linguistic, social and cultural capital in the UK setting.

#### **4.3.3. A comparison from a social class perspective**

As the above stories illustrate, Hassan and Hiba were highly invested in their integration and belonging to the host community which had not failed them as their home country had. I see their participation and integration trajectory as a reflection of their low social class and one of the interesting differences between Hassan and Hiba on the one hand and Omar, Sami, and Waard on the other. The couple's narratives centered on opening up to new social and cultural worlds, not without pain and ambivalence. By contrast, Omar, Sami and Waard rarely referred to their relationship with English people. Their referral was to point out structures of marginalisation and inferiorisation such as their experiences at the Jobcentre. They identified themselves as a "burden", "backward", and unloved in relation to the larger host community; these participants' stories were "stories of non-participation" (Giroir 2011: 167). Like Block's participant, Carlos, (2006b; 2012), they did not have a

strong sense of investment in their wider communities because their class capital and past identities were not validated yet or acknowledged. Much of their identity work was done in the context of the ESOL classroom where there were prospects for performing their class capital and powerful identities. Their narrativisation mostly focused on the loss of power and voice in this new milieu; it was individualistic, while Hassan's and Hiba's was more communal and had a greater sense of interculturality. For Omar, Sami, and Waard, life in the UK involved a life, and identities, "reversed" (Giroir 2011). For Hassan and Hiba, it was a fresh remodelling, transformative experience of identity. Individuals who enjoyed middle-class positions seemed to be much more affected by this condescension. My question here is to what extent would this state of affairs remain the same had Omar, Sami, and Waard progressed more in English and were able to put their knowledge and skills into practice and claim more powerful identities. Would the situation be reversed to their benefit?

Thus far, I have discussed the ways Hassan's and Hiba's class status was an enhancing identity category of the processes of English learning and socialisation. In what follows, I delineate the somewhat constraining effects of their class background on their experiences of identity negotiation and learning of English.

#### **4.3.4. Lack of voice and agency: feelings of illegitimacy and disempowerment**

As discussed previously, due to their class positioning, Hassan and Hiba reported being disrespected and undervalued in Syria. In Lebanon, the situation was not very different. From powerless subject positions, the couple felt unentitled to exercise their agency and had a lower sense of control. However, although, as the sections above outline, they had positive social experiences in the UK, they were still frightened to speak up and exercise agency when treated unfairly as the following illustrative examples show. They expressed worry that an act of agency could endanger their refugee status in the UK. As noted in Chapter 2, Hassan and Hiba initially rejected the invitation to participate in the project:

We were worried that the recordings could be accessed by somebody [British people in authority]... You know we ran away from problems, we don't want any problems here.

(Hassan, interview, 29/08/17)

On another note, when I asked the couple if they faced any racism or incidents where they were positioned negatively, they answered:

We've been here for two years, we've not been through even one incident...

(Hassan, interview, 29/08/17)

How come people say that British people are racists?!

(Hiba, interview, 30/04/17)

The couple were asked the same question by their ESOL teachers, and they gave the same answer complimenting English people. However, during interviews and diaries many significant racist and marginalising incidents floated on the surface.

Hassan and Hiba narrated an accident where their 10-year-old child had a fight with their neighbour's child, and the police came. The neighbour (Jo) at that time was not yet their friend. Jo came shouting and blaming Hassan's and Hiba's son for the fight. It turned out that Jo's child started the fight, and Jo then told her son off. Hiba added that she insisted inviting Jo in and offered her tea. When I referred to this as an "incident", Hiba rejected this naming and replaced it with "children playing". They commented as follows:

Hassan: I noticed that once you speak English, you can mingle with people...my child defended himself. I didn't even understand what he'd said...

Hiba: He told her that her son had hit him...

Hassan: Jo understood and recognised that it was her son's fault. By the way, they like to talk to us...

(interview, 29/08/17)

Hassan and Hiba took the responsibility for this "accident": had they spoken English, they would have been able to defend themselves. Indeed, the accident was brought up by Hassan and Hiba to make the point that mastering English was the remedy for all problems. They did not problematise or question what the neighbour had done to them.

Hassan and Hiba went on to narrate another "story" where their English male neighbour asked Hiba if he could borrow something, but Hiba did not understand what that item was as at that time she had only been in England for one month:

Hiba: I said to him 'no English', and he started talking...I swear by God it's really really difficult and then he got cross and slammed the door angrily...

Hassan: He's a lovely man and he might have needed something.

Hiba: He wanted something...I really got upset...if I had basic English, I would have been able to manage...

(interview, 29/08/17)

Again, Hassan and Hiba placed the onus and guilt on themselves. The neighbour who shouted at Hiba and slammed the door was described as a "lovely" man who was in need. It was Hiba's fault who could not understand English, not his. Further, when their 19-year-old son, Karam, and his Syrian friend were stabbed by a group of English teenagers while arguing over the result of a football match, Hassan and Hiba, unlike the other Syrian family, did not make a complaint. When asked why, Hiba replied:

Because we didn't want to make the problem bigger...if we make a complaint, we might be subjected to more...no let the man go...we don't want to complicate the matter further...

(member check, 17/08/18)

However, Karam went to the police himself and made a complaint - something that greatly upset Hassan and Hiba. On another note, Hassan was the only male participant in the project who did not question or resist the sustained positioning of ESOL students as cleaners. He even criticised the resentment of some Syrians with the job search that focused mainly on cleaning jobs.

All the above examples are accounts ridden with feelings of illegitimacy and inferiorisation. As people whose voices were not heard, and their choices and influences were constrained by the scarcity of their material and symbolic resources, Hassan and Hiba felt that they were still unworthy of resistance and unentitled to voice their agency. As foreigners/novices with limited English and as individuals who had been made to occupy subservient identity positions in their life, they did not perceive themselves as equal to British people. Neither of their comments placed the blame or responsibility on British people even when their son was stabbed; rather, they described the events in “situational terms as a result of having a lower sense of self control” (Manstead 2018: 25). Not only did they keep silent in the face of these marginalising incidents, but they also aligned with them. They felt powerless to confront as they were worried that an act of resistance might jeopardise their acceptability and legitimacy into their new communities.

Comparing the current section with the previous one confirms that identities are “nonunitary and contradictory” (Norton 2013a: 162) and cannot be narrated in a coherent way. Coherence is particularly difficult to achieve in the case of life-story narratives as a life story is neither linear nor noncontradictory. Multiple storylines compete with varying, and often contradictory, identity positions; inconsistencies and contradictions are inherent in the make-up of our identities. It was Hassan’s and Hiba’s class-related identity position of foreigners/novices which stimulated them to negotiate more desirable identities, but also it was what rendered them sometimes voiceless and placed them at the margins of important communities to them. Their stance towards negative positioning can be compared with that of Omar, Sami and Waard who were acutely critical of how they were positioned and strongly resisted being positioned as cleaners. As people who had occupied privileged identities in their home country, they possessed a more enhanced possibility of human agency.

The next section reports briefly on Hassan’s and Hiba’s experiences of learning English in the ESOL classroom, and how social class interacted with other identity dimensions to influence contradictorily Hassan’s experiences of learning English inside and outside the ESOL classroom.

#### 4.3.5. Links between working social-class and learning English in the classroom

Both Hassan and Hiba described in detail how they were regularly and severely beaten by their teachers at primary schools in Syria. When they started attending the ESOL classroom, they found a big discrepancy in how they were treated and positioned as students in either setting although the former was 35 years ago:

Hassan: Here, they don't break spirits. They encourage you "good good" even if you're not doing all right. They say "good" because they want you to keep trying. However, in our country it's a big sin to make a mistake.

Hiba: It's a sin. They hit us with pencils on the back of our hands!...Racism is in our country not here...

(interview, 29/08/17)

Their satisfaction and appreciation of the positive climate for learning in the ESOL classroom was inextricably linked to their previous humiliating school experiences which they ascribed to their social class. Hassan explained that students in villages were more susceptible to physical abuse because of the lack of supervision in schools. Hassan and Hiba expressed strong feelings of respect and admiration for their ESOL teacher, Mary, and positioned her as a "friend". Mary visited the family three times and shared food with them. Hassan was in awe that even when he made mistakes, Mary praised him for trying. Their identity as students changed from oppressed and sufferers who were not valued into participants/"friends" of their teacher - this change factored into the general transformative project of identity in which they were engaged.

This positive climate for learning and the identity shift in Hassan's and Hiba's student identity had a constructive positive effect on their commitment and engagement in the classroom practices and learning English:

It made me more encouraged to learn English.

(Hassan, interview, 29/08/17)

Classroom observation showed that both Hassan and Hiba were invested in the classroom practices. Hiba was particularly confident to speak English and took initiative inside and outside the ESOL classroom. She participated regularly in the classroom and in the social gatherings with her ESOL teachers. Her confidence was recognised by many classmates:

Hiba can manage with English better than Hassan.

(Leen, phone diary, 16/06/17)

Nadeema: Hiba knows English, she's better than me.

Leen: She takes risks.

Nadeema: Even when she's unsure, she tries...I feel shy...

(interview, 22/04/17)

Despite Hiba's limited English and vocabulary as a Pre-entry learner, she reported that she was uninhibited to make mistakes:

I like to take risks. It might not work out the first or the second time, but it will the third time...when I speak two or three words properly, I feel proud of myself it's like I show off (laughs).

(interview, 29/08/17)

#### **4.3.6. Intersections between social class and other identity inscriptions**

This section discusses that although Hassan and Hiba came from similar low-class background and went through relatively the same experiences in England, they had different histories which seemed to affect Hassan's confidence to speak English. Classroom observation showed that Hassan rarely missed any classes unless he was sick or had an appointment. He worked extremely hard in the classroom and was very attentive and showed a great sense of investment in the classroom practices. Yet, he reported that he was anxious and fearful of making mistakes despite the positive atmosphere he described inside and outside the ESOL classroom:

If I'm not sure 100% about what I will say, I find it difficult to speak. Some people are brave even if they know it could be wrong they try...Hiba is braver than me...I feel shy and worry what I say might be wrong.

(interview, 29/08/17)

Unlike Omar, Sami, and Hiba, if he did not understand something in the class, he did not ask the teacher because he felt embarrassed. When Mary visited the family, it was observed that he, unlike Hiba who spoke for herself, sought the help of his children and myself to get his message across and he communicated using simple words.

When asked why he felt apprehensive to speak English, Hassan provided two reasons which were rooted in his multiple, diverse identities. Hassan was the breadwinner of the family and took on all the public tasks in Syria and Lebanon and thus was far more subjected to humiliation and bad treatment than Hiba. This probably resulted in his lack of confidence to speak English - his "spirits were broken". Hassan explained:

Women aren't subjected to discrimination as men are. Particularly men who travel abroad are more susceptible.

(interview, 30/04/2017)

Hiba concurred that everything had landed on Hassan's shoulders and that he had been subjected to much more bad treatment and discrimination than her prior to their arrival in the UK. Thus, Hassan's inhibition and anxiety to speak English were partly rooted in his disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions and his gender identity as the head of the house. Here, there is an intersectionality of two identity categories: social class and gender. The above discussion seems to resonate with Davies and Harré's (1990) disposition that although that identity positions are socially recognisable categories, human beings can still make choices in regards to their discursive participation, choices that often stem from an individual's "history as a subjective being, that is, the history of one who has been in

multiple positions and engaged in different forms of discourse” (p.48). Thus, even while positioning and being positioned, speakers may remain “committed to a pre-existing idea of themselves that they had prior to the interchange” (p.56).

In addition, Hassan referred to another identity dimension which complicated his confidence to speak – the category of age:

It's fine when a child gets asked and they don't know the answer. However, it's embarrassing when an adult doesn't know what to answer, it's not easy...In the class, I'm the oldest 48 years-old...I swear by God it's not easy...there're younger students who are sharper than I am...

(interview, 30/04/17)

Hassan seemed to be uncomfortable with the fact that there were younger learners who knew better than him. He also espoused the traditional belief that younger learners have natural advantages that enable them to learn more quickly and easily than older learners: the younger the better. However, it was interesting to observe that although Hassan and Waard were both approaching 50, Waard had a completely different enactment of age:

I don't agree with those who say that learning becomes harder the older you get<sup>33</sup> because 'And of knowledge, you (mankind) have been given only a little<sup>34</sup>'. We're in a race with time...age has no effect whatsoever on language learning...

(interview, 06/12/17)

This discrepancy of attitudes could be attributed to Waard's level of education and religious stance, which seemed to have a positive impact on his own age positioning. To summarise, social class, gender and age interlinked with each other to impinge on Hassan's possibilities of speech. In this sense, social class cannot be experienced in isolation of other identities; rather, identities are intricately interwoven and there can be no simple reading of any single variable (Block 2006b; 2012; Kinginger 2004; Pavlenko 2001a). As Norton contends:

ethnicity, gender and class are not experienced as a series of discrete background variables, but are all, in complex and interconnected ways, implicated in the construction of identity and the possibilities of speech.

(Norton 2000: 13)

A final word should be said here. This discussion of Hassan does not seem to sit easily with the previous sections about his enthusiasm and willingness to engage with British people and his great investment in learning English. Yet, as discussed in Chapter 2 and as will become clearer in the following chapters, contradiction and diversity seem to be inherent in the mosaic of identity (Weedon 1997), and hence, in investment in learning English (Norton 2000). Hassan was very keen to initiate relationships with British people

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<sup>33</sup> Waard used a Syrian idiom which has no alternative in English بعد الكبرة جبة حمرة

<sup>34</sup> Surah Al-Isra, the Quran: وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا

employing *non-linguistic* discursive tools and was motivated to learn English, but his history and his past identities seemed sometimes to hold him back from his mission. Further, his inhibition did not seem to impact on his very investment in learning English; rather, it mainly affected his speaking opportunities - one of the four skills of learning English.

#### **4.4. Concluding remarks**

As evidenced in the data, social class served as a highly useful construct to make sense of the participants' identities and learning English. Different class positions in their home country can result in different levels of engagement and commitment to learn English. "Class matters" (hooks 2000: 7). Social class status can afford valuable privilege and/or cause great disadvantage (Vandrick 2014). Yet, it is crucial to note that it is implausible to assume a simple one-to-one correspondence between class positions and language learning. Rather, the relations seem to be complex and may entail paradoxical pathways as illustrated by the narratives of the 5 participants. The image of social class that emerged from the data is multifaceted and complex. The relatively intricate fusions of social class and language learning opportunities indicate that the process of social class enactment in language learning is rarely simple and straightforward. It is also worthwhile to note that although social class was an identity factor that loomed large in the participants' narratives, one cannot dismiss the role of additional discursive frames such as gender, age and religion.

One might wonder: what are the practical implications of the data presented? ESOL teachers and practitioners who are more critically informed about social class can utilise the ESOL college not only as a space for the development of English but also, and equally important, as an important site for learners to take up more powerful and expansive identities; teachers can better understand the language learning practices of their learners such as classroom dominance, hesitance to speak, silence and anxiousness; teachers can make sure that learners who were/are positioned differently and/or unfairly according to their social class have equal learning opportunities. ESOL colleges and institutions need not simply reproduce the broader inequalities embedded in society that some participants had experienced as a result of their class inscriptions, and which still influence their identities and learning trajectories. Understanding social class critically seems to be particularly important in the area of ESOL where refugee language learners are more vulnerable, and more susceptible, to be positioned in subservient social roles. Whether or not Northeast College perpetuated social inequalities or acknowledged learners' skills, resources, and identities will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Following this detailed exploration of social class, Chapter 5 outlines the role of religion in the participant's learning of English and participation in their new communities of practice.

## **Chapter 5 - Religion and language learning**

This chapter starts by exploring in depth the role of Islam, both facilitative and restrictive, in the Syrian refugees' identity negotiation and investment in learning English inside the ESOL classrooms and beyond. Then, it provides evidence of how a female Syrian participant, Rania, negotiated and modified her religious identity to some degree in order to fit into the ESOL classroom, which in turn increased her opportunities of participation and learning English. Subsequently, the chapter discusses the profound impact of the Manchester and London terrorist attacks (2017) on the Syrians' lives and sense of self, with clear restrictive implications for their language learning and socialisation. The chapter then takes the reader on a narrative journey of how religion was implicated in the life of Jean, a hijabi (a Muslim woman wearing a hijab or scarf) Kurdish woman who resisted marginalising Islamophobic discourses. Due to Jean's more advanced English language proficiency, which offered her more interaction opportunities with English-speaking people who held different/adverse religious attitudes to hers, she was the only female participant who reported communicating with English-speaking classmates/people on a regular basis. Consequently, she was more explicit than any other participants when making connections between her religious hijabi identity and her experiences of learning English in and outside the ESOL classroom. Thus, more space was allocated to her experiences in this thesis. The chapter concludes with some practical implications for (ESOL) language teachers and institutions.

### **5.1. Islam and language learning**

Throughout my fieldwork and data collection, like McMichael's (2002) and Sarroub's participants (2002; 2005; see Chapter 2), the centrality of Islam in most Syrians' lives was evident and their conversations were peppered with references to Allah and religious beliefs. Islam provided an overarching and meaningful framework that shaped and coloured the ways most Syrians apprehended their experiences and practices in a new culture. Participants drew upon 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. This is in line with findings from the Ethnic Minority British Election Study (EMBES) report (Howat et al. 2010), which suggests that religion plays a very important part in Muslims' lives and sense of identity in Britain. As the data will show, Islam was a motivating, but also a shaping, and sometimes restricting, factor of the Syrian participants' English learning practices and opportunities.

Before proceeding and discussing the positive impact of Islam on the Syrians' learning of English, I would like to note that what is presented in the narratives was the participants' own interpretations of Islam. The data will reflect not only the heterogeneity of the category "Muslim", but also the multiple ways in which the participants defined and presented themselves as Muslims and how that was manifested in the processes of learning English and participation. Numerous authors argue that Muslim people have different and even contradictory understandings and practices of Islam (Bhatt 1997; Eickelman 1989; McMichael 2002; Said 1985) - Islam is "a mosaic, not a monolith" (Gregorian 2003) (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.4). Like people of other faiths, most Muslims "are born into their religion. They then evolve their own relationship with it, their own, individual, view of life, their own micro-religion, so to speak" (Hamid<sup>35</sup> 2013). How people evolve their different understandings and relationships to Islam is conditioned by their own interpretations of the Quran and the Hadith of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), their education, gender, culture, and life experiences, etc.

### 5.1.1. Islam as a motivational factor to learn English

The value of seeking knowledge and education are deeply rooted in Islam through the Quran and the Hadith of Prophet Muhammad. The first word revealed from Allah to Prophet Muhammad was *Iqraa* (اقرأ) which means "read"; read 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 2000). The emphasis in Islam on pursuing knowledge and learning was strongly reflected in some participants' making sense of learning English. Islam enhanced the process of learning English and encouraged some participants to be "good" language learners:

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, interview, 06/06/17)

Like I said I don't like to be number 2...When Prophet Muhammad was sent with the call to Islam, Aktham Ibnusaifi<sup>36</sup> sent two of his men to Muhammed. They asked him who he was and what his message was. He said he's Muhammad Abdullah and the messenger of God and then recited some verses of the Quran. When the two men returned to Aktham, he said 'all I can see is that this man [Muhammad] is calling for good things so follow this man and be forceful...don't be left behind in this matter<sup>37</sup>...You know I shouldn't be a normal person, I like to be outstanding. Sahabas

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2013/may/19/mohsin-hamid-islam-not-monolith>

<sup>36</sup> Aktham was a person who did not initially believe in the message of Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>37</sup> The story that Waard is narrating goes back nearly 1440 years ago and he is using classic Arabic. Thus, to make sure the meaning is presented accurately, the Arabic version is provided below:

"ما أرى هذا الشخص يدعو إلا لخير فاتبعوه وكونوا في هذا الأمر رأساً ولا تكونوا ذنباً"

[companions] of Muhammad were reciters of the Quran and so forth...that applies to learning English and it's a motivator.

(Waard, interview, 18/04/17)

Waard went into making specific links between excellence in learning English and Islam. Most of his narratives were saturated with the Quran and Hadith. Not only did he trace direct links between his motivation to learn English and his own interpretation of the Islamic scripture and stories, but also he pointed out that his drive to be the number one student derived from this Islamic interpretation - he did not want to be a "normal" English learner. Indeed, Waard often obtained the highest marks in the class and his teacher noted that he was way ahead of his classmates because he was doing a great deal of autonomous learning. This detailed link made by Waard between Islam and language learning is interesting in and of itself as it is underrepresented in identity research. Yet, it is worth noting that Waard's ambitious stake in learning English was the product of not only his religion but also his educated and intellectual identities related to his social class (see Chapter 4, Section 4.2.1). This is very much in line with the findings of Sarroub (2005), Rich and Troudi (2006), and Bigelow (2010) that religion intersects with other identity categories such as ethnicity, gender, and social class to mediate the enactment of cultural and academic norms and practices at home and beyond (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.4).

### **5.1.2. Contesting normative, negative positioning of Muslims through English**

Another way in which religion intersected positively with learning English and participation was through the responsibility that some participants took to contest the positions ascribed to them as Muslims by the host community through aligning even more with their religion so as to change the others' perceptions of Muslims. Because of the stigmatisation around Muslims in public and media discourses, some learners felt doubly obliged to challenge this normative, negative positioning and "appropriate more desirable identities" (Norton and Toohey 2011: 414) through being good language learners and citizens. While in the previous section direct and clear-cut connections were made between learning English and Islam, learners here were less overt as the following excerpts show:

Amina: In the classroom you said that you hope to give a good example of Muslims. How can you do that?

Omar: Through taking things seriously...being on time...my religion tells me to do this...they 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...commitment is the most important thing...I want to show my teacher that I didn't come here to be a burden on her or this country...or take charity...I want to earn money by the sweat of my brow...

(interview, 01/04/17)

Commitment<sup>38</sup> (إحسان *Ihsan*) and punctuality are all principles emphasised in Islam. Classroom observation showed that Omar was 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. Thus, Omar had a sense of religious investment in learning English.

Another instance was provided by Fatima:

I was on the bus and an old man got on - he was unable to walk. The bus was jam-packed and he was carrying stuff...I felt sorry for him and got to my feet and carried his bags. I held his hand and got him off the bus. The bus driver thanked me so much...and the old man was very grateful and pleased. But I was annoyed that I couldn't reply to the bus 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...it's just our duty...I wish I could express that...

(phone diary, 16/05/17)

In this excerpt, Fatima traced links between her motivation to speak English and her desire to provide a truer version of her religion; had she spoken English, she would have told the bus driver that it was her religion that "urged" her to help the old man. Fatima's and Omar's identification of their desire to learn/speak English with Islam was probably instigated by the political and the social context in which they were located and, more broadly, by the larger negative international discourses around Muslims. They hoped to create, through English, a more positive impression of Muslims in an environment which was, by and large, hostile. It was a strategy used by many participants (Fatima, Mariam, Omar, and Waard) to reposition themselves and resist the identity positions thrown at Muslims such as "extremists", "threatening", "terrorists", "ugly" or "Other" (Awan and Zempi 2015; Mason-Bish and Zempi 2018; see later in this chapter). That said, like Giroir's participant (2014a), the Syrian participants' agency in contesting the negative host community perspectives on Islam was situated and structured by the societal power relations within which they acted. That is, the Muslim participants in the above examples had only as much power as the host society was willing to grant them. This will become particularly apparent in relation to the impact of the Manchester and London terrorist attacks on them (see later in the chapter), where the limitations on their ability to exercise agency became clear.

There are many such examples where Islam served as an impetus in the Syrians' investment in learning English and practices inside and outside the ESOL classroom. As the quotations show, learning English was in part a religiously-motivated act and an investment in their religious identities. The participants were strategic when they made sense of learning English by anchoring it in their religion. For those participants, Islam was an "anchoring home" - a home that could be carried and lived in throughout processes of

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<sup>38</sup> "Allah loves, when one of you is doing something, that he [or she] does it in the most excellent manner" Hadith by Prophet Muhammad.

displacement, migration and resettlement through the everyday workings of Islam (McMichael 2002: 179; see also Chapter 2). The act of linking their investment in English to that “anchoring home” (1) made learners less alienated while they were learning English and socialising in a new somewhat secular environment and (2) gave their investment in English a sense of groundedness as it was rooted in something that was central and stable in their often-unstable life of displacement. This resonates with the ways Sarroub’s hijabat participants (2002) organised their school behaviour and practices into religious categories of halal and haram, which helped them maintain their Yemeni social status and their identities as Muslims (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5.4.2). All the above examples of the enhancement, sanctioning and validation of English learning by Islam lead to the conclusion that Islam can be “investment-inspiring” (Block 2007: 108).

### **5.1.3. Islam as a “shaper” of English-learning-related practices**

This section discusses how Islam, intersecting with additional elements such as gender and culture, worked as a shaping, sometimes a limiting, factor of the range of identity positions available to the Syrian participants in their new communities and subsequently the possibilities for social interaction and English learning.

#### **5.1.3.1. Mixed seating as incompatible with Muslim identities**

From an Islamic point of view, 7 participants (5 female and 2 male) believed in gender segregation and that women and men were not supposed to be in the same place beyond the domestic environment. The 7 participants (5 in Pre-entry) were unhappy and/or refused to work with students from the opposite gender in the ESOL classroom for religious reasons:

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 get upset.

(Adham, interview, 02/04/17)

Leen: It happened many times...the teacher gives us the handouts and Saleem’s [a Sudanese male classmate] hand touches my hand. My ablution is nullified then<sup>39</sup>...and you need to talk with them...

Nadeema: and make eye contact with them!

(interview, 22/04/17)

Amina: Do you prefer women and men to work together or separately in the classroom?

Omar: Here comes religion!! I don’t prefer men to mingle with women...it’s just not right! I might accidentally touch a woman’s hand...

Samra: When the teacher pairs me up with men, I shy away.

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<sup>39</sup> It is worth noting that there is nothing in the Quran and the Hadith which requires gender segregation. Additionally, the fact that touching a non-mahram man or woman invalidates the ablution is a disputed issue in Islam and many Muslims would disagree with it.

Omar: How can I talk to a woman?!! Pardon me! Don't look at us as students, we're not used to that. Excuse me, you've been in education since you were a child and you've been all together. But we're not. It's a domestic atmosphere in the classroom...

(interview, 01/04/17)

Running through the comments was a lack of investment in pair and group work due to the participants' *own* interpretations of Islam. According to them, working in pairs and groups with the opposite gender students was incompatible with their religious identities. Unlike Sarroub's (2005) context, in which the hijabat were "unusually interactive" and more open in the classroom than in any other space in the school, the Syrian participants were disinvested in pair/group work. As classroom observation showed, when teachers enforced mixed seating, the participants remained silent and did not participate. Women shied away from men and did not make eye contact, and sometimes exchanged their seating with other female students (classroom observation, Pre-entry, 31/01/17). This seemed to have a constraining impact on their English learning and speaking opportunities in and out the classroom. However, Mary, the Pre-entry teacher, argued that mixed seating in the classroom increased the prospects for integration into British society and the workplace:

Because 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 when they're out again 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, 02/06/17)

Regardless of how sound and valid Mary's argument regarding the realities of the outside world, the Syrian learners reversed the communicative symbolic power game in their favour and the teacher who mingled with Muslims during her 10-year stay in China seemed to be understanding of this collective resistance. Learners' resistance to mixed-gender seating eventually led the teacher to return to their own seating preferences:

I think we went through a stage we're trying to mix them...we did it but you can see some people are not very comfortable and then I sort of just let things go and sort of people formed their very little groups and got very comfortable...the current thinking is that learning should be learner-driven to a degree...

(Mary, interview, 02/06/17)

When Mary reduced mixed seating, this was reflected in the students' participation behaviour. The level of talk and interaction increased, and learners became more participatory, humorous, and comfortable in asking/answering questions. The teacher's response (1) facilitated the students' learning opportunities, (2) acknowledged and accepted the resistant participants as "legitimate" students and members of the classroom community despite their violation of the classroom rules, and (3) maintained a good and comfortable atmosphere in the classroom. Such a response from the teacher gave the impression to the students that their identities were respected. I see this act of learner

resistance as an important identity practice that helped them while they attempted to keep their dual identities as Muslims and students. My argument here relates particularly to Pre-entry students whose experiences of being students was very new to them - to some, it was their first experience of education, and it was highly important to be positive and culture- and identity-sensitive. Thus, the Syrian participants' religious identities were not only structured by their engagement in a new and generally secular environment and their experiences of learning English, but they were also structuring and reshaping the new language learning environment and practices. As noted in Chapter 2, identity and language are mutually constitutive and inseparable (Weedon 1997).

However, it is important to note that this discussion of religion would be remiss if it did not acknowledge the role of the participants' cultural norms in shaping their religious practices and attitudes towards mixed-gender seating. In fact, four participants (Nadeema, Leen, Mariam, and Rania) pointed out the role of their culture in constructing their stance towards mixed-gender classroom practices. In these women's cultures, it was not appropriate for men and women to mingle and interact with each other. This intertwined relationship between religion and culture was also highlighted by Sarroub (2002; 2005) and McMichael (2002); see Chapter 2. Further, as will become apparent in Chapter 6, inequitable gender norms also played a role in some women's disengagement in pair/group work. In addition, as was indicated by three participant learners, the existence of many Syrians in the same class made collaborative activities involving the mixing of genders more challenging. Had these Syrian refugees been in a class without any or with fewer Syrian students, they might have been more amenable to mixing. Finally, it is worth noting that Waard and Jean who were graduates of university worked comfortably with the opposite gender students. This is particularly compelling in the case of Waard who, as the data so far has shown, had a strong religious identity, yet he worked with and regularly helped female students - an instance that shows there is no single monochrome image of Muslims and that other factors, such as education, culture and gender, mediate individuals' religious disposition. This is not to undermine the role of religion; rather, it is to communicate the nuanced and intricate ways that identity categories interact with each other and the impossibility of separating them out. A single classroom practice such as pair/group work seemed to reveal a network of interrelated, shaping identity factors.

### **5.1.3.2. Interactional opportunities in the outside world as mediated by religion**

While the above section outlines the function of Islam in shaping ESOL classroom practices and the relationship between learners, this section extends the discussion by briefly exploring the experiences of two male learners, Waard and Amaan, who reported turning down English-speaking opportunities outside the class because they thought they crossed religious boundaries. Amaan, more than any of the participants, frequently

expressed concern about the lack of English-speaking opportunities. Amaan's friend introduced him to an English woman who agreed to help him with speaking English. They exchanged phone numbers, but things did not go as Amaan had planned:

She said 'let's go for a drink tomorrow' I said I don't drink. She said 'just this time come on just for me'. I said no and that was it...In short, the only way to speak English is to become a friend with an English woman and give her money and whatever she wants, but this way doesn't suit our religion, traditions or culture.

(Amaan, interview, 06/06/17)

To sum up, Amaan turned down this opportunity for speaking English because it entailed things that contradicted his religious and cultural beliefs and values such as drinking alcohol and "committing adultery", in Amaan's words. Although Amaan expressed a strong desire to interact with English people, he ended this opportunity in favour of his religion.

Similarly, Waard refused many offers to live with an English family while he was waiting to be re-united with his family in Scotland. Living with an English family contradicted Waard's religious beliefs and his reservations about drinking alcohol:

There are [religious] things I can't give up for the sake of learning English...[host families] probably drink - that's why I didn't accept...Some people might say it's got nothing to do with me, but "indeed, intoxicants, gambling, [sacrificing on] stone alters [to other than Allah], and divining arrows are but defilement from the work of Satan, so avoid it...<sup>40</sup>". The prohibition here means also that you shouldn't sit at the same table with people drinking alcohol...Excuse me we sit here and joke, but there're rules. I might also delay prayers. However, here we're talking about an important faith issue...I should be committed to my religion. Here, I'm an ambassador of Islam, an ambassador of Arabs, an ambassador of Syria, and ambassador of my family...I don't like to follow like a sheep...

(Waard, shadowing<sup>41</sup>, 23/05/17)

As a devout Muslim, living with an English family who drank alcohol and being a good Muslim were entirely irreconcilable, and Waard prioritised his religion. From Waard's perspective, communicating and joking with his female classmates respectfully and delaying prayers sometimes were negotiable; nevertheless, drinking alcohol or joining people who drank alcohol was non-negotiable as it was strongly prohibited in Islam and "distorted Islam" in the eyes of British people (shadowing, 23/05/17).

In these two examples, Amaan's and Waard's investment in their Muslim identities was stronger than their investment in their L2 emerging identities. This raises a compelling question of what the perceived benefits and advantages would be for prioritising their Muslim 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 these interaction opportunities was structured by their religious

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<sup>40</sup> This is a verse from the Quran, Surah Al-Ma'idah (5/90). The Arabic version is:

إِنَّمَا الْخَمْرُ وَالْمَيْسِرُ وَالْأَنْصَابُ وَالْأَزْلَامُ رَجْسٌ مِنْ عَمَلِ الشَّيْطَانِ فَاجْتَنِبُوهُ

<sup>41</sup> On this showing occasion, the recorder was on with Waard's permission.

investment in the spiritual future world, i.e. the hereafter, which they preferred over their physical world. While Amaan's and Waard's religious identity was a motivational factor (see Section 5.1.1), it was also a shaping discourse of their investment in learning English and interaction opportunities. Religious identities could be contradictory and in a state of flux. As Weedon (1997) argues, identities are "precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak" (p.32). However, in reading the narratives more critically, it would become apparent that Amaan's and Waard's resistance was also embedded in much larger power structures where these refugee participants suddenly found themselves in a Western globalised environment with different interactional and self-representation patterns that went against the grain of who they were and what they believed in. The Syrian refugees were living in constant conflict between how they were or who they wanted to be and who they were supposed to be to carve out interactional opportunities and become accepted members by the host community.

Interestingly, Amaan and Waard can be compared with Sami whose interactions and English-speaking opportunities were punctuated by his religious identity:

My mum is a committed Muslim and performs all prayers. She tries to teach us, but I'm an open-minded, liberal man. Since I was in Syria, I used to go out with my Christian friends and drink...I'm the same here...

(Sami, interview, 21/09/17)

Like Giroir's participants (2014a), Sami's "open-minded" religious identity provided him with more space and viable identities from which he could seek English-speaking and practice opportunities; it gave him more diverse identity positions from which he could participate in social life. Sami reported hanging out with two female, non-Muslim, English-speaking classmates whose spoken English was stronger than his as they had been living in the UK for a long time. This opened up for Sami greater possibilities for social interaction:

I welcome any interaction opportunities. For instance, even though my family don't understand Kamilia [his classmate] and my wife is getting upset by her visits, every other day I invite her to stay over so I can benefit from her language. We spend the whole night talking, her English is broken though. I also visit her...

(Sami, interview, 08/05/17)

Yet, it is worth noting that all the interactional opportunities available to Sami occurred with ESOL learners and not local people of the host community.

## **5.2. Religious identities as subject to change and transformation**

The previous sections explored how the Syrians' opportunities to learn and practise English were structured by their religious identities. This section extends this line of thinking by examining how a Syrian woman, Rania, was not only shaped by but also shaped her religious identity as she was challenged in her new communities. In what

follows, I will delineate the transformation in Rania's religious and gendered identities as a response to the different gender ideologies that she encountered when trying to "fit in" in her ESOL classroom.

Initially, Rania was placed in a Pre-entry class with her husband, Adham. Due to issues with collecting children from school and responding to Rania's and Adham's request, Rania was moved up to the Entry 1 class. The new class had only 3 female students and men and women worked together, which was different from the Pre-entry class where the majority of students were females, and women and men resisted working together (see Section 5.1.3.1). The Entry 1 class provided new gendered and religious discursive practices which curbed Rania's investment in classroom activities:

I've always been shy, but my shyness has doubled because the classroom is gender-mixed...When the teacher gives us a handout to share, I just observe what they're doing. I don't participate or ask questions...you know how things were in Syria...Because of religion and the nature of relationships in our town, women were on their own and so were men...there wasn't much mingling...

(Rania, phone diary, 15/04/17)

At first, according to Rania talking and interacting with male classmates contradicted the gendered expectations of the religion of Islam, and the cultural expectations of her town. Rania explained that there had always been a "barrier" between her and men, and she had not even seen or spoken to her male cousins and relatives in Syria because her parents were very conservative.

Not only was Rania uninvested in the classroom activities, but she was also unable to understand what the teacher was explaining:

At first, I didn't understand anything I felt like an outsider. The class was all men...and students didn't change their tables so I didn't feel comfortable. I was worried if I changed my table, I won't be accepted...

(Rania, phone diary, 27/06/17)

Rania ascribed her inability to understand the teacher's explanation to an "outsider" subject position that placed her initially at the periphery of the classroom. This identity position was not socially imposed on Rania by her classmates and/or her teacher; rather, it was initiated by Rania's religious, cultural, and gendered inscriptions, which were crucially framed and filtered by historical and ideological processes which had set the parameters for Rania of how to enact herself.

Over time, however, Rania did not continue to position herself in this way and acted upon the classroom through taking a series of agentic practices to change her identity position and, consequently, the conditions under which she was learning and participating in the classroom. Rania described that she was at first sitting at a male-only table at the front of the class next to the teacher. Because of feelings of discomfort and being exposed

to the whole class, Rania moved to another table at the back which had one female and 3 male students. At this table, Rania reported feeling slightly more comfortable with men and started asking them a few questions. Yet, as the classroom observation shows, she did not participate in pair/group work. Concurrent with this, something happened in the classroom and changed the course of action to Rania's favour:

Rania: When we started taking lessons in different classrooms because of the refurbishment works in our class...here I mingled more with the class and got to know them all better and started to understand more...this encouraged me and I felt stronger...

Amina: I noticed you then moved to the table of Sumayya, Ahmad, and Waard...[table number 3]

Rania: Oh here I improved more, possibly because I mingled with them and got used to them. Thus, I felt I made a progress...I started to feel more comfortable because if I didn't understand something, I'd ask them. I ask Sumayya "what shall I do?"...Waard explained to me...I felt like one of them.

(phone diary, 08/06/17)

Rania understood that to learn English she needed to become a legitimate member of the classroom community. Like the participants in Skapoulli (2004) and Sarroub (2005) (see Chapter 2), Rania realised that membership and validation in the community of the classroom entailed a modification and revision of her gendered and religious identity performance. Therefore, she deployed the refurbishment works and the class movement to different classes and agentively mingled with both female and male students as she could change tables more freely. When the class members moved to a different class each lesson, they did not stick to specific tables which gave Rania more freedom to move around tables. Her final decision of moving to the (third) table of Waard, Sumayya (an Iraqi Kurdish female student who spoke Arabic), and Ahmad (a Moroccan male student) was a strategic one. Waard and Sumayya were two of the top students in the class and they often explained to and helped other students, and they all had a good sense of humour. At this table, Rania reported feeling as "an insider" and became more participatory and relaxed enough to talk with men in her little group.

At this table, Rania's speech style became more casual and she started laughing more. Waard, Ahmad, Sumayya, and Rania shared food, coffee, and sweets made by Sumayya and Rania. Having access to this group gave Rania a great deal of social acceptance and power which helped her tremendously in her attempts to appropriate a more desirable identity position as an insider within the classroom group. As an insider, Rania was encouraged to ask questions, work in pairs and groups, and even help her classmates with language issues. Rania's repositioning herself from an outsider to an insider would not have been possible without a renegotiation and expansion of her religious and gendered identities. Through this expansion, she became a legitimate and fully-functioning member of her ESOL classroom (Lave and Wenger 1991) and claimed the right to belong, which in turn had a marked effect on her opportunities of learning

English. Rania's ability to reconstruct her sense of self agrees with earlier research findings (see Chapter 2; Giroir 2014a; Kanno 2000; Kinginger 2004; Norton 2000; Skapoulli 2004; Talmy 2004) that delineate individuals' identities as subject to contestation and transformation as a result of (non)participation in new communities of practice.

Finally, I would like to finish Rania's narrative with two comments. Firstly, perhaps the fact that Rania was on her own in the class, without her husband or any Syrian female students, gave her a further stimulus for identity reconstruction. Had Rania's husband, Adham, attended the same class, this might have posed constraints on the potentiality of choice and agency in her performance of identity. Secondly, Rania's success at negotiating her right to participate in a mixed-gender classroom did not mean an entire change in her gendered and religious identity. In her final interview, Rania noted that she still struggled to have comfortable interactions with men. Her success in her classroom cannot be simply and straightforwardly generalised across all contexts and times. The rigidity of Rania's cultural and religious backgrounds means that identity (re)construction can be a long and arduous journey.

Having looked at the role of the learners' religious identities, both restrictive and facilitative, in their investment to learn English and their possibilities for social interaction inside and outside the ESOL classroom, the chapter will now turn to present detailed accounts of how far and in what ways the then recent terrorist attacks in England had affected the Syrian participants in terms of how they positioned and were positioned and their experiences of learning English.

### **5.3. The Manchester and London attacks: an introduction**

As discussed in Chapter 2, during the course of fieldwork and data collection, the Manchester and London terrorist attacks took place which led to a greater presence of religion in the participants' accounts of their experiences. Because of the terrorist attacks' profound effect on the participants and their sense of self, a specific section of this chapter was devoted to discussing this. Between March and June 2017, London and Manchester cities witnessed four attacks in which men used vehicles, knives and explosives to kill different sections of the public including children, tourists, Muslim worshippers, and a police officer. 36 people were killed and almost 200 more were injured (Anderson 2017). Three of these attacks were committed by British born Muslim men, with one by a non-Muslim English man. In the aftermath of the Manchester and London Bridge atrocities, there was a spike in the number of anti-Muslim hate crimes in both the physical and virtual worlds. Tell MAMA recorded a 475% increase in the number of offline anti-Muslim incidents reported in the week following the Manchester Arena attack. There was also an

increase of 30.6% of offline anti-Muslim hate reports in 2017 compared with the previous year of 2016 (TELL MAMA 2018).

### 5.3.1. The Manchester and London attacks: identity and English learning

Following the terrorist attacks, all the Syrians in this study reported feeling more vulnerable as Muslims.<sup>10</sup> feared revenge attacks, particularly on the women who were visibly identifiable as Muslims through their hijabs. Their anxiety was exacerbated after the terrorist attack by the non-Muslim English man who intentionally ran over Muslim worshippers in London<sup>42</sup> and the spread of many anti-Muslim hate messages<sup>43</sup> over social media, threatening to kill Muslims and bomb mosques. This had an effect on the Muslim Syrian participants as evidenced in the following quotations:

I'm not a woman, yet when I walk on the streets I look around and think: "Would I be stabbed by someone as a reaction?"...I have every reason to take precaution when walking on the streets...[that's] 90% of why I told Rania to stop going to college...

(Adham, phone diary, 07/06/17)

When a problem happens, one needs to limit social activities so they're not exposed to danger. One should remain up-to-date and stay away until the fire dies. Surely, some people would be upset, others are racists and waiting for an opportunity. Thus, if there wasn't an urgent need, we didn't go out...

(Waard, interview, 06/12/17)

Samra: I'm not gonna lie to you we need to be watchful<sup>44</sup>. My husband and I don't go out unless we want to buy clothes for my children...we also go to halal shops...But, we better not go far away...You know it's not safe as it used to be...

Omar: I feel a little fearful as I don't know how people would react - how do British people perceive us? With regards to the media, we're perceived as aggressive a million per cent sure. I have the right to fear them...For stance, I was thinking to start going out at night, but I've cancelled this idea now...I don't have the courage anymore.

(phone diary, 09/06/17)

Whether this fear was proportionate to the real risk or an overreaction is not particularly important. What is important is that the informants invoked feelings of fear and vulnerability as reasons to restrict their social mobility or not allow women to go to Northeast College. In these accounts, the Muslim Syrians took up the identity positions of *accomplice*, *outsider*, or *outcast* which were related to the religion of Islam. Their production of these identities is evidence of how identities are socially constructed in collaboration with other people (Giroir 2011). These identity positions were not wholly self-articulated by the

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<sup>42</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/19/several-casualties-reported-after-van-hits-pedestrians-in-north-london>

<sup>43</sup> <https://metro.co.uk/2017/10/27/man-jailed-for-threatening-to-stab-muslims-and-blow-up-mosques-7031552/>  
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/jailed-for-tweets-hate-speech-muslim-throat-slit-terror-rhodenne-chand-a8419636.html>

<sup>44</sup> In some cases, participants used idiomatic phrases which I did not find an alternative to. Thus, the Arabic version was provided:

بکذب علیکي کمان الواحد بدو یعقل و یتوکل

participants, nor were they explicitly imposed by British people. Rather, they were the result of the pre-existing, consistent, and essentialist association between Muslims and terrorism in the discourses circulating in society and the media and the then recent terrorist attacks.

From the identity position of accomplice and outcast, all the Syrian participants withdrew into their L1 communities and restricted their social activities, which had a restrictive impact on their opportunities to speak and learn English. This aligns with Sarroub's findings (2005; see Chapter 2) when the hijabats and their families withdrew from social activities and public spaces and struggled with who they became in the aftermath of 9/11. In addition, the above quotations raise many questions: how would the participants invest in learning English or seek interaction opportunities when they were feeling "fearful", vulnerable, unwelcome and potentially complicit in acts of terrorism by the speakers of the language they were learning? How would they invest in learning a language that became associated with fear and xenophobia? "If the language learner is always a vulnerable, incompetent, weary and lonely subject, then this matters greatly to our contextualising constructions of language learning" (Phipps 2017<sup>45</sup>).

### **5.3.2. Explicit connections between the terrorist attacks and learning English**

Direct links between the recent political events and learning English featured in three participants' accounts: Amaan, Adham, and Jean. I will discuss only Amaan and Adham as Jean's case will be looked at as a whole later in the chapter. Amaan made an explicit connection between the attacks and his subsequent lack of investment in learning English:

I'm a man after all. If they want to kill me, let them do it...However, I worry about my family and my biggest worry is my parents who are old particularly after what had happened to them...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, 06/06/17)

Amaan's statement offers a clear example of how these events were instrumental in shifting his investment in learning English, and again raises the question: can language learners invest in learning English when they are feeling vulnerable and fearful? Amaan himself gave a short, straightforward answer: no. Amaan was more invested in his parents' and family's safety than in learning English. Consequently, if English was no longer a priority, this would impact on the time and effort that Amaan was willing to dedicate to learning and studying English. However, it is worth pointing out that Amaan's vulnerability and fear, which appeared to hinder his sense of self and the process and outcomes of English learning and socialisation, need to be understood not only as a result of the terrorist

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<sup>45</sup> The quotation is taken from Professor Alison Phipps' presentation "Why does it matter who the language learner is?" in the Conference "Who is the language learner?" at the University of Sterling (10<sup>th</sup> March 2017).

attacks but also of the backdrop of his family's and Syrian friends' lived experiences of Othering as Muslims and foreigners in the wider community. Amaan narrated a series of "racist" incidents where his family and Syrian friends were Otherised and treated unequally, and unfairly, on account of their racial and religious identities. For example, Amaan recounted how his next-to-door Syrian neighbour was allegedly accused of raping an English woman. Although the man was found not guilty, he was still a target to a group of English men who tried to kill him using knives. Amaan went on and drew on another "racist" incident where his wife and parents were verbally abused by a group of English male neighbours because they were Muslim. This incident made Amaan extremely worried and vigilant that his family and parents might be subjected to further incidents in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks: "particularly after what had happened to them [his parents]".

Corroborating previous research about the impact of 9/11 on Muslim students (Giroir 2014a; Rich and Troudi 2006; Sarroub 2005; see Chapter 2), Amaan pointed out that these attacks and the consequent Islamophobic discourses triggered by them created complex conditions not only for language learning but also for identity (re)construction and language socialisation:

I wish I had an English friend to integrate in community. I teach him<sup>46</sup> Arabic and he teaches me English...But, unfortunately they perceive us as terrorists, criminals or murderers who've come to take their money and women...I haven't come here to harm you. On the contrary, I'll help you if you get in trouble. All I'm asking for is to become your friend. You're not going to convert to Islam nor am I to Christianity...

(Amaan, interview, 14/10/17)

As a Muslim, Amaan came to position himself as a perceived terrorist, criminal, and murderer - restrictive identity positions that denied him the opportunity to belong to and integrate into his host community and deprived him of potential English-speaking opportunities.

Unsurprisingly, the psychological concomitants of the terror attacks also penetrated into the ESOL classroom as illustrated by Adham:

Even during lessons, Hassan, Omar and I haven't stopped talking about the attacks...how many were killed and what the government has done. It's always looming in the back of our minds we don't forget about it...because the attacks were committed under the name of our religion...the whole Islam is blamed for and accused of.

(phone diary, 07/06/17)

Again, the identity position of the "accomplice" that the Muslim students adopted meant that they were not fully enacting their student identity. Would Adham, Hassan and Omar,

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<sup>46</sup> In Arabic language, "him" and "he" sometimes serve a generic whose antecedent noun falls under both sexes; they can be used as gender-neutral third-person pronouns.

who were originally traumatised language learners, be able to focus and engage in lessons when the events were looming in the back of their minds? Would they be able to sustain investment in the classroom practices when they felt guilty and “scared”? For learners to process, store and retrieve information, they need to be in a calm and nonthreatening state. From Adham’s comment arises an obligation for language teachers and ESOL institutions to acknowledge their learners’ pain and disturbing experiences and adequately address what their students are going through. This involves an acknowledgment of who they are.

In short, my data clearly show that the terror attacks had a profound direct impact on the Syrians’ sense of self, well-being, and the processes and outcomes of learning English in both formal and informal settings. This impact must be understood against the backdrop of the Syrians’ previous experiences as traumatised individuals and survivors of war. These attacks demarcated who they were, where they belonged, and what and how they could learn. The issues pinpointed by the learners have the potential to deepen and illuminate ESOL practitioners’, educators’, and scholars’ vision of how far and in what ways such discourses are involved in the process of language learning, and thus stimulate the kinds of debate and conversations necessary to help and engage those learners.

#### **5.4. Jean’s case: religion, identity, and language learning**

Having discussed the role of Islam and the backlash of the Manchester and London attacks on the participants thematically, I will move on to present a case study of how Islam was manifested in Jean’s experiences of identity/ies reinvention and learning English. This section therefore traces the ways through which Jean negotiated her identity as a hijabi Muslim woman and the impact of this identity practice on her English learning opportunities and practices in two social sites: the ESOL classrooms(s) and the public world.

##### **5.4.1. Jean’s religious identity and language learning in the ESOL classroom(s)**

This section contains two parts. Part 1 starts with an example from Jean’s Entry 1 class<sup>47</sup> where she was criminalised by her classmate because she belonged to a specific religious denomination, suggesting implications for language teachers and other ESOL stakeholders. The chapter moves on to discuss how Jean achieved remarkable success in self-appropriating and modifying her religious and gender identities to fit into her Entry 2 ESOL classroom, which consequently opened greater possibilities for learning English.

###### **5.4.1.1. The ESOL classroom as constraining Jean’s religious identity**

ESOL classrooms are not apolitical nor value free, and they are a site of cultural politics (Pennycook 2001). They are social spaces where societal inequalities can be reproduced,

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<sup>47</sup> Throughout diaries and interviews, Jean sometimes reflected about her experiences of language learning and identity negotiation in previous ESOL classes as she did in this example.

and learners' religious identities can be acknowledged, questioned, denied or constrained (Bigelow 2008; 2010), with implications for their language learning and participation opportunities. In the example below, Jean described an incident where she was criminalised by a Shia<sup>48</sup> Muslim classmate because she was Sunni Muslim:

We were having a break and Hamza<sup>49</sup> said all Muslims are Daeshi...I said to him 'How come Deash represents Islam! It doesn't at all. Rather, they're exploiting Islam...What has Islam got to do with Daesh?!' I felt heartbroken...However, since then I avoided Hamza...when I came to realise his mentality I mean I'm a hijabi Muslim and Kurdish like him so when he's targeting Islam he's targeting me so I stopped talking with him...because something had happened something had broken between us...

(interview, 04/08/17)

As Jean elucidated, Hamza essentialised Sunni Muslims as Daeshi because "Daesh is perceived as Sunni". When he said all Muslims were Daeshi, he meant all Sunni Muslims were Daeshi. Despite the shared Kurdish identity with Hamza, Jean was not excused from discriminatory religious storylines, and it was within this parameter she chose to act agentively, i.e. stop talking with Hamza. Like participants in Giroir (2014a), Bigelow (2010), Rich and Troudi (2006), Sarroub (2005) and many Muslims around the world, Jean found herself compelled to answer directly, and unfairly, for actions which she was not accountable for or had control over, and to continuously renegotiate her sense of self within inaccurate narratives around Sunni Muslims. The identity position of "Daeshi" imposed on Jean hindered the social interaction between her and Hamza. Further, as discussed in Section 5.3.2., would Jean be able to focus and engage in the lesson after being positioned in front of her classmates as "Daeshi"? Would she be able to sustain investment in the tense classroom atmosphere? How learners are made to feel and position themselves is a precursor of their investment in the classroom practices and their relationship with their classmates.

#### **5.4.1.2. Negotiating religious and gender identities to fit into the ESOL classroom**

Jean was not only "subject to" inequitable structures of power which restricted her production of her Muslim identity and subsequently her learning English opportunities, but was also "subject of" the conditions under which she was constructing herself as a Muslim woman in the classroom (Norton 2000). In the following excerpt, Jean described how she strategically self-appropriated her religious identity to fit into the classroom dynamics and modes of participation through the identity shift that she forged from a Muslim mother and wife to that of a school child:

Honestly, when I enter the classroom, I forget about my age and I was a teacher. I'm just a school child a little girl...I won't be able to learn English if I don't make this shift

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<sup>48</sup> Shia is the second largest denomination of Islam after Sunni Islam.

<sup>49</sup> Hamza was an Iranian Kurdish Shia student in Jean's class. Like all names in the project, Hamza is an anonymised name.

[i.e. change]...I see my classmates as students like me rather than men. If I meet them outside the college, no way I'd joke with them the way I do in the class...Outside the class, I switch back to Jean the wife (laughs)...If I didn't make that shift from 'you're a wife and a mother' 'they're men' 'it's haram<sup>50</sup>', I feel my mind is frozen it doesn't receive information as when it's tuned into the student mindset...it makes a big difference! Sometimes we're asked to work in groups, I get close to the guys and talk with them they won't eat me. This enables me to learn more efficiently...According to our religion, it's haram to sit and mingle with men who aren't mahrams<sup>51</sup>...we make jokes (laughs). However, I separate religion from the class. In the class, I am a student...this helps me to break barriers with men...

(interview, 20/05/17)

Jean here distinguished the settings of the ESOL classroom and the outside world as two polar sites with incongruent cultural, gendered and religious practices that invoked her to manoeuvre within - the outside world as ironically the representative of the Syrian culture and the ESOL classroom as the instantiation of the English culture. She reconciled the two worlds through (1) adopting the identity of the school child whose life was not yet to be conditioned by religious and cultural norms and (2) reframing her relationship with her classmates in a school learning framework rather than a religious and cultural one. By temporarily giving the men in her class the identity position of a student or a school child, Jean bridged the gap between the outside world and the classroom to be less constraining and more engaging. A liberal, humorous speech style helped her to be an insider within the ESOL group and engage more openly in the classroom discussion and social talks with classmates while a reserved and modest speech behaviour permitted her to be a legitimate member of the Syrian community. Learning English "more efficiently" required a modification in her religion and gender performance to ensure validation in the classroom community. Jean suspended the real-world cultural, gender, and religious norms which tended to be less important in the context of the classroom and created new norms, ones that united her with her class members and made her more of a student rather than a Muslim woman. This excerpt points to the role of Jean's agency and depicts very clearly that a learner's identity is not only constituted by social interaction, but also constitutive of social interaction. Unlike the Syrians who struggled to participate in the classroom from the identity of "Muslim", "husband" or "wife", Jean was successful, like Norton's participants (2000), Eva and Martina, in her bids for a more appropriate identity position which enhanced her language learning. Further, Jean's success is reminiscent of Sarroub's hijabat participants (see Chapter 2) for whom the classroom was an "oasis" from the social and cultural norms and provided "an alternative way of being". They felt comfortable and safe to interact with boys in the classroom: "In class it's different we talk to each other" (2005: 56).

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<sup>50</sup> Religiously forbidden.

<sup>51</sup> A woman's mahram is a person whom she is never permitted to marry such as her father, grandfather, great-grandfather, etc., and her son, grandson, great-grandson, etc., her paternal and maternal uncles, her brother, brother's son and sister's son, her mother's husband, husband's father, grandfather, etc., and her husband's son, grandson, etc.

#### **5.4.2. Jean's religious identity and interactional opportunities in the outside world**

Having looked at how Jean's religious identity shaped and was shaped by her learning of English and participation codes in her ESOL classroom, the chapter will turn now to explore the ways Jean's experiences of alienation and Othering in the aftermath of the Manchester and London attacks impacted on her sense of self and her interactional opportunities in English. Among all participants, Jean provided the most detailed accounts of the impact of these attacks, making explicit and direct connections between them and speaking English.

##### **5.4.2.1. Jean's experiences of Othering following the Manchester and London attacks**

Jean described in depth how she was alienated and Otherised in the wake of the Manchester and London attacks. Like all the Syrian participants, these attacks were powerfully alienating and marginalising for Jean:

Since Manchester attack, I feel there's been a big gulf between English people and us. Personally, I've not been subjected to any racist abuse, but I wasn't excused from some suspicious looks when I get on the bus, walk on the streets or do shopping. This has greatly impacted my speaking English opportunities which were restricted this week to my students...and my driving instructor.

(Jean, written diary, 04/06/17)

The normative distinction of "English people and us"/insiders and outsiders was rendered more polarised and entrenched by the terror attacks. In the second interview, Jean commented on the above diary:

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)...When I took the bus to the city centre, I used to sit in the front seat of the bus - I didn't want to mingle with them...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 the Manchester and London attacks, I really feel there's been a barrier.

(04/08/17)

Jean as a hijabi Muslim was perceived unfairly as complicit in these acts of terror, which mediated her sense of who she was and considerably restricted her interactional opportunities in English. Jean realised that there was a need for negotiation and putting her coat hood up to cover her hijab in areas with high British non-Muslim populations to hide her hijabi identity.

The social and religious exclusion that Jean had encountered made her conclude her second interview by:

Frankly, if I was non-hijabi, like I was before, I'd have more opportunities to interact with native speakers outside the college. They wouldn't give me that look I'm Muslim, they wouldn't even know I'm Muslim. Chatting would be easier because I wouldn't build a barrier...Absolutely they'll be more comfortable with non-hijabis...Because once I wear

my headscarf and go out, I become a different person that everyone knows I'm Muslim particularly now Islam has become a stigma in our life.

(04/08/17)

Jean's stance of discussing the issue of "non-hijabi" portrays the power of social positioning on who learners can become, what they can achieve, where they can belong, and the identity positions from which they can interact. This centrally affects their access to the TL community and its interactional and linguistic resources. Rather than contesting it, Jean eventually accepted the socially-constructed disposition that her hijab constituted an obstacle in her integration and socialisation and further complicated her identity (re)construction. As reported by the participants in Giroir (2014a) and Ellwood (2009) who aligned with negative stereotypes imposed on them, Jean seemed to recognise herself and Muslims within these stigmatising discourses which she had resisted in the first place - "Islam has become a stigma in our life". The above accounts stand in contrast with how Jean exercised her agency in the ESOL classroom regarding her religious identity. This clearly shows that for Jean and the Muslim Syrian refugees, as with many migrants and refugees, individual and migrant community agency is constrained by the societal structures and discourses of the host community. The Muslim Syrian learners were active players in the game of power but not "sovereign protagonists" (Weedon 1987: 41). In other words, Jean had as much power as her receiving community was willing to grant.

Having discussed the restrictive impact of the Manchester and London attacks on Jean's identity work and possibilities for social interaction, I now explore the processes through which Jean, as a hijabi Muslim woman, renegotiated her peripherality vis-à-vis her driving instructor and moved from being an outsider to an insider.

#### **5.4.2.2. Driving lessons as an important source of social interaction**

Not long after arriving in England, Jean's husband encouraged her to apply for a driving licence as a precaution against serious health problems which he was experiencing. Jean then started taking driving lessons with a driving instructor called Billy. Thus, a good deal of Jean's English interactions in the public world occurred with Billy whom she described as a friendly, chatty and approachable English man in his fifties. In Jean's account, Billy was a strong opponent of hijab and kept questioning her religious practices and was against economic immigrants and refugees not willing to learn English and integrate:

My instructor is that kind of fanatic English person...I mean he's like 'refugees need to work. If they don't work, they'll become a burden on society. Then, they [the government] will take money from him and pay refugees. Also, refugees should learn English and integrate in society. Otherwise, they should be deported. What are they doing here?!'

(Jean, interview, 04/08/17)

Billy's ambivalence towards foreigners and Islam was further fuelled by the Manchester terror attack (22<sup>nd</sup> May 17). Out of worry about Jean's safety, Billy frequently convinced her to take this "piece of cloth" off her head:

He was convincing me to take my hijab off (laughs)...he said it's unsafe for me and that religion is in the heart, it's not about wearing hijab and appearances...He knows I won't get upset and I don't dramatise things. Let him talk we're just chatting...look what he said to me yesterday he really cracked me up...'what a shock would be if God in the judgement day sends you to hell and me to heaven! I will say hahahaha...you worked so hard and I did nothing' (laughs)

(Jean, shadowing, 01/06/17)

This interaction, which employed good-humoured engagement, stands in contrast with how Jean navigated what seemed to be an Islamophobic incident in her ESOL classroom; she completely stopped talking to her classmate who accused all Sunni Muslims of being Daeshi (see Section 5.4.1.1). Despite the potentiality of choice and agency, Jean chose not to challenge Billy and took things humorously. Initially, I interpreted her inaction as a result of power asymmetries - the fact that she was talking with a more powerfully positioned expert native speaker imposed constraints on her agency. However, this interpretation was contradicted when Jean reported asking Billy to "shut up" after she had failed in her first driving test; she wanted to focus more on driving rather than discussing political and religious issues.

To my question why she had not reacted to Billy's religious prejudice, she said:

If he just sensed that I'm unhappy about the topic of discussion, he'd stop talking and become utterly silent. I didn't give him the impression that I was upset because I want him to keep talking I'm learning loads from him.

(interview, 04/08/17)

Jean's comment brings to focus the significance of (lack of) access to the TL interactional opportunities in (religious) identity negotiation and the exercise of agency in the performance of self. Fearing she might lose this sole source of social interaction in English, Jean humorously accepted what seemed to be religiously-based marginalising discourses. Her acceptance was a bid for access to English speaking opportunities. Her agentic manoeuvre of not resisting and being culturally sensitive was a tactic utilised in order not to be blocked from the very source that had become vital for her to genuinely practise English. As Billy was her only meaningful English contact, Jean developed a strong sense of stake in her relationship with him and the symbolic resources she was obtaining:

I've benefited a lot from Billy. I learned a lot of English from him especially the accent...He helped me break the barrier and talk. I mean to reply directly in English because you know there is a wall between knowing how to talk and to actually talk. Billy removed that wall between my brain and tongue. If he asks me something, I've gotta answer. I've become more comfortable and got used to talking.

(Jean, interview, 04/08/17)

Of course, this is not to claim that Jean adopted this unchallenging stance at all times. There were occasions, for instance, where she presented her religious beliefs logically without trying to look defensive. Another interpretation that Jean provided was that her language was not advanced enough to discuss such “thorny” topics. Jean’s data illuminated the complexity and the diversity of social and discursive practices behind her religious identity work and its relationship to the opportunities she found for developing her English language proficiency.

#### **5.4.2.3. A moment of victory: from an outsider to an insider**

In a diary entry written four months after Jean’s diaries about Billy, she surprised me with a revealing statement about her relationship with Billy:

Finally, I passed my driving test and Billy was really pleased. He said something that really touched me. He said that Ali [Jean’s husband] and I changed his perspectives of Muslims: ‘Even though you’re a practising Muslim, you’re not fanatical and you don’t position people as disbelievers. This made me realise that you Muslims are like us Christians’...He said that he’s sad not to see us anymore and to turn to him if we ever need anything...I really admired his attitude.

(written diary, 06/10/17)

Jean’s undefensive and understanding stance of dealing with Billy’s religious discrimination seemed to result eventually in a transformative identity position for Jean where her legitimacy as a Muslim woman was recognised. The phrase “you Muslims are like us Christians” was a moment of triumph for Jean as it signalled her movement from the periphery to the centre, from an outsider to an insider or even a friend. This moment signified a new project for Jean of coming to understand herself as a Muslim hijabi woman who was accepted by a “fanatic” English person who held adverse attitudes towards Muslims. That said, although successful in gaining entry by Billy, it remains questionable whether Jean established “new terms for speaking” in the broader British community (Giroir 2014a) and felt more stimulated to carve out intelligible moves towards opportunities to speak and practise English.

Like Giroir’s (2014a) participant, Alim, Jean succeeded, not without ambivalence and pain, in constructing “alternative stories” (Ochs and Capps 1996) to replace conventional, stereotypical stories around Muslims. The distinction between “them” and “us” dissolved and the identity boundaries became blurred. It is possible to claim here that not only did Jean unmake her position as an extremist Muslim, but also repositioned all Muslims relationally to Billy. Learners can be agents of change who are not only shaped by the discursive parameters and conditions under which they are learning English and participating but are also shaping them through agency. Jean’s Muslim identity did not only serve as a discriminatory, alienating identifier, but also it was the site through which she voiced her agency and took up the identity position of a recognised and legitimate Muslim woman. That said, it is worth noting that Jean was able to overcome obstacles to

participation because she “was granted the right to speak by a more powerfully positioned ‘expert’” (Giroir 2014a: 50). Not all Syrian participants or immigrants would have that opportunity either because of their limited language level or lack of access to community and material resources such as driving lessons; they would not probably have the right to speak and/or be listened to.

### **5.5. Conclusion: what can we learn from the discussion of religion?**

The chapter has attempted to answer the following question: how is religion implicated in the Syrian refugees’ identity work and opportunities to learn and speak English in their new communities of practice? As the data illustrates, religion serves as a useful lens to make sense of the participants’ shifting identities, their investment in learning English, and their access to language learning opportunities. Confirming that Islam is “a mosaic, not a monolith” (Gregorian, 2003: 1; see Section 5.1), 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 formal and informal language learning settings. 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/ies and learning English seem to be complex and may entail paradoxical pathways for the same individual which draw upon their own multifaceted and complex understandings of their religion - in this case, Islam. Furthermore, in line with what many researchers have found out (Bigelow 2008; 2010; Giroir 2014a; Rich and Troudi 2006), religion intersects with other discursive frames such as gender and culture, meaning that the implications for language learning are rarely simple or straightforward. I agree with Han’s eloquent call for a subfield of religion and language teaching and learning in Applied Linguistics and “the need for applied linguistics to take religion seriously” (2018: 432); there is an acute need within the current social and political climate to bring religion to the fore in Applied Linguistics as a shaping identity dimension along with other identity inscriptions, such as gender, race, and ethnicity which have received a good deal of research.

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 learning English but also as an important site for learners to assume 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 and participation, resistance (or otherwise) to working in mixed-gender groups, and silence in the classroom. Clearly, it is important for teachers not to impose values/practices that go against the learners' perceived religious identities without negotiation and developing shared understandings with the learners themselves. A deeper discussion about the consequences of ignoring and/or acknowledging the learners' religious identities can be found in Chapter 7. Additionally, from the learners' stories, particularly Jean's, arises an obligation for language teachers and ESOL institutions to acknowledge their learners' disturbing experiences and adequately address them. This involves an acknowledgment of the important role religion and religious prejudice play in the learners' every-day life and sense of self as we have seen in this chapter. ESOL teachers can develop lessons to help learners share and build their knowledge of each other's religions, religious sections and cultures rather than receiving that knowledge from public and media discourses<sup>52</sup>; this would help learners notice, attend to, and appreciate cultural and religious diversity, and problematise cultural and religious biases within the language practices in the classroom. The gap between what is being taught in ESOL classrooms and what students need and feel needs to be bridged. The learners' vulnerability and challenges of belonging need to be acknowledged and discussed, yet carefully and wisely, rather than being swept under the carpet for the sake of maintaining an ostensibly convenient and safe classroom environment.

In the next chapter, I will explore another identity dimension that featured in the Syrian women's narratives, i.e. gender - how gendered identities mediated and were mediated by the women's learning of English and participation in new communities of practice with new gender norms and ideologies.

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<sup>52</sup> For insightful examples of how some ESOL teachers applied this, please go to Chapter 7.

## Chapter 6 - Gender and language learning

This chapter answers the question of how gender, as a social and cultural construct, was implicated in the processes of learning English and identity (re)construction of 4 Syrian women, Samra, Nadeema, Rania and Mariam, through their (non)participation in new communities of practice. Although gender clearly relates to women *and* men, female participants drew on discourses of gender and ponder upon their implications for learning English more than their male counterparts within the data. Among the female participants, the stories of Samra, Nadeema, Rania, and Mariam are worth examining more closely as they captured so many of the experiences brought up by the cohort of women, and their stories represented almost two contrasting positions (Samra and Nadeema versus Rania and Mariam) with regards to their experiences of gender negotiation and participation behaviour in their new communities. The chapter contains two sections. It starts by exploring how Samra's and Nadeema's reported dislike of coming to the UK, triggered by gendered and cultural discourses about decision-making power (see Chapter 3), structured their potential to developing "new TL-mediated subject positions" (Block 2007: 136) and consequently their investment in learning English. This is followed by the experiences of Rania and Mariam whose gendered identities were constructed and (re)negotiated as they, and their families, discursively interacted with a range of socially and culturally embedded discourses of gender in the host community. Rania and Mariam developed empowered L2 gender identities and interpreted the disruption and disturbance that came with immigration as sites for growth and identity (re)construction. Although this chapter is intended to explore how gender mediated learning English, wherever appropriate I will lay bare the impact of other social forces such as immigration rules and war which were intricately woven and interacted with gender. The following section provides a thumbnail sketch of Nadeema's and Samra's positions in the UK, followed by their detailed narratives of identity (re)construction and (dis)investment in learning the language of the host community.

### 6.1. Nadeema and Samra: gender-driven disinvestment in the UK

Generally speaking in Arabic cultures<sup>53</sup>, major decisions such as where to live, how to live, and what to do seem to be primarily the husband's responsibility. Even within many houses with apparently equal roles, women tend to make decisions within the limitations imposed by their male partners (Promundo<sup>54</sup> and UN Women 2017). Due to prevailing cultural norms and traditions around gender coupled with the fact that in many households men

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<sup>53</sup> The term "culture(s)" is a notoriously difficult construct to understand. "Culture exists in each and every one of us individually as much as it exists as a global, social construct" (Spencer-Oatey 2012: 8). Within each culture are many cultures.

<sup>54</sup> Founded in Brazil in 1997, Promundo works to promote gender equality and create a world free from violence by engaging men and boys in partnership with women and girls.

are the main breadwinners, men tend to have more familial decision-making power than their wives. Nadeema and Samra reported strong feelings of resistance to coming to the UK to the point where their marriages were about to break down. Nadeema, accompanied by her husband and four children, came from Jordan to England under the VPR (see Chapter 3), a journey which she described like moving from “heaven to prison”. The following incident narrated by Nadeema was indicative of her strongly negative attitudes towards living in England:

I once got lost here and then called my husband...I said to him ‘you brought me here. Let you and Britain go to hell. I wish I had got divorced’...When I got lost, I was choking with rage...I hated myself, I hated life, and I hated my husband...When I talk with my family and miss them, I feel I can’t breathe...

(interview, 22/04/17)

Further, Nadeema noted that she had not seen her daughter and grandchildren, who still lived in Syria, for 7 years. She recounted how she and her husband attempted to arrange a visit to Lebanon so that she could see her daughter; however, she was unable to do so due to UK travel restrictions for VPR personnel like her, which left her in a state of despair:

The most difficult thing is being away from my daughter. You know if she comes here, I’d be the happiest person. Oh God I haven’t seen her for 7 years! 7 years! My heart feels like it’s burning...

(Nadeema, interview, 15/08/17)

According to Nadeema, moving to the UK made the chances of seeing her daughter even slimmer - it was easier for Nadeema’s daughter to visit her in Jordan. It was not unusual to see Nadeema crying in her interviews, the social gatherings, and the ESOL classroom. After three years in the UK, Nadeema did not appear to change her attitudes:

I don’t like it here...Still, if I have the choice, I swear by God I’d go back to Jordan.

(Nadeema, member check, 13/12/18)

As in the case of Nadeema, Samra reported being heartbroken to be separated from her family in Jordan, which was eventually her husband’s, Omar, decision; a decision that Omar described as a “sacrifice” to secure a better life for their children. Losing the social capital, represented by the love and support of her family and a busy social life in Jordan, and her inability to visit her family in Jordan were unbearable to Samra:

Samra: Honestly, I’m not gonna lie when I’m on my own I feel like I’m in a prison. I said to Omar I’ll wait for another year and I’ll see what happens!!

Omar: She’s thinking of going back to Jordan.

(shadowing, 11/05/17)

Both Omar and Samra identified themselves as “prisoners” because they initially thought that they, like many other Syrian VPR refugees, were unentitled to leave the UK.

To sum up, due to gender inequalities instantiated by Nadeema's and Samra's lack of engagement in the decision of coming to the UK, they were disinvested in the UK. The decisions were taken by their husbands, the income earners who had the final word. These decisions had implications; Nadeema and Samra moved away from their wider families and beloved ones. Thus, the negative feelings triggered by the separation could be seen as a reproduction of gender power. Nadeema's and Samra's negative feelings were further exacerbated by immigration rules, broader political and ideological structures of power, and war which made it difficult for them to see their families to whom they had great attachment.

Yet while issues related to their unhappy migration to the UK and strong feelings of dissatisfaction were prominent threads in much of the narratives of Samra and Nadeema, their narrativisation did not exclusively focus on these issues. Connections between the identity positions adopted by Nadeema and Samra in the UK and their experiences of learning English featured in an interesting, yet contrasting and nuanced, way in their stories. It is to these that I now turn.

## **6.2. Samra: a tale of contradiction**

This section traces the changes and dynamism in Samra's dispositions towards learning English from a motivated language learner into unmotivated language learner. How can her dispositions towards learning English be understood in terms of her changing subject positions, gender ideologies and practices, and membership in real and imagined communities? The section also highlights how Samra's opportunities to learn and practise English were mediated by her husband's dominance. Samra's story concludes with pointing out that her ambivalence towards learning English did not mean a complete and utter disinvestment; her identity as a mother of a hearing-impaired daughter prompted her to re-invest in English, a further instance in this project that complexity, contradiction, and diversity seem to be inherent in the mosaic of identity, and hence, in investment in learning English.

### **6.2.1. Samra: changing from a motivated language learner into deinvested language learner**

Despite strong feelings of alienation and disorientation, Samra was initially highly motivated to learn English and participated regularly, and was an assertive and confident student in the ESOL classroom. Her passion for learning English arose in Syria and continued in England:

English is my hobby...I just love it. That's why I participate now in the classroom. When I see an English word, I love to read it...it was my hobby at school.

(Samra, interview, 01/04/17)

I think Omar and Samra are way way ahead of us...their memory and comprehension are better than us. Sometimes the teacher would ask a question from the previous lesson. We forget. Yet, Omar and Samra would be the first to answer.

(Adham, phone diary, 18/05/17)

Samra reported being enthusiastic about going to Northeast College and Omar was encouraged by her enthusiasm and persistence. The couple said that Samra helped Omar revise and learn new English vocabulary at home because he did not have the patience and the study skills to learn on his own.

The identity position of a passionate language learner, however, went through significant changes. When Samra realised the impossibility of seeing her family in Jordan, she began to lose interest in English and became a somewhat deinvested language learner:

When people tell me that I can't travel to Jordan to see my family, I feel I'm like in a prison and in very low spirits...I feel desperate and depressed...There's nothing to encourage me like OK I'll study hard because in summer I'll have something exciting...If I could see my family, my whole life would change...that's why I shied away from learning English...I became less interested in learning English because I don't like this country.

(Samra, shadowing, 11/01/18)

This equivocation in Samra's approach to learning English was also pointed out by Omar:

Omar: I noticed that she's regressing rather than progressing.

Samra: Oh very much...Omar who knows no English at all has become ahead of me now.

Omar: I'm surprised by my wife because she knew how to read English. She's become neglectful...I mean she's not interested...

(interview 16/09/17)

When Samra was moved up to Entry 1 class (October 2017), her attendance dropped and her enthusiasm waned. At the end of the academic year (2017/18), Samra did not get moved up from Entry 1, while Omar did, yet she continued attending ESOL classes.

Samra's gender-driven disinvestment in the UK gradually caused an ambivalence in her disposition towards learning a language that was once her passion. Samra's relationship with English shifted from English as an object of passion and desire which was independent of her sense of self to a real social discursive practice that involved her identity as a wife who came to the UK reluctantly to preserve her marriage and family and as a daughter and a sister who was saddened to be separated from her family. In different ways and all through the project, Samra positioned herself versus discourses of unacceptance and resentment to live in England. Her being in a new culture did not lead into an active engagement; rather, she gradually recoiled into a discourse of denial. Samra's (dis)investment in learning English was very much shaped by male-oriented gender ideologies (her husband's decision to come to England). She became "neglectful"

about learning English because she was unable to cope with the emotional upheaval of separation from her family and being in a country she disliked. This upheaval acted as a negative accelerator not only of her identity development but also of language learning and caused her to become less invested in learning English. In this view, an important question arises: can language learners learn a language that is associated with oppression, subordination and separation from their families? As the next section will reveal, the answer to this question does not seem to be straightforward.

### **6.2.2. Gendered identities as a site of struggle**

Samra's ambivalence towards English did not mean, however, that she completely and utterly lost her motivation to learn English. Samra eloquently explained her mixed feelings towards English summarising a conversation with a social worker about her hearing-impaired daughter:

I was talking to her [social worker], giving her all the information and then I swear by God I had that feeling I thought how come that I don't like this country, yet I'm trying hard to make her help my daughter...Such a contradiction!...God knows that I'm learning English basically for the sake of my daughter...she is the most precious thing I have in my life...

(phone diary, 05/10/17)

This quotation expressed the "contradiction" that Samra felt towards English. Even though she felt ambivalent towards learning English and living in England, she did not ignore the fact that she needed the linguistic capital of English to be able to fully perform her identity as a good mother. Being a good mother involved more than physical and emotional care; in this new environment it entailed learning English in order to support her hearing-impaired daughter. Learning English for Samra involved not only acquiring a linguistic system of words and sentences and how they were structured, but it was also a social practice that engaged her gendered identities as a mother and a wife in diverse, and contradictory, ways. Her investment in English was thus "complex, contradictory, and in a state of flux" (Norton 2000: 11). However, Samra's stake in her mother identity which encouraged her partly to put some effort into learning English did not erase the fact that her disinvestment in the UK and separation from her family continued to be hampering her identity work and English learning. Nor did it mean that Samra succeeded in achieving membership in her new milieu. Rather, it did mean that identities, and investment in learning English, can be "a complex site of struggle" (Block 2007: 92).

The following section goes into more detail about how Samra's access to English-speaking opportunities and imagined identities were structured by her husband's gender and religious views.

### 6.2.3. Gendered inequalities in access to English interactional opportunities

Throughout the data, and as the above quotes illustrated, Omar and Samra emphasised that Omar made more progress with learning English than Samra which could be partly understood in terms of Samra's ambivalence towards learning English. Yet, Samra provided an additional gendered-based explanation:

He does everything...he does shopping, he takes children to school and talks with teachers...even when we go shopping together, he takes over everything...he literally does everything.

(interview, 16/09/17)

All the public tasks which entailed speaking English were performed by Omar. As professed by the couple, Samra was not even permitted by Omar to go outside or walk the streets on her own, including going to and coming from Northeast College which was a 10-minute walk from their house. Further, Omar added that he did not allow Samra to attend a voluntary women-only English class because he would not be able to be with her in the same class. Omar explained his attitude:

Syrian women have changed 180 degrees here...Syrians aren't taking religion seriously...In the end, I don't let my wife walk the streets alone. I don't give racists any opportunity to find her as an easy prey...this isn't Sunnah<sup>55</sup> [religion]. A woman should be accompanied by either another woman or a man...Also, my wife met with some Syrian neighbours...they invited her over after 7 p.m. It's not in our traditions that a woman leaves her house after 7 p.m. so I put some pressure on her...

(interview, 01/04/17)

This excerpt succinctly illustrates Omar's patriarchal views which were rooted in his religious stance and cultural tradition. These views relegated Samra into a dependant, powerless woman who was heavily reliant on Omar even in everyday activities, and restricted to a great extent her English interactional opportunities. Further, this quote brings to the fore how gender was inextricably linked to other identity inscriptions such as religion and culture to mediate language learning opportunities, hence corroborating the findings of previous research (Giroir 2014a; Goldstein 1996; Norton 2000;). Gendered inequalities in access to English interactional opportunities was a prominent thread that ran through many Syrian women participant's narratives and many studies as well (Goldstein 1996; Norton 2000; Park 2009; Pavlenko and Piller 2008).

### 6.2.4. Imagined identities as constrained by gendered inequalities

Omar's dominance seemed to have the unintended consequence of limiting Samra's ability to realise an imagined identity in her new community, which exacerbated her strong sense of disorientation and unbelonging:

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<sup>55</sup> Sunnah: practical traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad.

Yesterday, Omar's uncle said that the first year would be the most difficult and then the second year would be less difficult...I said to him 'impossible, probably because you're busy going out and studying and thinking ahead'...I feel I have nothing here...I spend my whole day doing the housework.

(Samra, interview, 16/09/17)

Samra's identity work and freedom of action and choice were to a large extent limited by patriarchal homogenising discourses that restricted her roles and contributions to the domestic sphere. Gender patriarchy curtailed not only the kinds of identities and communities that could be imagined by and for Samra, but also restricted her social mobility and resulted in a lack of exposure to the TL and opportunities to interact in English. Like Cooke's (2006) participant (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.6.), Samra seemed to have difficulty in visualising a connection between learning English and the future because her responsibilities were restricted to the house. "If we do not acknowledge the imagined communities of the learners, we may exacerbate their non-participation and impact their learning trajectories in negative ways" (Pavlenko and Norton 2007: 598). Samra's unresolved relationship with her new community and learning English was reinforced by the absence of an imagined identity and community in the UK. The following discusses whether Nadeema's experiences of learning English and gendered identity/ies development were similar or different to those of Samra.

### **6.3. Nadeema: unhappy but motivated to learn English**

Although Nadeema often complained, much more than Samra, about living in the UK, she seemed to be dedicated and stable in her investment in learning English, not missing any English classes and attending voluntary English-learning courses over the weekends. She reported asking her children to help her revise and study at home and was committed to learn English:

I'm trying to learn English. Yeah, I'm trying and I'll keep trying. I do want to learn I do want to learn.

(Nadeema, phone diary, 08/07/17)

It was interesting to see the contrast between Samra's and Nadeema's dispositions towards learning English. What was it in Nadeema's history and identity work which made her more motivated than Samra? I will start by setting the scene that will enable the reader to understand more deeply Nadeema's history and investment, followed by a brief discussion of the restrictive implications that illiteracy had on her learning English.

#### **6.3.1. Illiteracy as gendered and a constraint to learn English**

While the focus of this chapter is upon gender, what follows is a discussion of the effects of Nadeema's illiteracy in Arabic on her sense of self, disinvestment in the UK and her learning of English. Exploring illiteracy is a discussion of a gender equality issue - a

discussion of how denying women the right of literacy can have implications on the entirety of their life. Illiteracy is “analogous to the oppression of women in general, and amplified when the two factors together create an intersectional double bind” (Parker 2012: 4). Nearly two-thirds (63%) of the world’s 750 million illiterate adults are women, according to UNESCO Institute for Statistics report published in 2017. Nadeema’s illiteracy was not merely a background variable; rather, it was inherent and a lived experience in the mosaic of her life experiences and identity work. The word “illiterate”, or synonyms of the word, was mentioned 53 times by Nadeema in her data.

At the very beginning of her first interview, Nadeema spent quite some time expressing her frustration for being illiterate and the restrictive implications of illiteracy for her sense of self and learning English. Because Nadeema’s mother got burnt (see Chapter 2, Section 3.2.2) and because literacy was not perceived as important for females in her village at that time, Nadeema’s parents decided to stop sending her to school so that Nadeema, as a female, could look after her sick mother and newborn sibling. Hence, the roots of Nadeema’s illiteracy could be traced to gendered and cultural ideologies. Gender inequality in access to literacy seemed to shape Nadeema’s life and experiences including her relationship with her husband, family-in-law, and children. Due to her illiteracy, Nadeema reported that she was perceived by her in-laws as inadequate for her husband, and she was often characterised as a woman devoid of intelligence and character. Nadeema was quite aware of the elitist attitudes of her family-in-law who positioned her as second-class:

They made me feel that I’m less of a person because I can’t read and write. Sometimes they call me and say ‘what did you learn? Come on tell us some English words’ although they know no English at all. They just want to ridicule and humiliate me.

(Nadeema, interview, 15/08/17)

Nadeema’s illiteracy seemed to shape not only how she was positioned as a daughter-in-law and a wife but also her prospects of learning English. Her family-in-law, who lived in Jordan, positioned her as an inadequate language learner because she was illiterate in Arabic, an instance of the complexity of positioning and how it could take place on many levels by different people in different worlds (physical and virtual).

Illiteracy placed constraints on Nadeema’s gendered identities as a mother and a wife, on her progress of learning English, and hence on her status in her own home. Nadeema remarked that her two daughters and son, aged 16, 12, and 10, and her husband made a quick and massive progress with learning English, while she did not. She justified the gap between her family’s English and hers by her illiteracy which made her progress far slower, which resulted in her being reliant on her children and tilting the balance of power in their favour:

Nadeema: Sometimes my son asks me something and I say sorry I really don't know. He once said "Is there anything you know?!" and I was like "Shut up". He said "I swear by God I didn't mean anything but whenever we ask you, you say go and ask your dad"...Then they started asking my husband straight away...Back in Syria my children used to respect me very much and even fear me, but they've changed here massively...  
Amina: Do you think it's because you often depend on them with the English language?  
Nadeema: You mean that I no longer have authority over them? The fact that they know more than I do? Yeah that's correct.

(interview, 15/08/17)

This was supported by the observational data gained at Nadeema's house which showed that her children sometimes commented and laughed at her progress in learning English and her English pronunciation. Hence, Nadeema's illiteracy was shaped by and shaping her gendered identities.

Another impact of Nadeema's illiteracy on her learning of English was her inability to comprehend what was happening in the classroom:

Because I can't read and write in Arabic, I'm really struggling in the classroom. I don't understand anything at all...They [other students] do learn and understand better than I do because they write down in Arabic the meaning and pronunciation of the English words.

(Nadeema, interview, 20/04/17)

On many occasions, Nadeema opened up about how she was positioned by her Syrian classmates as an "incompetent", deficient and "slow" language learner. She believed that her inability to write down the meaning and transliteration of English words was the biggest challenge imposed by her illiteracy and made her fall far behind her classmates. She was unaware of the other consequences of illiteracy on human cognition and consciousness and metalinguistic awareness (Olson 2002; Ong 1988). After 4 academic years in the Pre-entry class, Nadeema stated that she did not get moved up (member check, 13/12/18), while some of her Syrian classmates, such as Jean, reached Level 1. When discussing the classroom, Nadeema downplayed her capabilities and subjugated her knowledge and abilities to that of her classmates. Despite her slow progress, Nadeema never lacked interest or investment in learning English.

To sum up, Nadeema's gendered-based illiteracy seemed to be socially constructed as a tool of hegemony which relegated her to subordinate and disempowered identity positions as a mother, wife, daughter-in-law, and language learner. In the following section, I discuss how the impact of Nadeema's reported illiteracy in Arabic on her stake in learning English was not wholly negative. I also examine how Nadeema's learning of English was facilitated, but also inhibited, by her husband's stance on gender.

### **6.3.2. Learning English to claim more powerful gendered and literate identities**

When asked about her investment in learning English, Nadeema said:

I want to learn English just like my husband and children. I just want to feel equal to them that they are not better than me. I also want to prove to my family-in-law who constantly bullied me that I'm just like my husband and daughters. I'm not less than them...

(phone diary, 08/07/17)

Through reading and writing in English and the concomitant expansion of linguistic capital and symbolic power (Weedon 1997), Nadeema could begin to reconstruct and modulate her gendered (i.e. mother, wife, and daughter-in-law) identities as "equal" and legitimate in the communities that were important to her. She realised that the condition of the oppressed was not immutable, and she could become, through learning English, a legitimate member in her respective communities. English would provide Nadeema with more than new communitive codes - "it also becomes a powerful marker of group identity, a sense of 'us'" (Egbo 2004: 248). For Nadeema, unlike Samra, English was a tool of social connection and identification with her own family and a community of literate and educated people:

Learning English is a compensation for a missed educational opportunity in Syria.

(Nadeema, interview, 15/08/17)

This supports Norton's (2001) argument that "an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space" (p.166). Despite her dislike and disinvestment in the UK, Nadeema was greatly invested in learning English as this was also an investment in her gendered and emerging literate identities.

It is crucial to note, however, that Nadeema's ability to imagine more powerful and positive gendered identity positions was originally triggered and enabled by her participation in new communities of practice with different ideologies and practices of gender and age:

Back in Syria my sister went to a literacy programme and learned to read and write in Arabic...but I felt ashamed because of my in-laws...when I came here and found out that people who are older than me are learning, I was encouraged to go to college. I should learn I'm younger than most of them [ESOL learners].

(Nadeema, interview, 15/08/17)

This aligns with what Wenger argues that leaving a community of practice can also involve "seeing the world and oneself in new ways" (1998: 155). It is ironic that the migrant context, that Nadeema had strongly resisted, caused her to critically re-evaluate her previous conceptualisation of what she could do as a 42-year-old illiterate woman, consequently producing her age and gendered identities in the UK in ways that benefited her processes of learning English and identity (re)negotiation. Her adoption of new identity positions was not entirely a product of her own free choice and agency; it was co-constructed in collaboration with her new communities of practice that sanctioned and validated these

identity positions. Nadeema's discursive renegotiating of dominant cultural, age, and gendered narratives aligned with the findings of many studies that suggest that the processes of language learning and participation in new discursive communities might trigger significant changes in how some language learners and users position and are positioned by others (Block 2012; Giroir 2014a; 2014b; Kanno 2000; Kanno and Applebaum 1995; Kinginger 2004; Pavlenko 2001a; Norton 2000). As Pavlenko (2001b) points out, language learning multiplies possibilities of gendered self-expression and provides opportunities for agency in the performance of self in new communities of practice. It was this reconstruction of gendered, age and cultural identities that was the most important feature of Nadeema's narratives because it was what prompted her to learn English and make meaning of her existence in the UK.

### **6.3.3. Learning English as a pathway to independence and prosperity**

Nadeema added a further motive for learning English:

I'm learning English so that I can get out alone, to buy things on my own without the assistance of anyone. At least if I get lost, I can read the name of the place I'm at.

(interview, 22/04/17)

Learning English would offer Nadeema the independence and the freedom that she was deprived of all her life as an illiterate, marginalised woman. In essence, Nadeema's imagined identity as an independent and empowered woman was as much a reconstruction of her illiterate gendered identity in the past as it was an imaginative construction of her sense of self in the future (Norton 2001). However, it is worth pointing out that Nadeema was capable of creating her imagined identity because it was sanctioned in the first place by her husband. Nadeema's husband was unlike Omar (see Section 6.2.4) in that he often encouraged her to get outside and be independent:

He wants me to learn English because he feels sorry for me that I get upset because I don't know [English]...When we first came, wherever he went, he took me with him...He encouraged me to get outside on my own...

(Nadeema, interview, 22/04/17)

Unlike Samra, having an imagined identity helped Nadeema forge a connection between learning English and the future; it added a purpose and an impetus to the process of learning English and gave her "an important sense of direction and agency in determining the conditions" under which she was learning English (Giroir 2014b: 305).

However, this did not mean that Nadeema's learning of English was not curtailed by gender patriarchal discourses performed by her husband:

My husband once came to my classroom and saw me sitting at the table with three men. He didn't accept it and got upset. When we got home, he said 'you can tell your teacher that you don't want to work with men and she's not gonna force you to do it'. I

said 'Doesn't your teacher ask you to work with women in the class?!' He said 'I AM a man, no one can talk about me, I am a man but you don't have to do it'.

(interview, 22/04/17)

This instance, along with many others in Nadeema's case and the other female participants, showed that the women's opportunities and efforts to learn English and appropriate new gender discursive practices were constantly compromised by their husbands who seemed to make choices about what aspects of their wives' gender identities to maintain and what to negotiate. This excerpt was significant as it was representative ("I am a man, no one can talk about me") of a more pervasive gendered hierarchy in the Syrian community that legitimated male authority, which in turn affected the women's opportunities to learn English and their future aspirations.

#### **6.4. A summary of Nadeema's and Samra's stories**

Both Samra and Nadeema, like Norton's participants (2000), depicted themselves as committed wives and mothers who were invested in their familial roles, and their language learning endeavours had arisen from these investments. Their stories help to illustrate how learners' investment to learn a language needs to "be situated with respect to the ideological and sociopolitical processes which both constrain and enable (re)negotiation of identity" (Kinging 2004: 220). Nadeema and Samra shared common ground through their engagement with a discursive practice of disinvestment in the UK, yet the variability of how they reacted on these discourses is a clear illustration of the diversity of experience among adult women language learners. Evidence from the two cases highlights that learning English was not only shaped by gender identities and ideologies but also by how the female individuals responded to and acted upon the gendered expectations and ideologies that were placed on them by their families and communities. Aligning with Giroir's (2014a) findings, Nadeema's and Samra's narratives underscore how their different discursive practices were contingent on the multiple identity positions that were prioritised in their sense of self. For Samra, who was greatly attached to her sisters and parents, her identity positions as a sister and a daughter were more prioritised than her identity positions as a language learner and a member in a new community, leading to an equivocation in her English learning endeavours. By contrast, despite Nadeema's disinvestment in the UK and separation from her family, her new identity as a language learner gave her a great deal of symbolic power that she had always aspired to as a marginalised, illiterate woman. Her investment in English was congruent with her investment in literacy, her history of subordination and aspirations for the future. Like Hassan and Hiba (see Chapter 4) and Kinginger's participant (2004), Nadeema seemed to succeed, in a way, by (1) forging membership and belonging in her new community of practice and (2) turning her painful experience on its head and making it a virtue.

## **6.5. Rania and Mariam: narratives of expansion and reinvention**

Having discussed the cases of Samra and Nadeema, the second part of this chapter will take the reader on a narrative journey of how Rania and Mariam, and their families, discursively reconstructed their gender identities as they navigated through different gender ideologies in their new communities, and how this gendered identity practice factored into their sense of self and investment in learning English. Like the women in Giroir (2014b), the narratives of Rania and Mariam were, in many ways, narratives of change and reinvention. Crossing the borders from Lebanon to the UK and learning English was a “transformative experience” for them, most notably in the way that their participation in new communities of practice created a space of transformation that was not available within the rigid parameters of the cultures and gender performance of Syria and Lebanon (Giroir 2011). Their time and stay in England had become representative of a site in which to grow up and expand, not necessarily acting independently from their families, but learning how to negotiate their own identity within their narratives of their familial roles and attachments. The novice and refugee identity positions for Rania and Mariam resulted in a sense of agency to imagine themselves as powerful and independent women. Yet, the new-found adopted identity positions did create conflict in their identity work and posed a few constraints on their language learning endeavours. I will start out with the case of Rania who provided an account of how she redefined her gendered identity from a woman with little voice and authority into an independent woman who performed as a language broker and a primary caretaker of her household. Wherever appropriate, other social factors which impacted Rania’s investment will be pointed out because as will become apparent gender cannot be discussed in a vacuum.

## **6.6. Rania and Adham: “role reversal” of traditional gender roles**

In Syria, Rania and her husband, Adham, reported performing conventionally and ideologically defined roles. Adham financially provided for the family and performed all the public tasks, while Rania provided sustenance and nurturing for the family by acting as a mother and a homemaker:

Adham was responsible for everything outside the domain of the house.

(Rania, interview, 19/07/17)

These traditional gender roles were accentuated by the movement into Lebanon in 2012 where Syrian women, as many participants claimed, were more likely to be sexually harassed and verbally abused, which placed strong constraints on Rania’s social mobility:

Rania: I felt scared to go out on my own, but I don’t here.

Adham: I don’t worry if she gets out here, but I used to in Lebanon.

(interview, 02/04/17)

When the family arrived in England in 2016, neither Adham nor his three children knew any English. According to Adham, he had only received 6 years of schooling and often missed school, which resulted in his low-literacy in Arabic. By contrast, Rania had finished secondary school and had learnt basic English in Syria. Unlike Samra and Nadeema, Rania could not depend on Adham or her children in terms of English and started to take over the responsibilities of the household that required English, which resulted in something of a “role-reversal” of the traditional family gender patterns:

In Syria and Lebanon, Adham was fully responsible for everything. But when we came here, because of my English level and I improved faster, there’s a sort of role reversal...when it comes to English and appointments, they’re all my responsibility.

(Rania, interview, 19/07/17)

As Rania’s English improved, she took on more and more of the private and public tasks to preserve the continuity of the family life and ensure survival and validation in the new community which was, unlike Lebanon and Syria, legitimising and even encouraging for her participation. As reported by the couple, it was Rania rather than Adham who did most of the organisation of the house and the paperwork connected with settling into a new country: filling out forms, setting up emails and performing a variety of tasks online (Rania’s IT skills were stronger than Adham’s), helping children with homework and teaching them, answering and making calls, booking and attending appointments, and interpreting for Adham in different situations:

Rania sorts out around 75% of anything related to the Internet, emails, translations, and paperwork.

(Adham, member check, 07/05/19)

Gradually and through the power of English, Rania took up the identity of the primary caretaker of the house and the language broker who mediated between her family and the outside world.

### **6.6.1. Investment from the identity of the language broker and primary caretaker**

When asked about her stake in learning English, Rania responded as follows:

Because I’m responsible for everything, I should learn English I should understand what they’re saying.

(phone diary, 08/06/17)

Like Norton’s participant (2000), Martina, Rania’s investment in learning English was primarily structured by her identity positions as a mother and the primary caretaker of the family, which in fact provided her with numerous opportunities to practise English on a regular basis. Most of the tasks that Rania performed in English were speaking-oriented. Hence, it was not a coincidence that Rania reported that she was invested greatly in developing the skill of speaking more than the other language skills. Learning to speak

English would enable her to perform her newfound language broker identity efficiently and keep the status and power that she earned in her house through her command of English. English provided her with a great deal of symbolic capital and self-esteem:

I feel stronger and more confident...I can depend on myself.

(phone diary, 15/04/17)

During shadowing, it was observed that Rania softly and covertly used her knowledge of English to claim voice and authority over Adham. She jokingly corrected his pronunciation and spelling and occasionally bantered with him about his inability to perform specific tasks in English such as writing down his name.

Rania's initial command of English seemed to serve as a source in her pathway towards emancipation from the chains of society and patriarchal authority and in her move from the margins to the centre of her own home, which facilitated her gendered identity/ies development. This in turn provided her with numerous language learning and speaking opportunities. This illustrates the constitutive relationship of language and identity (Tabouret-Keller 1997; Weedon 1997). Rania was a diligent language learner who made good progress over a short period of time. In phone diaries, she recorded deploying a variety of English learning tools to learn quickly. She attended a voluntary English conversation class; she revised and memorised at home what she had learned at college; she did a good amount of autonomous learning using mobile phone apps, Facebook and YouTube; unlike Nadeema and Samra, she often problematised not having an authentic community where he could speak English for real communication; she watched English cartoons with her children; and she tried to learn new vocabulary from her children.

#### **6.6.2. Gendered identity/ies (re)negotiation as a collaborative work**

It is important to note here that the reinvention of Rania's gender identity could not have been possible without the identity changes which Adham himself underwent in England:

I changed, yes I changed! In the past, for example, I didn't allow my wife to go out and do things because I was afraid of what people would say about her and myself. However, now I won't let people dictate terms. I no longer think about what other people would say or react...If I listen to people, they will control my life and even my wife's future...

(Adham, phone diary, 18/05/17)

As a response to participation in a new social and cultural space, Adham revised and renegotiated some restrictive cultural and gendered narratives which led to the emergence of a new gendered identity and new parameters for the expression of gendered self (Skapoulli 2004). As Weedon (1997) proposes, identities are "not innate, not genetically determined, but socially produced" (p.21). Adham's gendered identity transformation afforded Rania with new roles and identity positions and accordingly numerous

interactional opportunities. Adham aspired to run his own business and open a restaurant in England. He stated that he planned to let Rania work with him in the future. In the food markets organised at Northeast College, Rania helped Adham with selling food, dealing with customers and doing the maths.

Alternatively, it seems viable to argue that another force underlying Adham's legitimisation of Rania's social mobility and increased responsibilities was probably his own low literacy in Arabic which contributed to his slow progress with learning English compared to Rania:

Rania can memorise English words, but I can't. I don't have the study skills. What I take in the class remains in the class. I can't remember anything (laughs).

(Adham, interview, 02/04/17)

Like Nadeema, Adham's English linguistic abilities were not keeping pace with his traditional gendered identity as the primary caretaker:

Wherever I go I don't understand English AT ALL. We've got appointments all the time we've got 4 kids...I always try to avoid appointments and ask Rania to do as much as she can...I feel frustrated...I think how long I will be like I understand nothing...

(Adham, phone diary, 02/03/18)

Adham probably realised that the previous traditional gender roles needed to be modified and revised to ensure survival of the family life. Yet, this did not mean a complete change of Adham's gender ideologies. As we saw in Chapter 4 (Section 4.1.4.2), Adham asked Rania not to work with Sami because he thought he was nosey and acting like a teacher. Further, it was Adham's decision that Rania needed to stop attending ESOL classes in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks (see Chapter 5, Section 5.3.1). Adham also remarked that Rania was supposed to tell him about everything she had done during the day, including what she said in the interviews and phone diaries. These examples highlight the complexity of gendered identity work, and how the range of viable identities and English-learning opportunities available to Rania were not only enabled, but also controlled, at times, by Adham. Like Skapoulli's participant (2004; see Chapter 2), Adham enacted selective appropriation and detachment from the gender ideologies and discourses of the new culture. Being simultaneously a member of a conservative traditional Arabic culture and a European society of late modernity inevitably created tension and contradiction for Adham and rendered the process of gender performance and negotiation more complex and challenging. Hence, learning and speaking English, apart from being constituted by and constituting identity, is connected to an entire network of conflictive social and cultural practices embedded in the learners' multiple broader cultural and sociohistorical worlds.

Thus far, I have discussed how learning English and being in a new community was a catalyst of change for Rania, with positive implications for herself and for her learning

English. Yet, this identity transformation entailed some overwhelming challenges and complications, which will be outlined below.

### **6.6.3. The tension of the new gendered identities**

Rania was generally a shy and reserved woman and still at a beginner stage of learning English, which caused her to struggle when performing her new gendered identities:

Amina: How do you feel when you speak English with your teacher, your GP, etc...?

Rania: I feel fearful probably because I'm not that confident and also because of my limited English...Yet whenever I have an appointment and I know what I'll say, I go back to the class handouts and revise the needed vocabulary...I also use Google Translator...

(interview, 19/07/17)

Despite her strong fear (she reported trembling sometimes while speaking English), Rania refused to surrender to the nervousness which she felt while speaking English and prepared in advance to reduce her fear. Weighing up her priorities, Rania's identities as a mother and the primary caretaker of the house were stronger than her identity as a shy beginner language learner. Interestingly, Rania said that she sometimes did not ask for an interpreter for GP appointments because she did not want to be positioned as an ignorant immigrant who knew no English. The way she constructed her identity in the house as an independent and valued woman seemed to impact on her identity in the public world; she sought independence and respect not only in the family world but also in the wider community.

Additionally, enacting her new gendered identities in addition to her domestic responsibilities placed pressure on Rania and appeared to make her uncomfortable while speaking English:

Even if I know what to say I just become perplexed and I forget what to say....when I'm under pressure like I have 2 or 3 appointments on the same day in addition to college...or sometimes when we have an issue with regards to the language that needs solving and no one is helping...this pressurises me.

(Rania, phone diary, 08/06/17)

It is worth noting here that by the time Rania submitted this diary, she was seven months pregnant with her fourth child. Her very investment in her new gendered identities sometimes collided with her desire to speak and learn English. Rania reported that owing to the increased responsibilities inside and outside the house and the fatigue during pregnancy, she did not have time to revise or study English at home. She felt torn between her multiple, yet sometimes contradictory, identities and investments. As Rania communicated in the above extract and other phone diaries, her investment in learning English was also influenced by the stresses and strains of refugees' lives and experiences: (1) the recurring health problems that Syrian refugees and their children suffered from as a result of war and living in appalling conditions before coming to England, which entailed

several medical appointments on a regular basis and (2) the refugees' unfamiliarity with the bureaucratic requirements and new systems of communication in their new communities.

## **6.7. Mariam: England as a space to grow into adulthood**

This section traces how Mariam, like Rania, grew from a shy girl who struggled to translate who she was into an independent and strong woman, which provided her with status and confidence and accordingly numerous English learning opportunities. Mariam had a strong sense of her identity and was acutely aware of who she was and who she became. Among the female participants, Mariam was the most explicit in positioning herself discursively at the threshold of favourable transformation. How and why did this transformation occur? How did this transformation impact on her investment in learning English?

### **6.7.1. Shyness and gender in the domestic and public spheres**

Mariam and her mother, Fatima, stated that in Lebanon it was very dangerous for Mariam to go out on her own or stay in the house without company. They narrated many stories of how Syrian women were more susceptible to verbal and sexual harassment particularly young women like Mariam (19 years old). When the family moved to the UK, Mariam was still very shy and inhibited to go out on her own:

Mariam: I don't go outside alone. I go either with my mum to do shopping or with my dad to college. Apart from this, what should I be doing out there?

Fatima: I encourage her to go outside and depend on herself...it's safe here nothing to be afraid of...We coax her to be stronger...but she's introverted and shy. We're trying to change her...she's traditional!

(interview, 18/04/17)

Mariam's initial shyness and nervousness were in part the outcomes of how she was positioned as a young Syrian woman in Lebanon. Evidently, the sexual harassment that Mariam and many Syrian women were subjected to in Lebanon initially constrained her prospects of developing new gendered identity positions. In a sense, Mariam thought that the only identity positions available to her were a cautious and dependent woman who could be a target of sexual harassment. At first, this stance placed strong constraints upon her opportunities to interact with the target culture, be exposed to English input, and speak English as illustrated in the above and following excerpts:

As they say, I was naïve (laughs) like the cat has got my tongue, something like that. For instance, when the support worker visited us, I understood what he was saying, but I couldn't speak. Because I was shy, what would I say?! I was worried I might be wrong.

(Mariam, phone diary, 23/03/18)

Being heavily dependent on her family and lacking experience in the real world caused Mariam to have a low sense of self-efficacy and self-worth. Although Mariam's speaking

skills were the strongest in the house, she thought that she was not worthy of participation. Her sense of self was “fragmented”, “fuzzy”, and “undefined” (Giroir 2011).

### **6.7.2. Shyness and gender in the ESOL classroom<sup>56</sup>**

Mariam’s identity positions in the ESOL classroom were merely a continuation of those in her house and the outside world. For the first three months, Mariam reported that she was the sole female student in her Entry 1 classroom, the majority of which were male Syrian students including her father. This made the negotiation of her gendered identity more challenging and affected her engagement and participation in the classroom learning practices as is obvious by the following interview extract:

When the teacher asked me to work with a male student, I shied away from him. At that stage, I thought all students would get moved up except for me because they all participated in the class. Although I knew most of the things that the teacher had asked, I couldn’t answer...Not sure whether it was shyness or the fear of being wrong...the class was very very very sarcastic. This is why I probably didn’t like to ask.

(Mariam, 26/07/17)

For Mariam, her male classmates’ sarcasm and her identity as the sole female and youngest student were grounds for exclusion and disinvestment in the classroom learning practices. Hence, Mariam, like Nadeema, chose to protect herself from the male classmates’ criticism through performing the identity of the mute student that, in turn, limited her opportunities of speech and learning English and asking questions. Unlike Jean (see Chapter 4), Rania (see Chapter 5) and Sarroub’s participants (2005), Mariam was not capable of modifying her gendered identity to fit into the classroom dynamics and modes of participation even when she was later joined by a few female classmates.

In what follows, I present a detailed examination of the processes through which Mariam repositioned herself as a strong woman who could defend herself and exercise resistance in the face of inequitable and marginalising structures of power.

### **6.7.3. New communities with new gendered, cultural, and age narratives**

As stated above, Mariam’s mother encouraged her to go out on her own because England, unlike Lebanon, was a safe country. In Mariam’s account, her parents refused to accompany her or let her brothers go with her in an attempt to encourage Mariam to depend on herself. When Mariam started to go outside unaccompanied and interact with the target culture, she realised that the new milieu offered new means of gendered, cultural, and age self-representations:

I love the social gatherings with the ESOL teachers. As I told you, initially I was introverted and lonely, but now wherever my mom goes I go with her...I was told that here when children turn 18, they leave their parents’ house and look after themselves.

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<sup>56</sup> It seems worth reminding the reader that Mariam’s ESOL teacher did not agree to participate in the project nor allowed me to observe Mariam. Thus, this is Mariam’s self-report data, not observational data.

This made me think that I was about to become 20 so I'm no longer a little girl and started thinking about it. I also noticed that girls go out on their own and don't feel scared...So why would I feel scared then?!

(Mariam, interview, 26/07/17)

Through social engagement and participation in new communities of practice, Mariam realised that her previous gendered identities were not favourable, or needed, and she was prompted, like Nadeema and Rania, to cross boundaries and adopt new gendered, cultural, and age identities that held more symbolic capital and value in the new environment. This in turn provided her with numerous interactional opportunities and boosted her self-efficacy to depend on herself. In fact, Mariam provided many diaries, describing how proud she was of herself and what she had been able to accomplish with learning English and the help she was offering to her family English-wise. Identities are not simply seen as “discursively constructed categories of self but as lived experiences of participation in specific communities, where meanings of particular positions narratives and categories must be worked out in practice” (Pavlenko 2001a: 319).

During that time, Mariam was also enrolled by the help of WELT<sup>57</sup> in a variety of women-only voluntary English and IT classes. As explained in Chapter 2, WELT was a registered charity in Northeast College that helped ESOL learners find work, volunteering opportunities, and relevant courses. Mariam noted that because the classes were female-only, she felt confident enough to participate regularly and considered herself the “top student” and the “teachers’ assistant”. She was praised by her teachers as “the most enthusiastic” student in the class. Her teachers sometimes asked her to help and support her classmates, which further boosted her self-confidence. Concurrent with this increase of confidence, Mariam provided several diaries where she reported becoming more comfortable dealing and communicating with English men. For instance, she recorded how she asked an English man that she had not known to help her carry shopping bags to her house (WhatsApp diary, 19/06/17).

#### **6.7.4. A critical incident with WELT: a turning point**

Through diaries, Mariam emphasised on a specific incident of how she manoeuvred institutional inequalities of power as a central social factor in boosting her self-confidence and transforming how she saw herself in relationship to society and her own family. Mariam explained that she had accepted to be enrolled in several IT and English learning courses in the hope that WELT would stop chasing her to find a job. However, this was not a reasonable excuse for WELT staff who, as Mariam recounted, threatened to stop her benefits if she refused a job as a cleaner:

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<sup>57</sup> An acronym for Work, Education, Learning, Training.

I said, 'no I'm not working'. Then she was like 'I'm gonna report that to the Jobcentre...I'm gonna stop your benefits!'. I said 'do whatever you want...I have an appointment with the Jobcentre, and I'll tell them everything'...When I was talking with her, I dunno how God gave me the strength to reply...I did not know where the words came from!

(phone diary, 24/09/17)

Mariam reported the incident to the Jobcentre adviser who thought that what WELT did was "against the agreement" and greatly supported her complaint. In a later diary, Mariam reported that WELT had been contacted by the Jobcentre with regards to her situation.

In a phone diary that took place three weeks later, Mariam elucidated about how her resistance had a positive impact on the way she was positioned and treated by WELT and accordingly on her speaking English opportunities:

I felt valued they've changed because they recognised that I'm a force to be reckoned with (laughs)...Initially they considered me as a cleaner or nothing really...She would only say "hi, have a seat and look for a job"...However, after I had reported that to the Jobcentre, they talk to me as a friend...Or I can say they consider me as their daughter...

(phone diary, 17/10/17)

It is valid to argue that Mariam's budding identity as a strong and independent woman partly empowered her to resist WELT's inferiorisation. Further, this critical incident compelled Mariam to do self-regulation and take a readable and legitimate identity position versus WELT as a way of establishing recognition and resisting marginalising discourses. As Mariam stated, the outcome of this incident was a new and transformative identity position in which she was recognised as a legitimate participant with whom WELT staff could have a normal, proper conversation.

In reflecting on this event, Mariam narrativised her agency in her bravery to report to the Jobcentre. However, a more critical reading of this incident reveals unequal power structures at play in favour of Mariam and VPR Syrians in general. VPR Syrians, as professed by many Syrian participants and the college manager, were privileged in different ways and received differential treatment even from the Jobcentre. Would other refugees, who do not have the support of the Jobcentre or the security that Mariam had from her family had her benefits been sanctioned, be capable of resisting these institutional marginalising discourses? The answer is probably not all refugees. Thus, it was both Mariam's emergent strong identity and the underlying social circumstances surrounding this event which provided an intelligible framework within which Mariam was able to act.

In the diaries to follow, Mariam frequently referred to this incident as a turning point that signified the beginning of a new and transformative identity project in which Mariam could imagine herself in empowered positions and could legitimately defend herself in

English. Like Giroir's participants' (2014b), what ostensibly was a space of marginalisation turned into a space of identity expansion and growth:

Since then I felt I can do something like I have status in society (laughs)...I've become far stronger. I didn't use to defend myself, but now I can defend myself.

(Mariam, phone diary, 23/03/18)

The following section discusses another facilitative social process whereby Mariam's gendered identity work was strengthened, and hence a great set of speech possibilities was opened for her.

#### **6.7.5. Mariam's house: "I've become the executive manager of my parents"**

Throughout interviews and diaries, Mariam asserted the role she was playing in the house English-wise, yet after the critical incident with WELT she explicitly stated that her status and power in the house increased dramatically:

More recently I've felt that I've become a valued person in the house. I went with my dad to the city council and translated for him everything. I also went with my mum to the GP and there was no interpreter...I felt I've made progress in English. Helping my parents makes me feel happy and more excited to learn English to be able to understand the words that I can't understand...I feel I'm like the executive manager of my parents...Even my voice has got louder (laughs)...People keep telling me 'what happened?! You're different and you've become stronger...'

(Mariam, phone diary, 23/03/18)

Due to the changes in Mariam's gendered and social identities and the increase in her symbolic capital, she was confident to translate for her parents and take up many English-speaking opportunities. In turn, these language learning opportunities gave her more value and status which factored into how she saw herself versus her family and society. She began to see herself as a family member who was legitimate enough to occupy a superior position in the hierarchy of the house. When Mariam was supporting her parents, she was not only interpreting and getting the message between her parents and the other party, she was also organising and re-organising a sense of who she became and what she could achieve as a young woman. As such, she was engaged in a process of gender reconstruction and negotiation. Like Rania, Mariam's new identity positions with their increased responsibilities and authority encouraged her to invest more in learning English, and in particular speaking it, to be able to perform fully these new identities.

#### **6.8. A summary of Rania's and Mariam's stories**

As evidence from Rania's and Mariam's narratives illustrated, "border-crossers may find themselves in a situation where their previous subjectivities cannot be coherently and/or legitimately produced and understood and, thus, appear discontinued" (Pavlenko 2001b: 135). For these two women, learning English involved much more than the acquisition of new structures and systems; it led to new gendered and social subject positions, shifting

worldviews, and what they described as changes in their self-worth and self-efficacy. They narrativised their identity work as crossing over from one way of being and doing women into another, and they did so through (1) their openness to the new gendered storylines and practices in their new communities and (2) their continuous and strong investment in learning English to be able to perform their newfound identities and responsibilities. Although their narratives told how they rose above societal and institutional structures of power and forged paths towards more powerful and independent sense of self, their success was the result of a collaborative process involving themselves, their families and the receiving culture. Individual agency and resoluteness became central factors in Rania's and Mariam's interpretation of their experiences, yet it featured more strongly and prominently in Mariam's probably due to her age and the pressure she was under to find a job.

## **6.9. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have provided the narratives of 4 female Syrian language learners' gendered experiences of learning English. I have related their experiences of learning English to their constructed identity of gender. In spite of the variability in the stories of the four women, their (dis)investment in learning English derived from their gendered identities as wives, mothers, or daughters. Like religion and social class, there seems to be variable and conflicting evidence of the role that gender played in the women's identity negotiation and learning English. The chapter has theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the analysis highlights the importance of exploring an individual's gendered identity as a discursive construction that constantly interacts with the individual language learner's investment in the TL in addition to a multiplicity of other social discursive frames such as culture, age, religion, and illiteracy. On the practical level, the chapter reveals some normative gendered practices that deterred the female language learners from investing in the language to be learned and the community to be integrated in. For ESOL and language teachers, there are good opportunities to encourage language learners, male and female, to develop alternative communities and identities that go beyond culturally constructed gendered norms and ideologies, which would probably help them adopt new language learning and speaking opportunities. ESOL teachers and institutions can play a facilitative role in prompting language learners to critically examine the gendered roles and discursive practices that they have been performing for a long time.

The next chapter provides a discussion of to what extent the conditions in Northeast College facilitated or inhibited the Syrians' sense of self as new arrivals with little or no English. It includes examples of both expansive and restrictive positioning of the Syrian refugee language learners, with positive and negative implications for their identity development and learning of English.

## **Chapter 7 - Identity negotiation and language learning in Northeast College**

Now moving to examine specifically the ESOL classroom itself, Chapter 7 aims to answer the following research question:

- To what extent do the conditions within the ESOL College facilitate or constrain the Syrian refugees' negotiation of their identities and fulfilling their potential as English learners and novices in culturally and linguistically new communities?

These conditions include (1) how the Syrian learners are positioned in the ESOL classroom and (2) space for their identities to be expressed and valued.

As will become apparent, Northeast College was not a culturally or politically neutral territory, and provided conditions which were conducive to both the enhancement and hindrance of the Syrian learners' identity development and their learning of English in and beyond the ESOL classroom. This chapter will be presented in three parts. Part 1 starts by exploring the positive role that Northeast College and ESOL teachers played in promoting the Syrian refugees' sense of self and hence their willingness to invest in learning English. Subsequently, Part 2 lays bare some constraints under which the Syrian refugees were constructing their identity and learning English. In particular, it teases out a recurrent identity position that was consistently imposed on the refugee language learners in different social sites, i.e. the identity position of a cleaner. Then, Part 3 reports on how two female learners claimed that they were subjected to discourses of inferiorisation, Islamophobia and racism in their own ESOL classrooms, and how these structures appeared to restrictively shape their identities and subsequently their possibilities for English learning and social interaction. Finally, I consider some suggestions and practical implications for ESOL teachers and institutions.

### **7.1. Northeast College as a legitimising and empowering community of practice**

For some language learners, Northeast College was considered a safe, comfortable, and even fulfilling space in which they were offered identities of empowerment and felt valued and respected for who they were. Part 1 starts out by setting the scene by giving a glimpse into the Syrian participants' history of school learning in Syria, which enables the reader to make more sense of their current classroom and college experiences. Then, it provides some examples of the facilitative role of Northeast College in the Syrian refugees' experiences of identity negotiation and learning English: (1) acknowledging the learners' cultural, religious, and professional identities, (2) creating a safe and good-humoured atmosphere in the ESOL classrooms, and (3) organising out-of-classroom events and

social gatherings. Before proceeding I would like to remind the reader that I observed 13 Syrian learners (only Mariam was not observed) in three ESOL classes (see Table 9). The chapter also includes some learners' diaries and reflections of two ESOL teachers that I had not observed.

**Table 9. ESOL classes and learners observed**

ESOL classrooms	Teacher name	Number of Syrian learners	Learner name
Pre-entry	Mary	8	Omar, Samra, Fatima, Leen, Nadeema, Hiba, Hassan, and Adham
Entry 1	Hazel	4	Sami, Amaan, Waard, and Rania
Entry 2	Gemma	1	Jean

### **7.1.1. School experiences in Syria: setting the scene**

6 Syrian learners reported being physically abused and beaten up by their teachers in Syria, which damaged the effective atmosphere of their classrooms:

Alawite<sup>58</sup> teachers in Syria can't be compared to teachers here. They hit us...One of the teachers ordered us to bang our heads against the wall.

(Amaan, interview, 14/10/17)

School teachers were neglectful. They used to hit us if we spoke Kurdish...They followed a policy to spread ignorance amongst us. They were all from Latakia [i.e. Alawites]...We didn't have any rights in schools.

(Jean, interview, 20/05/17)

As school students, these Syrians were relegated to positions of inferiority and powerlessness and were racialised based on their racial and religious affiliations. Such positionings caused the 6 participants to associate schools and learning with negative feelings and ambivalence and to regard teachers primarily as authority figures to be threatened by. This in turn had a large impact on the Syrians' willingness to invest in schools and studying. Unsurprisingly, 3 participants reported dropping out of school due to this treatment.

### **7.1.2. Acknowledging the Syrian learners' identities**

However, the Syrian refugees were presented with a new image of learning, classrooms and teachers when coming to England, which played a crucially important role in their language learning experiences. 13 out of 14 Syrian participants expressed, to varying

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<sup>58</sup> Alawites are an offshoot of Shia Islam, and they form a religious minority of the Syrian population. Syria is ruled by an Alawite regime.

degrees, very strong feelings of admiration, respect, and love towards their current<sup>59</sup> ESOL teachers. Below are a few quotes that exemplify the overall view of the participants:

Knowing who your audience are is crucial. Hazel knows that the majority of the classroom are Muslims...She made us feel that we're not forgotten like Eid will not go unnoticed. She made us feel comfortable and relaxed like guys you are in your country...That lesson about Ramadan was very positive, very very positive...So far this lesson is one of the lessons that I can't forget.

(Waard, Entry 1, interview, 06/12/17)

I feel that she respects the fact that I was a teacher. Thus, I should not let her down...I need to reward that respect through being attentive and respecting her...I should work hard...

(Waard, Entry 1, interview, 06/12/17)

Honestly, she [Mary] always encourages me. Initially I didn't know how to write, but she kept saying to me that my handwriting is beautiful. She wanted to show me that I'm good. This is what encourages me to study and learn...She feels for me that I'm illiterate so she doesn't embarrass me and ask me difficult questions.

(Nadeema, Pre-entry, phone diary, 08/07/17)

Running through these extracts was a sense of appreciation from the students that the various facets of their identities were acknowledged in their ESOL classrooms. The teachers acknowledged and respected their students' cultural, religious, professional, and illiterate identities. By incorporating the students' past, present, and hopes and fears for the future, the teachers succeeded in promoting the learners' investment in learning English and in the classroom practices. They integrated the identities and investments of their language learners into the classroom pedagogy. Clear links were made by the learners between their teachers' acknowledgement and appreciation of their various aspects of their identities and their enhanced sense of investment in learning English and the classroom practices (for elaborate examples, go to Chapter 4 Section 4.2.2 and Chapter 5 Section 5.1.3.1).

For example, Waard felt a sense of commitment and responsibility that he should not let down his teacher who validated his teacher identity. He also expressed his impression with his teacher's designing a whole lesson about Ramadan (see Figure 5 below). During the Ramadan lesson, it was observed that Waard, who displayed a strong religious identity, was very engaged and participatory in the activities which embraced his Muslim identity. This was also noticed with regards to most students in the class, both Syrians and non-Syrians, and Muslims and non-Muslims (Classroom observation, Entry 1, 20/06/17). The lesson provided a venue for the learners to display their religious identities and an opportunity for Muslim and non-Muslim learners to know each other particularly after the Manchester and London attacks. Similarly, Nadeema stated becoming more

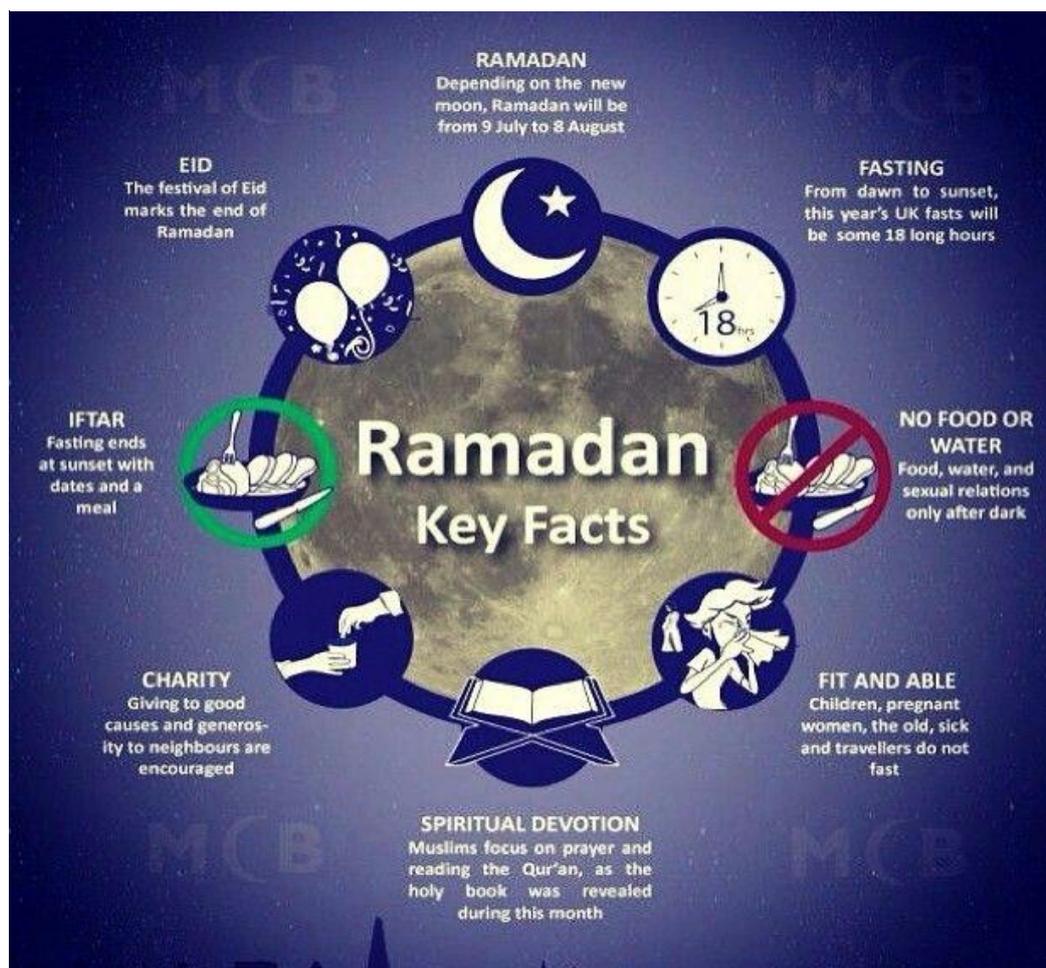
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<sup>59</sup> Later on in this chapter, Jean reflects on her negative experiences with her previous ESOL teacher.

invested and determined to learn English as a response to her teacher’s encouragement and understanding of the challenges that she was facing as an illiterate woman. Classroom observations showed that the three teachers I observed tried hard to incorporate their students’ diverse identities and used ideas, topics and issues that allowed the students to express and reflect upon their identities. The teachers also made use of my cultural and religious knowledge (as an observer and a classroom assistant within the classrooms) to ensure that the classroom was a comfortable and inclusive community of practice and learners were valued and respected.

It is important for students in all teaching contexts to feel appreciated and valued as individuals. Yet, it is even more important for refugee language learners who often, as the data in previous chapters has clearly shown, seem to struggle to make sense of who they are in a new milieu in which they are often rendered into a marginalised status and depicted as a burden (see Chapter 4 for the discussion of Omar, Sami, and Waard), or as foreigners, terrorists (see Chapter 5, Section 5.3), and unskilled (see later in this chapter).

Figure 5. Part of the Ramadan lesson’s materials in the Entry 1 classroom



### **7.1.3. The good-humoured and relaxed atmosphere in the ESOL classrooms and the emergence of positive classroom behaviour**

Another interesting theme that emerged from the data was how the good-natured and safe atmosphere in the language classrooms and the positive positioning of the Syrian learners by their teachers encouraged them to be relaxed and risk-takers. For instance, during a social gathering at Fatima's house, Mary, the Pre-entry teacher, referred to her learners as friends (shadowing, 12/05/17). The students in turn positioned themselves relationally to their teachers as friends or family members - identity positions which were not available for them in the classrooms in Syria or in the expert English-speaking communities outside the ESOL classroom:

Mary deals with us as if we're like her family or friends. She's so lovely...We can be very noisy but she's been very patient with us...The classroom is so much fun. We eat and drink in the break and we make jokes in the classroom. When Adham makes errors, we would laugh at him. We encourage each other.

(Leen, Pre-entry, phone diary, 22/04/17)

We're now like nursery children. When children like their teacher, they like to go to school. Learning becomes more interesting...The atmosphere of the classroom is very relaxed and friendly we laugh...I don't see her [Gemma] as a teacher. Rather as a friend, a family member, but not a teacher. If I didn't understand something, I don't feel shy to ask her...I'm feeling really comfortable in the classroom.

(Jean, Entry 2, interview, 20/05/17)

From the identity positions of friends or family members, the Syrian learners were stimulated to participate and realised that errors were an inevitable part of learning. The comfortable, safe, and fulfilling classroom conditions allowed them to participate without feeling threatened or being judged on their novice abilities. The ESOL classrooms offered the learners legitimising identities and opportunities to learn English, make errors, and initiate comfortable interactions and relationships. This was conducive for a more effective learning environment and positive learner behaviour, particularly taking into consideration the low education level and the bad, excruciating school experiences for many. This is reminiscent of how the relaxed atmosphere and the positive positioning of Norton's participant (2000), Mai, in her workplace provided her with positive means of self-representation and hence prompted her to regularly engage in conversations with her co-workers.

By way of example, initially Adham was an anxious and shy learner who was inhibited even to say one word as noted by his ESOL teacher:

In the beginning I felt really cruel even asking him [Adham] one question (laughs)...

(Mary, interview, 12/07/17)

In Syria, Adham reported negative experiences with education, and had ended up leaving school without being able to read and write very well in Arabic. In the ESOL classroom,

Adham became more confident and participatory over time and accepted the inevitable nature of errors. When asked what caused that shift, Adham replied:

At first I wasn't comfortable because I was embarrassed to answer. I knew it was going to be wrong...now I'm comfortable. Our classroom is very comfortable...students like to talk to correct their mistakes...Errors are normal...And Mary is very lovely and looks after me. I love her...If we don't laugh and make jokes, we can't comprehend (laughs)...There's a sense of humour in our classroom and students speak loudly and participate.

(Pre-entry, interview, 19/07/17)

As a result of the good-natured and relaxed atmosphere, Adham, as well as his Pre-entry classmates, seemed to have developed a new student identity and positive classroom behaviour that contrasted with their previous educational experiences in Syria. This consequently increased their stake in the ESOL classroom and learning English. Like the hijabats in Sarroub (2005), for the Syrians the classroom turned into an "oasis" and a "sanctuary" from the pressure and the disruption that came with moving into a new social and cultural milieu with little or no English. That said, there are still some examples, as the chapter will later reveal, where Northeast College negated the identities of the language learners, with negative implications for their language learning.

In what follows, I will discuss two further positive examples - Friday social gatherings with Pre-entry female learners and the food markets run by Northeast College - that illustrate that the influence of ESOL teachers does not stop at the door of the language classrooms and point out the crucial role that they can play in the emergence of new positive identity positions and English speaking opportunities for their learners.

#### **7.1.4. Friday social gatherings with Pre-entry female learners**

Two of the ESOL teachers played a proactive role in their female students' social lives outside the classroom. Mary, accompanied twice by Hazel, responded to some Syrian women's, who were mainly Pre-entry, invitations to visit their houses (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2.4). In the social gatherings, the Syrian women were proud to introduce their teachers to their food (see Figure 6 below), traditions, culture and even dance, as expressed below:

Lovely gatherings. We talk and have fun with the teachers. They learn about our traditions.

(Samra, interview, 16/09/17)

I swear by God I was very pleased when Hazel and Mary visited us. By the way, I suggested that every woman brings a dish to the party at the end of the course. I love gatherings with the teachers.

(Hiba, interview, 29/08/17)

Nadeema, Hiba, and Samra reported a high sense of personal fulfilment when their teachers expressed their admiration with their food; cooking turned into a social discursive

tool for the Syrian women to occupy positive identity positions in the eyes of their teachers, which could be said to have contributed into a more equal learning experience. Social gatherings expanded the range of identities available to the refugee women and offered them the opportunity to become ethnographers of their own cultures and traditions, good cooks, conversation contributors, and legitimate members, thus enabling them to break down boundaries and re-orient themselves. The safe gatherings served not only as sites of cultural representation and exploration but also as sites of identity creation that allowed the women to occupy identities of competence and to negotiate the marginalisation that they often encountered as novices and beginner language learners in new communities of practice. In the gatherings, the women were no longer the beginner language learners who were assessed on their language proficiency; they became the experts who explained to their teachers how to cook, how to present food, and where to buy the ingredients of the food.

**Figure 6. A social gathering at Leen's house**



Further, the social gatherings were a discursive tool through which the teachers succeeded in making the female learners feel welcome and recognised not only by the ESOL community but also by the wider British community:

Honestly I felt very happy when they [Mary and Hazel] visited me because they were the very first people who made us feel respected and valued in this country. They visit me because they love me...

(Hiba, phone diary, 01/02/18)

I enjoyed the gatherings...something nice about the teachers is that they don't show off that they are our teachers or they understand more than we do...I feel like they're equal to us or friends...They made me feel relieved to live in this country and warm towards the British community overall.

(Rania, phone diary, 10/01/18)

The ESOL teachers were often the first contacts that the women refugees had, and hence they served as “social mediators and informants in the new environment” (Hawkins and Norton 2009: 32). As evidenced in these quotes, the teachers were instrumental in the ways the refugee language learners positioned themselves and understood their social surroundings and their potentiality to become future members in the host community. In Hiba's and Rania's comments, there was a sense of an emergent identity as future participants in their new communities and a tendency to cross boundaries and initiate relationships with British people, encouraged by their ESOL teachers who acted as role models of the new community. Hiba and Rania felt equal to and recognised, not only by their teachers but also by the bigger British community. This encouraged them to move away from the identity of foreigners or outsiders and “warm” towards the larger British community.

#### 7.1.5. Food markets organised by Northeast College

Northeast College ran a variety of events and markets such as Christmas, Spring, and Summer Markets (also called food markets), the International Women's day event, and the World Refugee Day event. Amongst these events, food markets were the most prominent and important for the Syrians and the biggest in terms of scale. On the food market day, students ran stalls to sell food and a variety of services and products. Stalls included hot and cold food from all over the world, pottery, jewellery, art, clothing, beauty products and services including henna painting and facials (see Figure 7 for a food market advert). In preparation for the food markets, students willing to run food stalls were required

**Figure 7. A food market advert**



to attend a food safety training day, and by the end of the day they would receive a Food Hygiene certificate. The college also offered a workshop on how to become self-employed and sell and present food and products.

Four Syrian learners - Adham, Hassan, Hiba, and Rania - took part in the food markets. Adham and Hassan had worked as a chef and a kitchen assistant respectively in Syria, and their wives, Rania and Hiba, helped them in cooking and selling the food in the food markets. When asked about the food markets, Adham and Hassan along with their ESOL teacher pointed out the constructive role of the food markets in expanding Adham's and Hassan's identities and assuming more valued and "powerful" identities:

I see all people love my food more than any other kind. This makes feel happy and good about myself. I feel powerful and confident. When it comes to speaking English, I feel like something compensates for another. I mean I'm successful in what I'm doing and everything is fine, but I can't understand everything people are saying and they can't comprehend my pronunciation. My food makes it up for my language...Honestly, I find it easier to speak English in the food markets because people are talking to us according to our level. When they see that my language is weak, they modify their speech in a nice way. But in the outside world, people talk a mile a minute<sup>60</sup>.

(Adham, member check, 07/05/19)

Obviously his [Adham's] experience in the market...people were so impressed by his presentation skills. So I think that's been really good because he's gone up in the estimation of the other learners because of what he did...the other learners maybe view him as like oh this guy has some skills...Well in English he's quiet, he's not that quiet outside (laughs)...

(Mary, interview, 12/07/17)

Out-of-classroom food events seemed to provide a fertile ground for Hassan and Adham to adopt identities of competence (Iddings and Katz 2007: 312) and power and offer them paths towards new ways of being and acting in English. It was interesting to observe how Adham and Hassan repositioned themselves relationally to myself in the food markets and food safety sessions; they teased me about my poor cooking skills and became more confident and affirmative while talking to me and explaining their recipes (shadowing, 28/06/17). Food markets acknowledged and validated their sociocultural histories and past identities as skilled people and discovered their hidden resources and skills that had lain untapped and unused (see for example, Adham's food presentation skills). Food markets provided Adham and Hassan with important discursive tools to reposition themselves in the eyes of their teachers, peers and myself as skilled and legitimate members rather than deficient language learners or inadequate interlocutors, which contributed to a more equitable social and educational experience. From this point of view, Hassan and Adham could be said to have become more encouraged to associate learning English with growth and strength (for them) rather than with their own supposed

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<sup>60</sup> أما برا الناس بترش رش الكلام.

weakness and deficiency, and thus invest more in this language of empowerment and future.

There are two important points that arise from Adham's excerpt (above). Firstly, interacting in English from the identity of a valued and "powerful" chef was fairly easy for Adham. As noted above by his teacher, Adham presented himself in the food markets in a way that was different from the classroom, which impacted on his comfort and confidence while speaking English. In the food markets, he successfully developed the identity of a "legitimate speaker" who was worthy, in effect, to speak and be listened to (Bourdieu 1977). He felt validated as a respected interlocutor even if he could not understand everything or make himself understood. Yet, this legitimacy and promotion to equal status in conversations was not gained because his English was getting better; rather, it was earned through his cooking and presentation skills. His chef identity was strong enough to "compensate" for the limitations in his listening and speaking. Secondly, Adham's extract points out the benefits when TL speakers share the onus with language learners to understand each other and make themselves understood. Adham was prompted to speak because customers at the food markets shared the responsibility with him to have successful interactions; they simplified their speech and spoke slowly to the point that Adham did not experience much difficulty speaking and listening to them. This social and linguistic reality in the food markets markedly contrasted with Adham's position in the outsider world, where his position of power was minimised, and his English was not tolerated. The onus was on him to understand and be understood.

Additionally, Adham, Hiba, their ESOL teacher, and the college manager noted that the food markets demonstrated possibilities of connecting the ESOL college with the learners' imagined identities as chefs and productive people:

When I finished, I found out that all people were pleased. This encouraged me to start up my own business. I didn't think about it on the scale of the college. I took it further to the whole society...I was pleased because I realised that there will be success not failure here...I felt like I've made a big achievement (laughs with pride)...Of course thanks to Mary...

(Adham, interview, 19/07/17)

When people buy my food and say 'thank you it was delicious', I feel more and more ambitious. I feel like I can take part in any food markets and courses...In this country, if you work there will be probably a happy ending...when I go out and cook, I feel there is hope. I become more optimistic about the future.

(Hiba, member check, 14/07/19)

It was important for both of them (Hassan and Adham) and I'm really pleased...Maybe next market they can think about how can I do better, think about my pricing because that will help them in the future...to be aware of budgeting that's really important.

(Mary, interview, 12/07/17)

It [the food market] teaches them skills maybe to go and do something like that themselves...all things about the market is to go and get their business themselves.

(Toby, interview, 14/12/17)

The food markets enhanced these Syrian refugees' sense of imagination and increased their confidence to meet the external challenges of setting up their own businesses as chefs and cooks. For instance, to participate in the food markets, the ESOL learner participants running food stalls were required to attend two training workshops (food hygiene and enterprise), name all the ingredients in English, research what might cause allergies, define pricing, and sell and talk to customers from all over the world. All of this could be considered as a link between these learners and their imagined careers, and prepared them to set up their cooking and catering businesses in the UK. According to Kanno and Norton (2003), a drive for affiliation in imagined communities can provide language learners with a sense of direction, a raised level of commitment, and greater investment in their language learning trajectories. As such, through food markets the ESOL teachers had the opportunity to tap into the refugee language learners' imagined identities as chefs and encourage them to dream beyond their current, often marginalised, status and imagine participation in communities that aligned with their cooking skills and knowledge. "Students must be enabled to explore who they are, who they are not, who they could be" (Wenger 1998: 272). As learners can envision their future more clearly, they increase their responsibility in the community and become more active participants and increase their investment in learning English. English is considered then as one of the most important means for gaining the affiliation to their imagined identities and communities. Adham is currently in the planning stage of opening his own restaurant after applying for a loan from the government. Hassan's and Hajar's participation in the food markets opened many doors to them; they were approached by many people to cook for them. They are currently participating in a variety of food markets in and outside Northeast College and are working on setting up their own business.

These social events are considered promising examples of how educators and ESOL teachers and managers can facilitate their learners' development of more positive and powerful identities and enhance their sense of imagination. They provide learners with access to cultural, linguistic, and material capital (Bourdieu 1986). They are also a reminder for educators and ESOL teachers to always presume competence in refugees and immigrants and never stop searching for the keys to interactions that lead to the imagining and participation beyond ESOL classrooms. The following section will discuss an interesting commonality that was observed among the participant teachers and the manager, which appeared to shape how they saw their ESOL students.

### 7.1.6. ESOL teachers and the manager as Others

Interestingly, what emerged from the data was that all the participant teachers and the manager, or their family members, were at some point in their life considered as Others or foreigners. Mary reported living for 16 years with her family in China and elaborated on her challenges to learn Chinese and integrate in new communities of practice. Hazel noted that her father came to the UK as an unaccompanied refugee minor at the age of 14. Gemma, the Entry 2 teacher, said that her grandparents came to the UK as Jewish refugees from Austria and that her interest in teaching English to adults primarily derived from her interest in her grandparents' ability to speak English without having ESOL classes (see Chapter 3). Toby, the college manager, referred to himself as a "foreigner" living in the UK. Finally, Samira, the teacher who assessed newly-arrived students recounted that her parents were Arabs and that her father arrived in the UK at the age of 18. Being through or hearing about the same challenges that their ESOL learners were faced with seemed to shape the teachers' and the college manager's professional identities and heightened their consciousness of the "upheaval" of immigration or displacement:

Just like the refugees or the ESOL students I wasn't from here so to me also it's a foreign country...I am also a foreigner here and that shapes very much...I can understand how people look at England because I look at England like that too...I think I understand better than others what it's like to be as a foreigner...

(Toby, interview, 06/07/17)

When I have come from a home where I have actually seen or physically experience many things then I am fortunate and have a greater awareness of what goes on and what can go on once the doors are closed you know it's fear sometimes because it's fear of the unknown...I have an amazing insight how difficult life is for so many people....

(Samira, interview, 20/11/17)

Their professional identities were mediated by the immigration or displacement experiences that they themselves or their families had experienced and that had placed them sometimes in marginalised positions. This, in turn, had informed their own identifications of their students and the college pedagogy and policy, which seemed to contribute to a more supportive and relaxed learning environment. All of this is a reminder of the pivotal role that the identities, be it of teachers or learners, play in the dynamics of ESOL institutions. The above quotes make more sense when they are examined with reference to the students' previous comments through this chapter. Throughout the interviews and classroom observations, the teachers and the manager made direct connections between the needs of their students and their own, or their own relatives', experiences as refugees or foreigners. In the field of language teacher education, an increasing number of studies have argued for the importance of understanding the language teacher's identity and sociocultural and sociopolitical positionality in relation to

their students to better understand classroom practices and identification of their students (e.g., Ajayi 2011; Gao 2012; Kayi-Aydar 2018; Kim and Kim 2016; Norton and Toohey 2011; Varghese et al. 2005).

## **7.2. Northeast College as a reproduction of marginalising discourses about refugees**

Thus far in this chapter, I have discussed how Northeast College contributed positively into the Syrian refugees' development of a more powerful and positive sense of self, which in turn facilitated their learning of English and integration in their new ESOL community of practice. However, the ESOL community was not always a legitimising and empowering space for the learners as will be illustrated in the following examples. Part 2 of this chapter discusses the processes whereby Northeast College reproduced, at times, negative discourses around refugee language learners and contributed to a reinforcement of asymmetrical relations of power. I will seek to bring to light how some particular pedagogical and institutional practices constrained some ESOL refugee learners in their reimagining of possibilities for both the present and the future and in their production of their sense of self in their new environment, thereby causing them sometimes to de-invest in learning English. The first section of Part 2 problematises a recurrent identity position that was associated with refugee language learners, that is of a "cleaner". Discourses that positioned and essentialised ESOL refugee language learners into the box of a "cleaner" were evident and emerged and re-emerged across a range of institutional and educational practices in Northeast College. Yet, due to space constraints I will discuss this positioning and its impact on the learners' identity development and learning of English in only two spaces: the ESOL classrooms and the job search<sup>61</sup>.

### **7.2.1. Cleaner positioning and identity construction in two ESOL classrooms**

As classroom observations and some Syrian learners' accounts below illustrate, "cleaner" positioning emerged in two classes: Pre-entry and Entry 1. While I observed the Pre-entry class, all the data related to the Entry 1 class was reported by Mariam as I was not given the opportunity to observe her Entry 1 class. Pre-entry classroom materials repeatedly and consistently focused on cleaning vocabulary and jobs (see Figure 8 below for two examples) despite the fact that none of the Syrians, who formed the vast majority of the class, said that they had worked as cleaners. As my Pre-entry observation notes show, when jobs were discussed cleaner was the one that was always on the top of the list, which some students picked up on. At Pre-entry level, there was no exam at the end of the academic year, so the course materials were produced by the teacher herself to meet the

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<sup>61</sup> Please go to Chapter 3 Section 3.2.2 for information about the job search in Northeast College.

learners' presumed needs. In other words, the materials were not "exam-driven" as was the case in higher levels (Mary, interview, 02/06/17).

Figure 8. Examples of Pre-entry materials pertaining to cleaning



What a cleaner needs. Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date 12/6/17

1. Write letters in the gaps.

Trolley mop bin-liner bucket carpet bin

Floor polish vacuum cleaner desk

2. Write words from the box in the gaps.

dusters and polish bin liners vacuum cleaner  
floor cleaner, bucket and mop

You need the dusters and polish for the desks.

You need the bin liners for the bins.

You need the vacuum cleaner for the carpets.

You need the floor cleaner, bucket and mop for the floors.

empty dust vacuum use

You need to empty the bins and put in the bin-liners.

You need to dust the desks and use some polish.

You need to vacuum the carpets.

You need to use floor cleaner, a bucket and a mop on the floor.

Interestingly, Pre-entry cleaning materials created different impacts for female and male Syrian learners. Women will be discussed later in this section. With regards to the male students, Adham and Omar, who occupied powerful professional identities in Syria (see the previous discussion in this chapter and Chapter 4) expressed the strongest sense of resistance:

Cleaner cleaner cleaner! Most lessons are about cleaning. We're sick of cleaning. Oh man I'm a professional chef not a cleaner...They probably think that we all had worked as cleaners and now they're like 'come on people clean our country'...

(Adham, interview, 19/07/17)

I'm really getting upset. Every lesson cleaner cleaner cleaner cleaner and then what?!...why don't they teach us for example what to say if we're looking for a job in a factory?...I want to show them my creativity...I would come back to Jordan and not work as a cleaner.

(Omar interview, 16/09/17)

Mariam also noted that her Entry 1 teacher put a great deal of emphasis on jobs, particularly cleaning and cooking jobs:

Amber keeps giving us lessons about jobs as if it's the only subject in the world... 'if you worked a painter or in a factory'...but she focuses the most on cleaners, chefs and kitchen assistants these kind of jobs. I feel upset because I'm not in England to learn this...probably they think that we all were cleaners in Syria or low-class people like we're not high-class like them.

(Mariam, phone diary 19/06/17)

The courses materials' positionings of ESOL students as cleaners or kitchen assistants could be seen to be embedded within oppressive ideological assumptions generally held about refugees and immigrants as un-skilled and uneducated and the fact that on job sites cleaning jobs did not require an advanced level of English or qualifications:

I think the reason there's an emphasis on cleaner it's because for the cleaning job if you've got very low levels of English it's one that's considered to be one that is the first step...yeah that's pretty demeaning...pretty humiliating...

(Hazel, interview, 28/06/17)<sup>62</sup>

There's only so many occupations so many jobs that you can apply for without many qualifications...it's really limited apart from kitchen assistant and kitchen porter...you need to have experience or you need a certain qualification which our students don't have...

(Mary, interview, 12/07/17)

As the data above illustrate, "educational sites are not neutral places independent of an external society; rather, educational practices are viewed as significantly shaped by wider sociopolitical forces and in the interests of dominant social groups" (Hammond 2006: 549). The ESOL teachers, Mary and Amber, may have seen themselves as empowering

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<sup>62</sup> It is worth noting that the course materials in Hazel's class addressed all kinds of jobs.

the students to enter the workforce; yet their cleaning-based classroom materials and activities tended to reproduce social marginalisation and disempowering societal discourses around refugees and stifle the imagined identities and communities that the learners aspired to. This in turn contributed to a sense of inadequacy and Otherness among the learners, positioning them as unskilled and inept. I see these examples as a form of educational violence or abuse whereby the learner refugees were lumped together and categorised as a homogeneous group within the box of a “cleaner”. As the learners pointed out, the discourses around jobs envisioned the refugees in low-skill, “low-class”, and low-qualification jobs. As noted by Ellwood (2009), ESOL colleges or educational institutions can be “prime sites for the construction and perpetuation of particular discursively produced practices” and “social identities” (p.109).

However, learners themselves were not “blank slates” waiting to be constructed by their teachers (Ellwood 2009: 110). As we have seen above and in Chapter 4, the learners brought their own previous discursive constructions of themselves and cultural and professional identities to the classroom. Omar was a businessman in Syria; Adham was a professional chef who owned a restaurant for 10 years; Mariam was hoping to study Pharmacy at university; that is, there was a big discrepancy between the cleaner identity imposed on these learners and the identities they used to occupy and/or aspired to construct in their new environment. An additional complexity to how this positioning was discursively constructed was the fact that working as a cleaner can be very devaluing and deprivileging in Syria. Hence, the students’ strong resistance to the cleaner identity was the product of a collaboration of a multiplicity of social factors including their social class, culture and imagined identities. We have seen in Chapter 4 Section 4.3.4, for example, how Hassan, who stated coming from a less privileged background in Syria, was not hurt by the cleaning discourses. Unsurprisingly, not only did the cleaning positioning in the ESOL classrooms have a negative impact on these three (Omar, Adham, and Mariam) Syrians’ sense of self but also on their learning of English and investment in the classroom practices. It is to that I turn now.

#### **7.2.1.1. Cleaner positioning and investment in the classroom practices**

As classroom observations and some participant learners’ data showed, when the lessons focused on cleaning jobs, the learners showed a lack of investment and interest in the activities. There was an evident example which clearly demonstrated the impact of cleaner positioning on the learners’ willingness to invest in the classroom activities. After shadowing Adham in a food safety session that was designed to prepare students for participating in the food markets, the students and I headed back to the classroom as there was one hour and a half left of the classroom session. However, Adham refused to catch up with the remainder of the session:

I'm going home I don't want to attend the class. I know it's going to be about cleaning and I'm not a cleaner.

(Adham, shadowing, 28/06/17)

Here, Adham's desire to acquire the symbolic capital offered by English classes was in conflict with his resistance to the cleaner identity that did not acknowledge his imagined and previous identities and communities. Adham found it difficult to shift from the identity of a valued and skilled chef in the workshop into the identity of a cleaner. As a result, he decided to remove himself from the ESOL class on that day. It was an act of resistance to hold onto his chef identity. Lumping learners into cleaners and restricting their imagined identities and communities can result not only in the perpetuation of their marginalised status but also in the plateauing of their English language development. Classroom practices can influence who learners can become and what they can achieve (McDermott 1993). The students were not invested in cleaning lessons because they did not connect with their imagined identities and communities. As Pavlenko and Norton (2007) argue, not acknowledging language learners' imagined identities and communities might exacerbate their non-participation and affect their language learning negatively. However, it seems worthy to note that Adham's adoption of empowered and competent identity positions, as discussed in Section 7.1.5., as a result of participation in the food markets was greatly facilitated by his Pre-entry teacher who at the same time focused on cleaning jobs. This illustrates the complexity of classroom life and "the complex interplay of the diverse influences that form identities" (Ellwood 2009: 113).

#### **7.2.1.2. Gender-informed attitudes towards cleaning positioning**

Of interest here is the difference between the women's and men's attitudes towards cleaning positioning. While the men seemed to feel devalued and deskilled, the women expressed their interest in the lessons and activities that focused on cleaning:

Cleaning lessons are useful because this is our job in the house it's all cleaning...very useful information.

(Leen, phone diary, 16/06/17)

It's very important you know 'wipe' and 'cloth'. I liked that lesson.

(Samra, interview, 16/09/17)

Fatima: We're listening to and acquiring new English words from cleaning lessons.

Mariam: Because mum doesn't attend the job search, she feels it's very normal to learn about cleaning in the classroom. Yet, had she looked for jobs, she would have hated herself.

(interview, 27/07/17)

The women, unlike the men, were invested in the emphasis on cleaning because they were receiving the information and the vocabulary about cleaning from the identity of the housewife. They were approaching the lessons' content from a different perspective and

a different identity position to that of the men. Cleaning lessons and its vocabulary acknowledged their gendered identities and household labour and gave them a sense of social appreciation and recognition of their often underestimated work at home. Their attitudes towards cleaning discourses can also be understood with reference to the fact that they did not, as Mariam explained above, contextualise the lessons and read between the lines as men did. They did not realise that they were being positioned as cleaners outside their houses as none of the female Pre-entry learners had ever been employed. Fatima did not mind to learn about cleaning in the classroom, but she reported her unacceptance to work as a cleaner because it was socially inappropriate:

I find it difficult to work as a cleaner.

(Fatima, interview, 27/07/17)

Having discussed the impact of cleaning discourses on the learners' sense of self and subsequently on their investment in learning English, we move now to the job search where the ESOL learners were also positioned systematically as cleaners.

### **7.2.2. The cleaner identity in the job search**

As explained in Chapter 3 (Section 3.2.2), on Friday mornings learners on Jobseekers' Allowance (JSA) attended a job search session. Yet, the Syrian women, except for Mariam as she was single, reported being excused from attending the job search. As explained by the college manager, Northeast College agreed with the Jobcentre that they would help learners, mainly Pre-entry, learn how to conduct job searches and find key information in job advertisements (Toby, interview, 14/12/17). Because most learners lacked computing skills, teachers searched for jobs using the government website <https://www.gov.uk/jobsearch> and printed off a variety of jobs, from which learners selected 5 jobs and filled out a form (see Figure 9 below for an example of the job search form). Pre-entry learners, however, just copied 5 jobs selected and provided by the teacher. Afterwards, it was the learners' responsibility to follow this up by contacting the people and companies that had advertised the jobs.

The Syrian male language learners, particularly in beginner levels, often expressed their anger and frustration at the fact that the vast majority of jobs in the job search session were cleaners or kitchen assistants:

I felt I'm here to clean the country always cleaner cleaner cleaner. I felt like a mop...We said to the teacher we're sick of cleaning, we want proper jobs. She said turn over the page...Initially, we couldn't understand what the teacher had said because our language was very limited. We didn't understand anything. We were just copying.

(Amaan, Entry 1, interview, 06/06/17)

I got sick of the job search on Friday. I just go and copy the paper. In effect, I'm just drawing the words...the jobs listed are all cleaners.

(Adham, Pre-entry, phone diary, 09/10/17)

Running through these quotations are two points. Firstly, the job search positioned the ESOL learners consistently as cleaners or unskilled workers through providing them with mostly cleaning jobs. Secondly, there was a lack of understanding on the part of the learners of what they actually were doing in the job search. Many learners, particularly Pre-entry, stated that for the first two months they did not know what the word "cleaner" had meant. The learners were not prepared nor ready to attend the job search. Effectively, this problematises the very concept of the job search for beginner learners. How can Pre-entry or beginner learners who are struggling to write their first names look for jobs or even work? Would any company hire individuals who do not know yet all the letters of the English alphabet? Not only did the learners' limited English place them in inferior positions but it also made them unaware of who they were made to be and denied them the possibilities of more complex, hybrid, and shifting affiliations and identities.

Depending on the imagined communities and identities the learners identify themselves with, they can become stimulated to invest or de-invest in learning English. In this case, the language learners were stimulated to de-invest themselves in learning English and to identify negatively with English. Like the cleaning classroom activities, the job search created moments of non-participation and marginalisation for the learners in their ESOL institution and reduced their self-esteem and self-worth. The students were not merely filling out job forms but also organising and reorganising a sense of who they were, what they could learn, and who they could become. As such, they were engaged in a process of identity negotiation and (dis)investment in learning English.

**Figure 9. The job search form**

Job search – getting key information out of job adverts  
 After getting key information from job adverts, you need to follow-up.  
 To follow-up means to phone, to send emails with a covering letter, to send your CV, and to fill in application forms online or on hardcopy.

1 Job title (Job name)	3 Company	Job Reference Code and 4 Job ID	Job Type 5 • Full Time (FT) • Part Time (PT) • Permanent • Temporary	6 Application Methods (How to apply)	7 Location (place)	8 Salary (money) EEEEEEE
A cleaner 18/9/17	Focus cleaning	44472091	Part time	[Redacted]	[Redacted]	NM W
B cleaner 26/9/17	Centre for life	44533712	Part time	[Redacted]	[Redacted]	5.92 - 7.50
C cleaner 30/8/17	Minster cleaning services	35851269	Part time	[Redacted]	[Redacted]	7.50
D cleaner 23/9/17	Leas Premier cleaning limited	44540872	Part time	[Redacted]	[Redacted]	7.50
E Home store cleaner 27/9/17	Home Bargains	44436326	Part time	Email [Redacted]@inmateis.co.uk	[Redacted]	5.06 7.73

### 7.2.3. A final note

It is important to note that the discussion of positioning learners as cleaners would be remiss without the following two comments. Firstly, based on my numerous observations of the Pre-entry teacher, Mary, the motivation for her<sup>63</sup> focus on cleaning was undoubtedly well-intentioned, which was acknowledged by her students who expressed their understanding of her good intentions; it issued from an attempt to help the students enter the workplace. As a teacher who, on several occasions, seemed clearly to value her learners' diverse backgrounds, expertise, and struggle, her focus on cleaning cannot be easily or straightforwardly analysed. ESOL teaching is an intensely complex business and there are a variety of social factors and pressures that interact to impact on what is going on in the classroom, particularly for ESOL teachers who work under tremendously difficult circumstances with little support and funding. Further, as explained by the college manager, because mandation from the Jobcentre happened more in the beginner levels, the topics were more "work-related" (Toby, interview, 14/12/17). In other words, there was a pressure on teachers to focus on jobs, but not exclusively on cleaning jobs, as part of the college funding came from the Jobcentre. This effectively explicates the complexity and contingency of cleaning positioning. The production, perpetuating, and expression of cleaning discourses can be seen to form one aspect of the constraints and funding cuts that are being constantly excreted on ESOL institutions (see Chapter 1).

Secondly, during the last interview with the Pre-entry teacher, I passed on to her the male learners' resentment and unhappiness with cleaning discourses. Mary concluded her discussion of her teaching approach saying that it was important to know so that she could adapt her teaching materials for the next academic year. In the next academic year, Adham stated in his phone diaries that the teacher stopped focusing on cleaning jobs. This illustrates the teacher's good intentions and her strong desire to listen and respect her students' voices and identities. It also highlights how research can help teachers bridge the gap between their own understandings of their learners and that of their learners. This seems to be of crucial importance particularly in the beginner levels where teachers do not always have the capability to listen to their students' voices partly due to their limited language.

### 7.3. Discourses of marginalisation, racism, and Islamophobia

Part 3 will document further examples of *perceived* marginalisation as well as racism and Islamophobia experienced by two female Syrian learners: Jean and Mariam. It will explore the accounts and experiences of Jean and Mariam who reported the impact of invalidating

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<sup>63</sup> Here, I can only speak with regards to the Pre-entry teacher as I did not interview nor observe the Entry 1 teacher, Amber. Besides, as the data will show, there were other issues about this teacher.

their professional and religious identities on their, as well on their classmates', sense of self and stake in their ESOL classroom practices and activities. Before proceeding it is worth noting three points. Firstly, the following data are the learners' *own* perceptions and feelings of what they had experienced, i.e. their emic understandings (Davis 1995; see Chapter 3, Section 3.1). The process of inquiry in this project was not to discover meaning and truth deposited a priori, but to explore how the social world was made meaningful and interpreted from the perspectives of the Syrian learners. Secondly, the teachers that Mariam and Jean reflected on were not participants in the project and hence I did not have the chance to include their voice nor my observation. Hence, all the following data are Jean's and Mariam's self-reports and not observational data. Finally, Mariam and Jean were the only participants who agreed to participate in their classes. This means that the data draws on the accounts of individual learners rather than all the Syrian participants.

### **7.3.1. Jean: "Have some respect I'm just a teacher like you"**

In her interviews, Jean described her unhappy experiences with the ESOL teacher that had taught her before her current teacher, Gemma, that I observed. Gemma replaced the main teacher who had gone on a maternity leave in March 2017. Jean discussed many examples of her previous teacher's behaviour that she felt had contributed to her, and her classmates', experiences of inferiorisation and marginalisation and the concomitant consequences on learning English. These examples included: 1) throwing the handouts at students; 2) giving them activities and exercises to do without explaining in advance how to deal with them; 3) making fun of the students' questions and mistakes and sometimes not answering their questions; 4) using a loud voice and behaving "rudely", "arrogantly" and "rigidly" with the students; 5) threatening the learners by depriving them of ESOL classes if they missed more than 4 classes; and 6) changing the way she treated students when she was observed by the college manager. Through my role as a volunteer with the learners, I heard similar complaints and comments about this same teacher from Jean's classmates and other Syrian learners.

Jean referred to a particular event in the classroom which crucially shaped how she came to see herself and her participation and stake in the classroom. After going through her corrected exam paper, Jean noticed that the teacher forgot to assess one of her answers. When checking with the teacher, Jean claimed that she was accused of cheating and adding the answer afterwards. This incident left Jean in a state of shock and hopelessness:

I felt very bitter. Very very upset...Have some respect I'm just a teacher like you but the circumstances forced me to be a refugee and become your student...I'm not gonna cheat and she knows how much I'm interested in English. Honestly this was the straw

that broke the camel's back<sup>64</sup>...After that incident, I stopped asking questions. I went to the class just to prove my attendance and I didn't participate much.

(Jean, interview, 04/08/17)

As discussed in Chapter 3, Jean had been a teacher in Syria and had taught for 15 years and had come from a wealthy family. Hence, positioning her as a “cheater” was a blow to her identity and how she saw herself relationally to the teacher, a member of her imagined community in England. When the teacher failed to acknowledge her professional identity as a fellow teacher and affirm her (previous) symbolic and class capital, there was no appropriate identity position for Jean to take up in the classroom. The classroom was not a “legitimate context” for her professional and class identities (Norton 2000: 181). It is for this reason Jean decided to withdraw and become deinvested in the classroom practices. It was an act of resistance on her part to stop asking questions and participating. It is true that Jean's decision to become de-invested in the classroom was triggered by this incident, yet it needs to be understood within the context of the classroom discourses that tended to systematically and regularly position learners in subservient positions. Jean's story serves as a sober reminder of the interrelationship between identity and formal language learning. It also affirms how language learning and participation opportunities are shaped by social practice and inequalities in power. As discussed in Chapter 2, power inequalities in the outside world can be reproduced in language classroom contexts and immigrant language learners might be subjected to othering and marginalisation in their classrooms with consequences to their language learning (e.g., Bigelow 2010; Kanno 2000; Majumdar 2010; Pennycook 2001; Rich and Troudi 2006; Talmy 2004). Jean's narrative contrasts markedly with how Waard's professional identity was acknowledged and celebrated by his teacher and how this impacted positively on his efforts and commitment to learn English (see Chapter 4, Section 4.2.2).

However, this did not mean a complete disinvestment in learning English on the part of Jean. Despite of her ambivalence to invest in the classroom, Jean clarified that positioning her as a cheater and a “burden” encouraged her to do an enormous amount of autonomous learning:

It had an opposite impact on me...It turned into a motivation to learn and move up. I want to learn quickly, get rid of her and move up to a higher class...So what the teacher had done to me pushed me to study more in the house using my mobile phone and the Internet.

(Jean, interview, 20/05/17)

This vignette allows for a more nuanced picture of how power operates within classrooms to differently shape the learners' stake in learning English and highlights the complexity and unpredictability which can exist in what might otherwise be conceived as a simplistic

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<sup>64</sup> و كانت الشعرة يلي قصمت ظهر البعير

dialectic relationship between inequalities in power and learners' agency. Despite being humiliated by the accusation, Jean was determined to learn English so that she would move up to a higher class where she could be respected and valued as a committed language learner.

### **7.3.2. Power transference from the micro to the macro sphere**

The previous section explored how Jean's sense of self and opportunities to learn and practise English were structured by how she felt she was positioned in the classroom. This section extends this line of thinking by examining how the marginalising discourses in Jean's classroom extended outside the classroom and constrained her sense of self and participation opportunities:

Catherine [the teacher's name] made me feel like I have an inferiority complex...I mean if my English is not perfect, I shouldn't talk. I didn't feel comfortable. Initially, if I went with husband somewhere, I would hide behind him and ask him to talk...

(Jean, interview, 20/05/17)

Throughout the interviews and diaries, Jean turned her teacher into a criterion against which she judged people's friendliness and approachability and whether they could be talked to or not. If people were friendly and approachable, she described them as "unlike Catherine"; if they were arrogant and difficult to talk to, she described them as "like Catherine". As noted earlier, teachers are in a powerful position and hence their positioning takes on an added significance. "Language teachers are not merely teaching students how to present information in another language and copy the appropriate behaviors; they are also imparting, although often unconsciously, a system in which meanings are interpreted and subjectivities are constructed" (Hammond 2006: 550). Through teaching, teachers assign language learners subject positions and create classroom conditions, which either facilitate or constrain their learners' experiences of identity development and language learning. According to Jean, her production of herself as an "inferior" participant who was unworthy of participation in the outside world was triggered by the inhibiting classroom discourses and how she was positioned by her teacher. That is, the inequalities circulating in Jean's classroom shaped her self-image of herself and curbed her access to Anglophone networks and language socialisation.

The chapter will now turn to present Mariam's *own* accounts of the negative and tense atmosphere in her classroom, starting by a macro-level discussion of the atmosphere with the aim of setting the scene for the example that follows.

### **7.3.3. Rigidity and resistance: setting out the scene**

In her phone and written diaries, Mariam often complained about the strained, unpleasant atmosphere in her classroom which was due, according to Mariam, to the tense relationship between the teacher, Amber, and some Syrian male students. Mariam

explained this relationship by (1) the teacher's constant attempts to control the class through her "strict" approach which stood in contrast to the approach followed by most ESOL teachers in the college and (2) the students' strong resistance through making the discourse of the classroom disorderly by challenges, interruptions and disagreements. Mariam mentioned many examples of what she and some learners (although not all) perceived as a "strict" teaching approach: (1) late students were not allowed to attend the class; (2) students were not allowed to sit in the classroom during the breaktime and if they arrived early before the class time they had to wait outside the classroom; (3) when asked by the students, the teacher would explain once. If the learners did not understand, she would say: "it's your problem not mine" (Mariam, phone diary, 19/06/17); and (4) she was impatient with the learners' mistakes and questions. Mariam stated that this "rigid" treatment caused resistance on the part of several male Syrian learners who started to overuse Arabic and challenge the teacher, which negatively affected the classroom atmosphere and the learners' experiences of learning English. Throughout the project, many Syrian participant learners - Omar, Leen, Sami, and Nadeema – made comparisons between the relaxed and positive atmosphere in their classes with the tense one in Mariam's class.

Mariam described a situation which, in her own account, demonstrated how her stake in the classroom was affected by the teacher's treatment:

When I first started, she gave me a form to fill out. I was new to all this and didn't understand some questions. I said to her 'explain to me I can understand if you explain'. I felt that she got upset so I said straight away 'no no thank you'. It's like I just don't need her...It was as if she wasn't my teacher I would ask her questions and she wouldn't reply and stuff like this.

(Mariam, shadowing<sup>65</sup>, 29/06/17)

For the learners, the ESOL classroom is never solely about learning English. Importantly, it is also about the identities they establish and the interpersonal relationships they form with their teachers and peers (Kanno and Applebaum 1995). Mariam's refusal of her teacher's help was a refusal of implicit powerless identity positions as a burden or a deficient language learner. The teacher did not seem to be cognizant of Mariam's bid for an independent and powerful identity position when she said: "I can understand if you explain". Learning English for Mariam was inextricably intertwined with establishing her new identity as a language learner in her new classroom. As explained in Chapter 6 (Section 6.7.2), during the initial stages of the course, Mariam was the sole female learner and reported feelings of isolation and unbelonging; hence, not being recognised by her

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<sup>65</sup> On this shadowing occasion, the recorder was on with Mariam's permission.

teacher took on an added significance and made her feel that she was not part of her classroom.

#### **7.3.4. Discourses of *perceived* Islamophobia and racism in Mariam's classroom**

Another issue which further contributed to the tense atmosphere in the class was some learners' *own* feelings that the discourses circulating in the classroom were sometimes "racist" and "Islamophobic" as claimed by the following two quotes:

It was Christmas time...there was a poster of all religions on the wall behind us. The teacher talked briefly about all religions Christianity, Judaism, etc., but she ruled out Islam...Then, Nadeema's husband started irritating her and said: 'why didn't you talk about us [Muslims]?' She said 'you are Syrians and know about Muslims but you don't know about Christians...No need to talk about Islam'. Then he said that almost a quarter of the Syrian population is Christians. Then the male students kept saying that she hates Muslims and Islam...

(Mariam, shadowing, 29/06/17)

I don't want to move up to Amber's class because the Jobcentre thing is very important to her...She teaches students only speaking so that they can start working...The way she deals with students is clearly 50% or 60% racist. It's like 'You shouldn't miss classes because the Jobcentre is paying you'...If I get moved up to Amber's class, my language level will become zero because if I get hurt, I won't be able to concentrate AT ALL.

(Sami<sup>66</sup>, interview, 21/09/17)

A number of the students interpreted the teacher's exclusion of Islam in the discussion of the poster as an indication of her biases towards Islam and Muslims. They could not understand why the teacher discussed all religions but not Islam. Sami also understood the teacher's over-attention to the Jobcentre as an indicator of racism; his interpretation needs to be situated within the deficit model circulating in media and public discourses that depicts refugees as an economic burden on the welfare and the job market in the UK (Philo et al. 2013). Of course, these students did not formulate their perceptions of racism and Islamophobia based solely on the above examples; rather, they were socially embedded and constructed in a series of situations and examples that had happened in the classroom through which they recognised how they were positioned as Muslims, Syrians, and refugees. The religion poster, for example, could have been productively and effectively employed to acknowledge the students' religious identities particularly in light of (1) how Muslims, by and large, are positioned in a negative light in public and media discourses and (2) the centrality of Islam in many Syrian participants' life (see Chapter 5, section 5.1). However, this does not indicate that the teacher did hold racist and/or Islamophobic opinions. The discussion will be further nuanced at the end of the section.

A legitimate question arises here: what is the relationship between these perceived discourses of racism and Islamophobia and language learning? A lack of support in

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<sup>66</sup> Sami was not a student in Amber's class, but he had heard about her from his two brothers who were her students and other Syrian friends.

facilitating English language learners' integration and acceptance into the language learning community can often result in the perpetuation of their marginalised status and in the plateauing of their English language development (Kanno and Applebaum 1995). If we do not acknowledge and validate the multiple identities and communities that the language learners belong to and associate themselves with, this would probably reflect negatively on their enthusiasm and engagement in the language to be learned and the community to be integrated in. Understanding how power operated subtly, and how the language learners felt they were positioned in their classes was key to making sense of their stories of language learning and to paint a deeper and more sophisticated picture of what was actually going on in the classroom. Mariam often expressed feeling ambivalent towards her teacher and investing in her ESOL classroom, and some of her classmates were more invested in challenging and resisting the teacher than in learning English. Further, Sami made hypothetical direct links between these discourses of perceived racism and his stake in learning English. Had he been positioned as Other or a burden, he would not be able to focus on learning English. As Bigelow (2010) argues, educational and language learning institutions "do not stand free from powerful discourses in (global) society that instill suspicion and fear of Muslims" (p.114).

### **7.3.5. Perceived racism and Islamophobia: nuancing the discussion**

I would like to end this discussion by raising two points. Firstly, an integral part of understanding this discussion is to look at the discourses present within these two ESOL classrooms through the lens of how refugees and Muslims, by and large, are represented in public and media discourses, which subconsciously might have shaped the two teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards their refugee Muslim learners. What the teachers said or did could be unconscious biases influenced by the negative coverage and representation that surround refugees and Muslims. Philo et al. (2013) discussed the ways in which media coverage operated to construct negative accounts of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. They argued that there is a "persistent and overwhelmingly hostile coverage of refugees and asylum in much of the national media... Such media accounts have a crucial impact in legitimising the hostility toward and bullying of the new arrivals" (pp.165-66). Thus, the presumably racist and Islamophobic discourses in the ESOL classes could be embedded in much larger inequitable structures of power and government policies. In this sense, the ESOL teachers may join a long list of convenient scapegoats including refugees, economic immigrants, and Muslims. Secondly, and similarly, the ways the learners perceived what they had been exposed to in their ESOL classes were probably mediated by their negative experiences of racism and Islamophobia in the wider society. As Rich and Troudi (2006) pointed out, post-9/11 discourses appeared to shape how Muslim students see themselves in relation to the larger L2 community. They

have expectations of being treated unequally on the grounds of their religious and ethnic identity.

#### **7.4. Conclusion: what does the chapter tell us?**

In this chapter, I have explored the positive as well as negative experiences of the Syrian learners inside their ESOL college and classrooms. As the data illustrate, ESOL institutions can be both spaces of empowerment and disempowerment for ESOL learners. They can be a site of liberation and empowerment when they provide learners with empowering and expansive identity positions from which learners would be more encouraged to learn and speak English. However, they can also be a site of disempowerment and domination when they sustain, legitimise, and reproduce dominant discourses around refugees and Muslims and impose identities of deficiency and otherness on their learners. This in turn can diminish learners' motivation to learn English and reduce their investment in their ESOL classrooms and wider host communities. That said, it seems important to note that although the Syrian learners' own accounts of perceived marginalisation, racism, and Islamophobia need to be listened to and addressed thoroughly and seriously, they should not cover the bigger picture of the college which was for most learners an "oasis" and a "sanctuary" from the marginalisation and devaluation they had been exposed to in the outside world. The few negative incidents and stories need to be viewed within the generally positive atmosphere in the college which was discussed in detail at the beginning of the chapter.

Language teachers need to realise the power they possess to enhance or constrain their learners' imagined communities and identities or to be model members of imagined communities of L2 users for their students. They must consider the impact of their own power and privilege on the learners' sense of self and the outcomes and processes of learning English. This seems to be crucial given that refugee language learners are doubly liable to be silenced and marginalised due to their minority backgrounds and lack of English proficiency. The ESOL classroom does not need to be demeaning to the learners' abilities and identities. It becomes apparent through the chapter that it would be advantageous to teachers and educators to learn about the learners who they teach and to find opportunities to have discussions with the learners about their challenges, cultures, and perceptions of the whole language learning process. Speaking more generally, one of the calamities of education is the manner by which the dialogue between institutions and learners has been silenced and devalued. Learners are often talked about not spoken with. The devaluation of ESOL learners' voices may have insidious and undesirable effects on the learners, ESOL institutions, and the language learning process as a whole as we have seen with the job search and the dominant discourses of cleaning. The chapter would hopefully help teachers and people in charge create a more nuanced and real picture of

who ESOL learners are, which would inspire them to resist the dominant discourses around refugees and Muslims and do their own little research; there is no single monochrome image of ESOL learners. Knowing who ESOL learners are can feed positively into the class atmosphere and pedagogy and consequently have desirable implications for the learners' sense of self and commitment to learn English.

Chapter 8 provides a summary of the findings and results of the whole thesis, specifically how they relate to the research questions, and how they contribute to the body of research that has explored the relationship between identity and language learning.

## **Chapter 8 - Bringing things together: identity and language learning, intersectionality, and diversity**

This chapter looks back at the previous analysis to present three central and overarching themes that have been gleaned from my analysis of the 14 participant Syrian language learners' narratives. The opening theme is the interrelationship between the learners' identities and the processes they engaged in, and their outcomes of, English learning. The chapter then moves on to examine how the learners' multiple identities did not emerge independently of each other. Instead, the identities interconnected to create a complex picture of how each individual's identities were enacted; there was always an overlap across and between identity dimensions. The third theme sheds light on the diversity of the Syrian individual language learners' experiences of identity negotiation and development and language learning. The chapter concludes with some implications for ESOL teachers and institutions.

### **8.1. What is the relationship between investment in language learning and learners' identities?**

The relationship between investment in language learning and learners' identities is the main and overarching question that the project attempts to explore. To begin with, my analysis of the Syrian language learners' data illustrated the centrality of identity in their narratives of language learning and participation in new communities and the intrinsic relationship between investment and identity. The analysis produced a large amount of references to the interrelationship between language learning and identity. The outcomes of the analysis related to this theme will be presented in four interrelated subsections. Firstly, the Syrian learners' identity dimensions - class, religious, gender, cultural, refugee, age, and racial - shaped their investment in learning English and mediated their access to English learning and interactional opportunities available in the bigger community and the ESOL classrooms. Secondly, migration and social engagement in new communities of practice necessitated a negotiation and/or a transformation of the Syrians' identities, impacting positively and/or negatively on their language learning trajectories and outcomes. Finally, past *and* future identities played a powerful role in shaping the Syrians' sense of self and language learning experiences. Before proceeding, it is worth noting that although the four categories will be examined in separate sections, they do interrelate and intersect with each other in complex ways. Whenever possible, I will refer to these interrelationships and intersections.

#### **8.1.1. Language learning as shaped by learners' identities**

First, what the findings of this project clearly show is that the Syrian participants' identity inscriptions, e.g., class, religious, gender, cultural, refugee, age, and racial, had a powerful

impact, positive and/or negative, on their sense of self, agency, and investment in learning English. These identity dimensions underpinned the learners' motivation and/or ambivalence to invest in English and their language learning practices such as classroom dominance, silence and anxiousness, lack of attendance in ESOL classes, resistance (or otherwise) to working in mixed-gender groups in ESOL classrooms, doing a great deal of autonomous learning, and limiting or maximising social interaction. Put simply, these aspects of identity can afford valuable privilege and/or cause great disadvantage for the language learning outcomes and processes.

Starting with social class identities, the evidence from the project showed how 5 Syrian refugee language learners' affiliation to different social class positions in their home country directly and/or indirectly, positively and/or negatively and in various ways impacted on their sense of self, and their (dis)investment in learning English in and outside the ESOL classrooms. We saw in Chapter 4, for instance, how Waard's previous class capital - built around his education, his love for books and vast knowledge of several life areas, and profession as an Arabic teacher - served as assets to him in the processes of identity negotiation and learning English in his new communities. Because Waard had a great sense of investment in his intellect, he was extremely invested in learning English; his symbolic capital was, in addition to other social factors<sup>67</sup>, the underlying motivation which encouraged him to learn English and set ambitious goals (e.g., delivering a lecture in English and doing crossword puzzles), and to be patient while achieving them. In the ESOL classroom, Waard's previous professional identity as a teacher was acknowledged and respected by his classmates and ESOL teacher, which increased the prospects for him to forge the identity of a successful and hardworking language learner and thus stimulated his engagement in the English-learning classroom practices. His previous educational experiences had also prepared him for studying English in ways not open to most participants; Waard transferred the skill sets that he had deployed while studying Arabic language in Syria into learning English.

Waard's class capital, however, appeared to have restrictive effects on his learning of English. As a reflection of his teacher identity and interest in grammar, he appeared to be more invested in accuracy rather than fluency, which explained his initial hesitance to speak and overuse of the word "sorry" in the classroom. Waard attributed his fear of making mistakes to his previous teacher identity. A teacher, from his perspective, should be prepared to answer *all* students' questions to avoid the embarrassment and "humiliation" of not knowing. Speaking from the identity of the teacher rather than the student, Waard was conscious of his errors and overused "sorry". The image of social

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<sup>67</sup> This will be discussed in section 8.2. Intersectionality of identity dimensions.

class that emerged from the data, like religion and gender, is multifaceted and complex. The relatively intricate fusions of social class and language learning opportunities indicate that the process of social class enactment in language learning is rarely simple and straightforward and may entail paradoxical pathways for the same individual learner as we have witnessed in the case of Waard.

With regards to intersections between religious identities and language learning, Chapter 5 demonstrated that access to linguistic resources, ESOL classes, and interactional opportunities in English was mediated by the participants' religious identities, their own interpretations of their religion, and resulting religious misunderstandings and biases in the TL culture. For example, all the learners reported feeling vulnerable and restricted their day-to-day movements in the aftermath of the Manchester and London terrorist attacks because of their Muslim identity. From the identity positions of accomplice and outcast, all the Syrian participants withdrew into their L1 communities and restricted their social activities, which had a restrictive impact on their English learning and speaking opportunities. Another instance of the interrelationship between religious identities and language learning was the experiences of two male learners, Waard and Amaan, who reported turning down English-speaking opportunities outside the class because they thought they crossed religious boundaries. Alternatively, some learners' investment in learning English was as much as an investment in their religion as they hoped, through being good language learners and good citizens, to contest and change people's perspectives of Muslim people.

Gender was another identity dimension that loomed large in the data, particularly in the women's narratives (see Chapter 6), and seemed to influence their endeavours and willingness to invest in English. For example, Samra's and Nadeema's reported dislike of coming to the UK, triggered by gendered and cultural discourses about decision-making power within their families, appeared to mediate their opportunities to develop new TL-mediated subject positions and hence their stake in learning English. The evidence from Chapter 6 also shows how some women's imagined futures and identities and their opportunities to learn and interact in English were structured by their husbands' gender, religious, and cultural views. However, it is worth noting that Chapter 6 did not only show the restrictive but also the facilitative role that some men played in their wives' adoption of new gendered identities. For instance, Nadeema's and Rania's husbands supported their development of new gendered identities, which fed positively into their learning of English. On the other hand, the Syrian women's gendered identities as mothers, wives, and daughters sometimes acted as a motivational factor to learn English. For instance, despite Samra's ambivalence towards learning English (see Section 6.2.2.), her identity as a mother of a hearing-impaired daughter prompted her to invest in English and was the main reason for her attending ESOL classes. Consequently, the image of gender that emerged

from the data supports the view of gender adopted in Chapter 2, that is, gender as a complex system of social relations and discursive practices that are better understood as emerging in the language learners' local social, cultural, political and ideological contexts and that goes beyond the male/female dichotomy (see Section 2.5.2).

### **8.1.2. Identities as subject to negotiation and change**

Another salient theme that ran through the project findings in terms of the interplay between identity and language learning was how shifts in the Syrian learners' identities impacted on their learning of English and participation in intra- and inter-communities of practice. Identity shifts and their impact on the processes and outcomes of language learning have been documented in numerous SLA studies investigating the reciprocal relationship between identity and language learning (e.g., Block 2007; 2012; Ellwood 2009; Gao et al. 2015; Giroir 2014a; 2014b; Kanno and Applebaum 1995; Norton 2000; Sacchi 2014; Skapoulli 2004; Vasilopoulos 2015). By identity shifts, I mean the identity transformations that the Syrians experienced as a result of their new identity positions as refugees and language learners, and their (non)participation in new communities of practice with different ideologies and cultures to those they were used to. Interacting with a range of socially and culturally embedded and discursive discourses, at the same time as learning English, were critical life experiences for the Syrian refugees that led to new identity positions and shifting worldviews and perspectives. The Syrian participants framed their English learning stories within the broader narrative of identity (re)construction as they negotiated their right to participate and belong to their new social and cultural milieus. The participants' new identities, whether taken up or socially imposed, either multiplied or curbed their possibilities for language learning and/or agency exercise in the performance of self.

The identity changes that were observed through the participants' data can be broadly classified into two main categories. Firstly, there were identity changes that happened as a result of starting a new life in a new social and cultural environment with little or no language; in these cases, the learners did not take the initiative to transform who they were. Instead, new identity positions were imposed on them. Yet, the learners did have a say in resisting or accepting them. Unsurprisingly and at the risk of generalisation, these new identity positions tended to be negative and restrictive due to the public and media negative discourses around immigrants, refugees, and Muslims. Examples of these identity shifts were numerous and occurred and reoccurred all through the Syrian refugees' journey of immigration and after arrival in the UK. As evidenced by the data, there were numerous moments where the Syrian participants became aware of a significant gap between how they saw themselves and how they were seen by the members of their new communities. Some of these new negative identity positions turned

to become catalysts for the Syrian learners to assuming more agency and changing the circumstances under which they learned and participated, ultimately leading to new identity positions and more language learning and speaking opportunities.

For instance, Mariam reported being positioned as a “cleaner” by an organisation in Northeast College that was supposed to help her during the process of looking for a job. This was a moment where Mariam became cognizant of the rupture between her previous and imagined identities and the cleaner identity imposed on her. Yet, Mariam refused to accept the cleaner identity position and reported the incident to the Jobcentre adviser. As Mariam stated, the outcome of this incident and her exercise of agency was a new and transformative identity position; one in which Mariam was recognised by the organisation as a legitimate speaker with whom they could have a proper conversation in a respectful way. What ostensibly was a space of marginalisation turned into a space of identity expansion and growth. Another instance of the identity shifts that the Syrians underwent was the change in how they saw themselves as Muslims. Their Muslim identity was not a point of contention or exclusion in Syria, yet, in the UK and particularly following the terrorist atrocities, their Muslimness became a social factor of exclusion and limited their language learning and interaction opportunities.

The second broad category of identity changes was when the learners took the decision to change how they performed themselves in order to improve the conditions under which they were learning English and to move from the periphery to the centre of communities that were important to them. In other words, they took the initiative to change: “Identities are not merely given by social structures or ascribed by others, but are also negotiated by agents who wish to position themselves” (Norton 2013a: 5). Yet, this does not exclude the possibility that their agentic moves of identity transformation came as indirect answers to how they were initially positioned within their new worlds. However, there was no direct or explicit power being executed on them to change and they could probably survive without these changes. As we saw in Chapter 5, Jean and Rania strategically modified their religious and gendered identities to fit into their ESOL classroom dynamics and modes of participation. To ensure validation in her ESOL classroom community and learn English “efficiently”, Jean suspended the real-world cultural, gender, and religious norms and created new norms, ones that united her with her class members and made her more of a student rather than a Muslim woman. Jean employed a liberal, humorous speech style while interacting with her male classmates, something she did not do in the outside world while interacting with Syrian men.

Finally, it is important to note that these voluntary identity transformations were not performed randomly; rather, the learners exercised their agency and changed their identities selectively and partially in ways that benefited them the most in their current and

imagined communities and in their affiliations to two different cultures: the Syrian and the British. Jean adapted and extended her gender and religious identities in her ESOL classroom, but she skilfully chose not to while interacting with Syrian men in the outside world. She was aware that this might have been misread within the framework of the Syrian culture. Similarly, we saw how Rania's gendered identity shift from a shy and dependant woman into an independent woman was facilitated and encouraged by her husband, Adham. Yet, this did not mean a complete change of Adham's gender ideologies. As we saw in Chapter 4 (Section 4.1.4.2), Adham asked Rania not to work with Sami because he thought he was nosey. Further, it was Adham's decision that Rania needed to stop attending ESOL classes in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks (see Chapter 5, Section 5.3.1). This highlights that the individual "is not conceived of as passive; he or she is conceived of as both subject of and subject to relations of power within a particular site, community and society: the subject has human agency" (Norton 2013a: 164).

### **8.1.3. Investment and language learners' past identities**

There was significant evidence throughout many of the participants' stories that their past histories and identities played a powerful role in shaping their (dis)investment in learning English and (non)participation in their new communities. Their accumulated memories of their private and public lives in their home and interim countries and their previous positions within their families and communities seemed to have an important impact on the way they understood their relationship to the language of English, how much investment they were willing to put into learning that language, and the ways they resisted/accepted discourses of marginalisation. Our identities are constituted not only by the present but also by the past. How we were constructed and constructed ourselves in the past can become a large part of how we define ourselves in the present and the future. That said, I am all too aware that by including a separate section about the learners' past identities, I am opening myself to the question that whether the learners' identity dimensions in the above discussion overlapped with their past. The answer is: yes, they did. However, dedicating a separate section to the learners' past emphasises the role of the past in identity formation and transformation, the complexity of identity work, and the multiplicity of social factors determining how the Syrian learners performed themselves in their new communities.

A focus on the learners' past histories and communities and the previous identities they had occupied enables us to understand how their bonding with the past might mediate their language learning trajectories and outcomes. The impact of the past was evident in many participants' narratives but particularly and powerfully in the case of Nadeema (Chapter 6, Section 6.3.2.). In Syria, Nadeema was often ridiculed and bullied by her in-laws because she was illiterate. Her illiteracy, which was gendered-based, reduced her

confidence and self-efficacy while she was learning English. However, her past experiences of marginalisation had also a positive impact on her willingness and enthusiasm to learn English. Nadeema was highly invested in learning English as it was the discursive tool to reposition herself relationally to her in-laws and prove to them that she was capable of learning English despite her illiteracy in Arabic. Additionally, English was a source that would offer Nadeema the independence and the freedom that she had been deprived of all her life as an illiterate and marginalised woman. Investment in English was congruent with Nadeema's history of marginalisation and subordination. To sum up, Nadeema's motivation to learn English was embedded in: (1) her history of illiteracy that was gendered-driven and (2) her desire to transform into a strong and independent woman. In this example, we see an interaction of all the points listed under Section 8.1: (1) language learning as shaped by learners' identity aspects (gender in this case), (2) identities as subject to negotiation and change, and (3) investment and language learners' past *and* imagined identities.

Another instance that exemplifies the power of the past on the learners' sense of self and language learning experiences was the vast difference that 6 of the Syrian learners felt between their previous positioning as school students in Syria and their ESOL classrooms in the UK (see Sections 4.3.5 and 7.1.1). Many Syrians came to the ESOL classrooms with the expectations that they would be placed in inferior positions to their teachers and their mistakes would not be tolerated as was the case in Syria. However, the Syrian learners were surprised by, and appreciative, of the relaxed and good-humoured atmosphere in the ESOL classrooms and how they were perceived positively by their teachers. The students in turn positioned themselves relationally to their teachers as friends or family members - identity positions which were not available for them in the classrooms in Syria. From the new identity positions of friends or family members, the Syrian learners were more prompted to invest in the ESOL classroom practices and were relaxed and risk takers. To sum up, the Syrian learners viewed their present circumstances in the ESOL classrooms and their ESOL teachers through the lens of their past school experiences, which rendered them more appreciative of their new learner identities and reflected positively on their language learning experiences in the ESOL classroom.

#### **8.1.4. Investment and language learners' imagined identities**

In many and diverse ways, the narratives of the Syrian learners illustrated that the identity positions they took up were shaped not only by their past experiences and identities but also by their imagined identities and communities - who they aspired to be and with whom they imagined themselves to be in the future (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.6.). Imagined identities and communities were no less real than the learners' past and present identities. The learners' current identities were the product of their past, present and future. The

Syrian learners saw themselves in the future as legitimate members in diverse communities to which they did not have access. As the participants' data illuminated, imagined identities and communities emerged as a central part of their language learning narratives - it affected their investment and sense of agency in the learning of English. The effect of imagination on the Syrian learners' language learning processes and outcomes worked in two ways: facilitative and restrictive.

Firstly, the Syrian participants' imagined identities and communities acted as a beneficial impetus and purpose for action, prompting them to make corresponding and diversified investments in learning English to reach their future identities and communities. In Chapter 7 (Section 7.1.5), I discussed the positive role that Northeast College played in forging connections, through the food markets, between some ESOL learners' imagined sense of self and communities and the learning context in the college. Food markets stimulated their view of their future selves and increased their confidence to meet the external challenges of setting up their own businesses as chefs and cooks in the future. According to Kanno and Norton (2003), a drive for affiliation in imagined communities can provide language learners with a sense of direction, a raised level of commitment, and a greater investment in their language learning trajectories. This was supported by the stories of Adham, Hassan, and Hiba who were encouraged by their participation in the food markets to start their own business and become legitimate members in diverse English-speaking communities.

As shown by the data, imagined identities and communities had a profound impact not only on the learners' general and whole investment in learning English but also on their sub- and selective investment in some language skills over others. Many Syrian learners did not put effort into improving every language skill. Instead, they exerted their agency and made selective investments in improving specific language skills that contained higher value in relation to their current and imagined identities. For example, Rania, who was performing the identity of the language broker in her house, was greatly invested in speaking. Her investment in speaking was not an act of coincidence. Most of the tasks that Rania performed and would perform in the future in English were speaking-oriented. Improving her spoken skills would enable her to perform her newfound language broker identity efficiently and keep the status and power that she earned in her house through her command of English. By contrast, Waard, who aspired to occupy a high position in an imagined community of intellectual, educated, and like-minded English-speaking individuals, put tremendous effort into mastering English writing skills and grammar and found little interest in improving speaking. For Waard, English was a language of thinking and knowledge rather than a language of speaking and initiating relationships. This agrees with the findings of McKay and Wong (1996) who noted that investment can be highly selective in one or a combination of the four language skills and that different language

skills hold different values for language learners that is related to the overall picture of their identities (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.5)

However, many negative examples emerged from the data where some of the Syrian learners' imagined identities were not acknowledged, which resulted in their resistance towards learning English and hence less language learning investment. For instance, in the context of the ESOL classrooms, Omar, Mariam, and Adham saw no possible gains of the cleaning-related classroom materials that did not facilitate the emergence of their imagined identities and their learning of English; hence, they seemed to be de-invested in these lessons. There was a big discrepancy between the "cleaner" identity imposed on them and the identities they used to occupy and/or aspired to construct in their new environment. We have seen how Adham (Chapter 7, Section 7.2.1.1) removed himself from the classroom when he knew in advance about the cleaning focus of the lesson. His desire to acquire the symbolic capital offered by English classes was in conflict with his resistance to the cleaner identity that did not acknowledge his past and future identities. Chapter 6 also gave an instance of how Samra's imagined identity and freedom of action were to a large extent limited by her husband, Omar, who restricted her roles and contributions to the domestic sphere. This in turn exacerbated her strong sense of disorientation and restricted her social mobility and resulted in a lack of investment in learning and speaking English. This agrees with Pavlenko and Norton (2007) who argue that language learners' imagined identities and communities can influence their learning trajectories, agency, and resistance in the learning of English.

The notions of past and imagined identities can have great implications and promise for bridging theories of identity and language learning and practice in ESOL classrooms, for informing critical and transformative language pedagogy, and making sense of language learners' stories and practices in the classroom. Hence, one of the important features for language researchers and teachers and ESOL stakeholders is to make connections between language learners' histories and imagined identities and the classroom activities and materials, thus motivating learners to be more invested and engaged in the language classrooms. Learners' histories and future aspirations can become rich resources which help teachers construct classroom activities that engage language learners, acknowledge their past histories, and contribute to their desired trajectories towards participation in their imagined communities. When teachers are informed of learners' histories and imagined identities, they can make language learning more meaningful and turn the classroom into a legitimising space for learners to take up identity positions that are not incompatible with their previous and imagined identities and feed positively into their motivation to learn the TL.

Having explored the multi-faceted interplay between identity and English learning, I move now to discuss how identities intersected with each other to impact on the Syrian learners' English learning processes and outcomes.

## **8.2. Intersectionality of identity dimensions**

As the above discussion shows, intersections between different identity aspects was a recurrent major theme through the data. Identities did not emerge independently of each other. Instead, they interconnected to create a complex picture of how identities were enacted and there was always an overlap across and between identity dimensions. Intersectionality between identities is not exclusive to this project and has been recognised by many scholars (e.g., Bigelow 2010; Block and Corona 2016; McMichael 2002; Norton 2000; Rich and Troudi 2006; Sarroub 2002; 2005). In Chapter 5, for example, religion was discussed with references to gender, education, and culture. Most compelling was the example of mixed-gender seating in pair and group work in the Pre-entry class. 7 participants expressed their lack of interest and resistance to work in pairs and groups with the opposite gender due to their *own* interpretations of Islam. However, when more examination of this issue was conducted, many social factors surfaced. One factor hindering some learners' participation with the opposite gender classmates was their cultural disposition that played an active role in shaping their religious stance towards mixed-gender seating. According to their culture(s), it was not appropriate for men and women to mingle and interact with each other. Further, as discussed in Chapter 6, inequitable gender norms also played a role in some women's disengagement in pair/group work. Nadeema's and Rania's seating in their classrooms, along other social practices, were partly monitored and controlled by their husbands who preferred their wives not to work with men. Finally, the Syrian learners' educational backgrounds also intervened with the previous identity aspects and had an impact on their level of engagement in this classroom practice; Jean and Waard who were the most educated participants worked comfortably with the opposite gender students. The above discussion is just an example that illustrates that "identity is multilayered and complex; that different dimensions of identity cannot be dealt with in isolation from one another; that intracategorical differences are often the most interesting aspect of identity research" (Block and Corona 2016: 509).

Another good example of intersectionality was noticed in the narratives of Waard (see Sections 4.2.1 and 4.3.6 in Chapter 4 and Section 5.1.1 in Chapter 5). Waard displayed a strong religious identity and made direct links between his motivation to learn English and his own interpretation of the Islamic scripture and stories. Yet, Waard's religiously-based ambitious stake in learning English was equally the product of his educated and intellectual identities (see Section 8.1.1). According to Waard, English was

(1) the means through which his identity as an educated and intellectual man and a proactive seeker of knowledge would be constructed and expressed and (2) the tool to reposition refugees from the normative position of ignorant and a burden to that of educated and productive. Waard's interconnected social class and religious identities also had a positive impact on the enactment of his age identity, which in turn impacted positively on his language learning (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.6). Influenced by the Islamic scripts and his vast knowledge, Waard maintained that age identity had no negative effect on language learning. Not only did identity dimensions intersect with each other, but also their entanglement impacted on the enactment of other identity aspects with either affordances or constraints for the processes and outcomes of language learning.

That said, I am all too aware that in selecting to discuss the identity dimensions separately, I am opening myself to the criticism of separating the identity aspects superficially and ignoring a great deal of the complexity of identity work and its impact on language learning. However, organising the data and presenting the findings need to be done within the constraints of a PhD thesis. Through the discussion chapters, I have been sensitive to and aware of the intersectional nature of identity aspects, and I have tried to avoid to fall into the trap of default "essentialisation of identity categories" (Block and Corona 2016: 509). Although in each chapter one identity element was the baseline of the discussion, the analysis actively engaged other identity categories that were thought to influence the issue under discussion. Any analysis of identity that does not take intersectionality into consideration cannot address properly the complexity and richness of identity and will produce an inadequate picture of the multifaceted and interconnected identities of individuals and collectives.

The following and final section will explore the extent to which the Syrian refugees were similar or different, suggesting implications for ESOL teachers and institutions.

### **8.3. Syrian refugee language learners: individuals or a cohesive whole?**

As clearly illustrated by the findings, there was a great deal of commonality running across the narratives of the Syrian refugees. They were similar in many ways. They all experienced the trauma of war, displacement, and being Others in the interim countries and in the UK. Their journey of immigration, learning English, and participation in new communities of practice was as much as a journey of identity negotiation and (re)construction. They all were motivated, to varying degrees of course, in learning English to be able to occupy or perform their desired identities. However, this project also illustrated that even within this relatively small cohort of 14 Syrian refugees, a wide diversity emerged. The individual Syrians came from a diversity of socio-economic, religious, cultural, and educational backgrounds and brought with them a wide range of

prior learning experiences and skills, varied forms of capital, and different aspirations for the future. All of this overlapped and interconnected in complex ways and was pertinent to how the Syrian refugees positioned themselves and were positioned in their new environment, how they expressed their sense of self, and how they approached, engaged, and invested in learning English. Given the learners' diversity and individuality, it was perhaps inevitable that they would engage in learning English with different and diverse ways, levels, and attitudes. It is to that I shall turn now.

All Syrian learners were invested, at different levels, in learning English. Yet, they were, at the same time and equally, if not more, invested in other worlds outside the ESOL classroom and in identities beyond those of language learners and refugees. These other investments, which distributed between the past, present, and future, in turn determined the learners' motivation to learn English which resulted in a diversity of linguistic investments. McKay and Wong (1996) point out how the particular needs, desires, and negotiations of the learners are not "simply distractions" from the task of language learning, but "must be regarded as constituting the very fabric of students' lives and as determining their investment in learning the target language" (p.603).

By way of example, we have seen how the three learners - Omar, Sami, and Waard - who came from middle-class backgrounds were very concerned with developing their immediate English language to regain their class capital in the soonest possibility. Yet, they did not have a strong sense of investment in their new social and cultural communities outside the ESOL classrooms because their class capital and past self-identities were not validated yet or acknowledged. Much of their identity work was done in the ESOL classrooms where there were prospects for performing their class capital and powerful identities. Hence, their investment in the classrooms was stronger than in the outside wider community. By contrast, Hassan and Hajar who came from low socio-economic backgrounds and had experiences of marginalisation and disrespect in their home country were highly invested in their integration and belonging to the wider British community which had not failed them as their home country did. Their narratives centered on opening up to new social and cultural worlds which afforded them with numerous interactional opportunities. Each group showed a high sense of investment in learning English, but each in their own unique way and as seen in Chapter 4 even the differences within each group were discussed. The individual Syrian learners' investment in learning English needs to be understood with reference to their diverse life experiences and backgrounds that contributed to different language learning experiences and trajectories.

Another good example of how the learners' varying motivations to learn English were embedded in their affiliations to different worlds and identities was provided by the narratives of Nadeema and Samra. Although both Nadeem and Samra shared common

ground through their engagement with a discursive practice of disinvestment in the UK as they came against their will, yet the variability of how they reacted and how they approached learning English is a clear illustration of the diversity of experience among the Syrian language learners. For Samra, who reported being greatly attached to her sisters and parents in Jordan, her identity positions as a sister and a daughter were more prioritised than her new identity positions as a language learner and a member in a new community, which resulted in an equivocation in her English learning endeavours. By contrast, despite Nadeema's disinvestment in the UK and separation from her family, her new identity as a language learner gave her a great deal of symbolic power that she had always aspired to have as an illiterate woman.

#### **8.4. Some implications for ESOL teachers and institutions**

What has been said about the diversity of the Syrian refugees' experiences of identity negotiation and English learning might be a simple fact for many, but unfortunately it seems to have been regularly forgotten and overlooked by ESOL stakeholders, institutions, and teachers. The discussion is a reminder that refugees are individuals not statistics. They are language learners, teachers, fathers, mothers, daughters, sisters, sons, businessmen, and chefs. They are all individuals rather than a cohesive whole. Central to this discussion are the implications for language researchers, teachers, and institutions. As maintained by Hall (2019), teacher and institutional awareness of individual learners' diverse and multiple experiences is crucial to developing a fuller and richer understanding of, and offering support for, any challenges individual language learners might face both in and outside the classrooms. We should recognise that English language proficiency represented only a part of the Syrians' rich, multiple worlds, identities, and skills. Therefore, care is needed not to lump or essentialise the Syrian refugees, and more generally all refugees, as a group nor to conflate their individuality and diversity. In this spirit, therefore, it is viable to propose that this diversity of identities and investments can be integrated into the ESOL classrooms as a pedagogical resource to acknowledge learners' rich experiences and resilience and celebrate diversity. Teachers and institutions need to respond, within their capabilities, to the particular challenges, possibilities, and needs of their individual language learners.

ESOL stakeholders, institutions, and teachers need better data about ESOL learners' backgrounds and characteristics including their first language literacy, educational history, learning difficulties, employment aspirations, and even some knowledge of the local employment market and opportunities available. This information differs greatly from region to region in the UK, from institution to institution, and from class to class. ESOL provision needs to tick the boxes in terms of the exams/proficiency students are required to achieve, but also needs to recognise their individuality. This places a

burden on ESOL institutions and teachers that need much more government funding and support to be able to recognise and respond to the diverse needs of their individual learners.

Following this summary of the main themes and issues that have been gleaned from the data, I close the thesis with Chapter 9 that briefly answers the research questions, followed by the limitations and some practical implications of the project.

## Chapter 9 - Conclusion

This chapter starts by providing brief answers to this project's research questions. Subsequently, it outlines the limitations of the project with regards to the research design, and notes some unforeseen issues that emerged during the course of the project. It concludes with some practical implications and recommendations for (ESOL) teachers and institutions and policy makers.

### 9.1. Overall findings with respect to the research questions

I have already summarised some of the main findings of the project in Chapter 8. Therefore, in this concluding chapter (Chapter 9), I deal specifically with answers to the project's research questions, and detail some further arguments regarding Research Questions 2 and 3 (see below).

The project explored the following research questions:

- 1) How does the Syrian refugees' investment in learning English intersect with their social positioning and changing identities?
- 2) How far and in what ways do structures of marginalisation and Islamophobia shape the Syrian refugees' identity construction and their subsequent investment in learning English?
- 3) In what ways, if any, do the Syrian refugees resist these structures and situate themselves in their new social milieu?
- 4) To what extent do the conditions within the ESOL College facilitate or constrain the Syrian refugees' negotiation of their identities and fulfilling their potential as English learners and novices in culturally and linguistically new communities?

These conditions include (1) how the Syrian learners are positioned in the ESOL classroom and (2) space for their identities to be expressed and valued.

#### 9.1.1. Research question 1: intersections between identity and language learning

The first research question was fully addressed in Chapters 4 through 6, and the findings related to this research question were reiterated in Chapter 8 (Section 1). My analysis of the Syrian language learners' data illustrated the centrality of identity in their narratives of language learning and participation in new communities, and the intrinsic relationship between investment and identity. Firstly, the Syrian learners' identity dimensions - class, religious, and gender- shaped their investment in learning English and mediated their access to English learning and interactional opportunities available in the ESOL classrooms and the wider community. Secondly, migration and social engagement in new communities of practice necessitated a negotiation and/or a transformation of the Syrians' identities, impacting positively and/or negatively on their language learning trajectories and

outcomes. Finally, past *and* future identities played a powerful role in shaping the Syrians' sense of self and language learning experiences.

### **9.1.2. Research question 2: marginalisation and/or Islamophobia and language learning**

In terms of Research Questions 2 and 3, the answers were embedded throughout the discussions of Chapters 4 to 8. Yet, in this concluding chapter, they will be looked at more explicitly. As the data has shown, the Syrian refugees were subjected to many forms of marginalisation and/or Islamophobia at different levels and in different spaces: (1) their own houses, (2) Northeast College and ESOL classrooms, (3) and the outside world. We have seen examples of how Nadeema was marginalised, due to her illiteracy, in her own house by her family and was relegated to an inferior identity position. Yet, like Giroir's participants (2014b), the marginalisation that Nadeema experienced prompted her to invest more in learning English to take up more favourable and powerful identity positions and change the balance of power. This means that the marginalisation she experienced was also a space of possibility and growth for Nadeema, a space from which she moved forward to resist inferiorising and devaluing discourses around illiteracy and exercise agency. Yet, this was not the case in Samra's, and many other participants', narratives of identity negotiation and learning of English. Samra's social mobility and gendered identity work was constrained by her husband's gendered and religious beliefs, which caused an equivocation in her investment in learning English and rendered her into a dependant, powerless woman who was heavily reliant on her husband. As has been demonstrated in this project, marginalisation among the Syrians themselves was made up of multiple subtle ways through which they were sometimes positioned unfavourably. These included gender, religion, social class, illiteracy, and age.

As discussed in Chapter 7, Northeast College and the ESOL classrooms were not culturally or politically neutral territories, and provided conditions which sometimes hindered the Syrian learners' identity development and their learning of English in and beyond the ESOL classroom. Many Syrians reported incidents of marginalisation, racism, and Islamophobia in Northeast College and in their own ESOL classrooms. For example, Jean was positioned by her Muslim Kurdish classmate as "Daeshi". Despite the shared Kurdish and Muslim identities with her male classmate, Jean was not excused from discriminatory religious storylines, and it was within this parameter she chose to act with agency, i.e. stop talking with her classmate (see Chapter 4, Section 5.4.1.1). Mariam also elaborated on the atmosphere in her ESOL classroom, which she described as "intense", "racist", and "Islamophobic". This consequently had a negative effect on how she and some Syrian classmates came to position themselves relationally to their ESOL teacher and, unsurprisingly, on their endeavours and interest in learning English. Additionally,

Mariam emphasised an incident with WELT<sup>68</sup>, in which she was positioned as a “cleaner”, a role which she resisted (see Chapter 6, Section 6.7.4). Mariam understood her resistance and the way she manoeuvred the institutional power inequalities in her ESOL college as central social factors in boosting her self-confidence and transforming how she saw herself in relationship to society and her own family.

With respect to the outside world, in the aftermath of Manchester and London attacks, all the Muslim learners reported feeling vulnerable and restricted their day-to-day movements because of their Muslim identity. Amaan also narrated a series of “racist” incidents where, as he saw it, his family and some Syrian friends were Otherised and treated unequally, and unfairly, on account of their racial and religious identities. For example, Amaan recounted how his wife and parents were verbally abused by a group of English male neighbours because they were Muslim. Amaan pointed out that these incidents, as well as the terrorist attacks and the consequent Islamophobic discourses triggered by them, created complex conditions not only for language learning but also for identity (re)construction and language socialisation (see Chapter 5, Section 5.3.2).

The above discussion illustrates that “power is everywhere” and “comes from everywhere” (Foucault 1998: 63; See Chapter 2, Section 2.4.4). It operated in top-down and bottom-up ways. This supports Pennycook’s (2007) assertion that power is neither monolithic nor invariant. Rather, it must be understood as “contingent, shifting and produced in the particular, rather than having some prior ontological status” (p.39). The Syrians were in a powerful process of identity (re)construction and power negotiation at several levels among their families, at Northeast College, and in their own communities.

### **9.1.3. Research question 3: resistance and agency towards marginalisation and/or Islamophobia**

Moving to Research Question 3, the ways the Syrian learners acted on these structures of marginalisation and/or Islamophobia were contingent on (1) the capital they possessed and the previous identity positions they had occupied in their previous lives and (2) how much power they were granted in the particular incidents of marginalisation and Islamophobia in their UK context. Firstly, the Syrian learners themselves were not “blank slates” waiting to be constructed by their new communities; they brought their own previous discursive constructions of themselves and cultural and professional identities. For example, we have witnessed how Omar, Sami, and Adham, who had occupied powerful professional identities in Syria, expressed the strongest sense of resistance towards the “cleaning” positioning they experienced. Interestingly, they can be contrasted with Hassan, who reported coming from a less privileged background in Syria. Hassan

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<sup>68</sup>A pseudonym for Work, Education, Learning, Training.

was the only male participant in the project who did not question or resist the sustained positioning of ESOL students as cleaners. He even criticised the resentment of some Syrians with the job search that focused mainly on cleaning jobs. As an individual whose voice was not heard in Syria and Lebanon, and his choices and influences were constrained by the scarcity of his material and symbolic resources, Hassan felt that he was still unworthy of resistance and unentitled to voice his agency in the UK even when he experienced racist incidents (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.4). He felt powerless to confront as he was worried that an act of resistance might jeopardise his acceptability and legitimacy into his new communities.

Secondly, the Syrians' act of agency was not only enabled but also constrained by the societal power relations within which they acted. As the findings illustrate, some Syrians succeeded in voicing their agency and resistance in the face of marginalising and Islamophobic discourses, yet sometimes it was difficult for them to be agentic. The Syrians were active players in the game of symbolic power, yet they were not "sovereign protagonists" (Weedon 1989: 41). This became particularly apparent in relation to the impact of the Manchester and London terrorist attacks, where the limitations on their ability to exercise agency and resistance became clear. For example, Jean was strategic in reading the power dynamics of particular situations, and she exercised agency in her ESOL classroom when she was positioned as "Daeshi" and "cheater". Jean also succeeded, although not without ambivalence and pain, in constructing "alternative stories" (Ochs and Capps 1996) to replace the conventional, stereotypical stories around Muslims initiated by her driving instructor. However, her agency was constrained by the effects of the terrorist attacks, and she deployed non-confrontational strategies in the outside world, such as sitting in the first seat of the bus and covering her hijab with her coat hood, to cope with the backlash of the terrorist attacks. In other words, the Syrians exercised as much power as the host, or the involved, communities, that had authorised the marginalisation and the Islamophobia in the first place, were willing to grant. "If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose" (Butler 2004: 3; see Chapter 2). Hence, agency was a situated enterprise, embedded in the dynamic discursive frameworks of the social worlds in which the Syrians negotiated power. The idea of full agency or "full subjectivity" that is necessary for individuals to act in this world and resist inequitable structures of power is an "illusion". Individuals are "embodied subjects with particular but not inevitable forms of conscious and unconscious motivation and desires which are themselves the effects of the social institutions and process which structure society" (Weedon 1989: 41).

#### **9.1.4. Research question 4: the conditions in the ESOL classrooms**

The final research question was explored in detail in Chapter 7. For the Syrian participants, Northeast College was a site of liberation and empowerment when it provided them with empowering and expansive identity positions from which they were encouraged to learn and speak English, and felt accepted as new arrivals in their new communities. However, it was also a site of disempowerment and domination when it sometimes sustained, legitimised, and reproduced dominant discourses around refugees and Muslims, and imposed identities of deficiency and otherness on the Syrian learners. This in turn diminished some Syrians' motivation to learn English and reduced their investment in their ESOL classrooms and wider host communities. That said, this should not take too much away from the overall, bigger picture of the college which was, for most learners, an "oasis" and a "sanctuary" from the marginalisation and devaluation they were exposed to in the outside world, and a space where their identities were acknowledged and expanded, with positive impact on their experiences of learning English. The few negative incidents and stories need to be viewed within the generally positive atmosphere in the college.

### **9.2. Limitations of the project**

I acknowledge that there were variables that affected how the project findings emerged within the context of particular participants in a particular time and space. I will discuss these limitations, of research design and of unanticipated issues which emerged during the course of the study, in the following sections.

#### **9.2.1. Research design**

One of the aims of this project was to give a voice to the Syrians' emic perspectives on identity negotiation and change and on learning English in times of mobility, paying particular attention to some of the areas that are traditionally undervalued and underrepresented in Applied Linguistics research. In exploring these areas, I have painted a particular picture of a specific group of 14 Syrian refugee ESOL learners, and this picture cannot capture the vast experiences of the many ESOL, and migrant, learners across the UK, who come from a diversity of cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. An analysis of other ESOL/language classroom communities, at another UK location, and at another point in time might have resulted in different data sets. However, given the adequate and detailed descriptions I have provided in laying out all the necessary details of the research process, the findings that emerged from this project have the potential to provide valuable insider insights which are likely to resonate with language learners, teachers, and other stakeholders in most contexts, both in the UK and beyond.

Another limitation of the project is related to the diaries the Syrian learners provided. As noted in Chapter 3, some participants provided more diary entries than

others, and four did not take part in the diary study at all. This variation meant that the voice of some participants was inevitably louder than others within the diary data. Although this was a limitation of the project, diaries seemed to be the only feasible way through which the experiences of “difficult-to-reach” participants were accessed. Through diaries, the participants opened up about aspects of their English learning and identity negotiation which were not able to be accessed otherwise. Further, the multiple sources of data served as a means of triangulation, each a tool by which to clarify, corroborate findings that emerged from other data sources (Giroir 2014b). As argued by Guba (1981) and Brewer and Hunter (1989), the use of different research methods in tandem compensates for their individual shortcomings and exploits their respective benefits.

Finally, this thesis has outlined the perspectives of two female learners, Jean and Mariam, who reported experiencing Islamophobic and racist incidents in their ESOL classes. However, it should be noted that these two women were the only Syrian participants in their ESOL classes, and, unlike the main cohort of participants, Jean’s and Mariam’s teachers did not agree to participate in this study. In other words, the narratives of Jean and Mariam would have undoubtedly nuanced had their ESOL teachers and/or other Syrian learners presented their own readings of the particular events. It was interesting that the most controversial accounts and stories emerged from the two ESOL classes whose teachers did not agree to participate.

### **9.2.2. Unanticipated issues**

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 5, during the course of fieldwork and data collection, the Manchester and London terrorist attacks took place. This led into a greater presence of religion in the learner participants’ accounts of their experiences of English learning and identity negotiation. Would religion feature in the participants’ accounts to this extent had the attacks not happened? Would another group of Muslims, who had not been through the trauma of war, react towards these attacks in the same way the traumatised Syrian participants did?

Further, the Friday social gatherings in which the Pre-entry teacher met with her female learners were facilitated and sustained by my participation and my interpretation skills (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2.4). It was made clear by the Syrian women and the Pre-entry teacher that these gatherings were constructive in building rapport not only between the Syrian women, the teacher, and myself but also among the Syrian women themselves and between the Syrian and non-Syrian women. This might have affected the classroom atmosphere and the learners’ investment in the classroom practices, and hence the data they provided and the classroom I was observing. Evidently, I was “in there” in the context I was observing, and my presence was shaping the data provided. Yet, this seems to be unavoidable in this type of ethnographic research.

The next section discusses some practical implications for (ESOL) teachers, institutions, and stakeholders as well as policy makers.

### **9.3. Practical implications and recommendations**

While this project aims to illuminate the experiences of a specific group of Syrian refugees in the North East of England, it is hoped that the following recommendations and practical implications will be helpful to (ESOL) teachers and institutions and policy makers, in the UK and beyond.

#### **9.3.1. Practical implications for ESOL and/or language teachers and institutions**

Based on the findings of this project, a series of mediating factors are proposed to facilitate the integration of ESOL learners' past and future, learner and non-learner identities in ESOL classrooms to increase their opportunities to exercise agency, and to support home, community, and ESOL college connections. These mediating factors should include ESOL institutions' and teachers' efforts to (1) create out-of-classroom events and occasions for learners' family and community lives to intersect with college and educational experiences; (2) accept and celebrate linguistic/cultural/class/religious heterogeneity in ESOL classrooms and institutions as a viable and authentic way of being and communicating so that ESOL learners may learn not to value one language/culture/race/religion/social class over another; (3) structure ESOL classroom activities and materials so as to promote a multiplicity of perspectives, identities, and voices; (4) design classroom materials and activities that stimulate learners to genuinely know each other rather than depend on normative discourses that might not serve the interest of some already marginalised learners; and (5) provide opportunities for ESOL learners to take up identities of competence and power in the classroom and the college. These facilitative suggestions might empower learners to bridge the gap between their life histories and cultural and symbolic capital and the institutional context of learning English. Perhaps then, ESOL (refugee) language learners will start to find deeper meaning and purpose in their experiences of learning English in ESOL institutions, be able to exert a compelling voice in classrooms, and, ultimately, transform their language learning circumstances to become more pertinent to their real and future life and sense of self.

Additionally, given the Syrian learners' reflections in the aftermath of the Manchester and London attacks and their own accounts of what they perceived as racism and Islamophobia, ESOL classrooms can become particularly important dialogue sites for ESOL learners to deliberate about issues which directly affect and unsettle who they are. At a time when such spaces in public life can be marginalising and excluding, ESOL classrooms can be important spaces for debate and shared understanding between ESOL learners, and teachers, who may not normally share such conversations. ESOL

classrooms need to reflect and shed light on the barriers and challenges ESOL learners face in their daily life outside the walls of ESOL classrooms; ESOL classrooms need to be socially and culturally sensitive and responsive. Language learners learn best when they can make connections between what they learn and their cultural contexts and experiences, when their teachers are responsive to their challenges and needs, and when their classrooms are acknowledging their identities. For example, participatory ESOL - “an approach to teaching English language and literacy that draws out and builds upon the experiences of students and develops a shared critical understanding of the world” (Bryers et al 2013: 6) - can be a challenging, but safe, environment to facilitate meaningful and relevant dialogue that is important to the learner group:

In this way, participatory education can help teachers and students alike resist ESOL being used as an arena for top-down attempts to get people to adhere to dominant agendas by providing the tools to critically analyse these agendas, and where necessary, exploring ways to resist them.

(Bryers et al 2013: 34)

Further, most of the learner participant cohort in this project had experienced relatively little formal education prior coming to the UK, and few were illiterate or semi-literate. As Omar, Sami, and Adham noted (see Chapters 4 and 6, Sections 4.2.1. and 6.6.2.), not possessing study skills hampered their learning of English. Nadeema and Adham, who were illiterate and semi-literate respectively, made very slow progress with learning English compared with their fellow Syrians despite being very motivated to learn English and attending ESOL classes regularly. The findings of this study therefore suggest that traditional and conventional models of ESOL provision and progression, which can take years to complete, fall short of meeting the linguistic needs for the Syrian participants, many of whom arrive in the UK with pre-entry level English and lack in study skills. As Sidawa (2018) notes, obliging learners to demonstrate progression by frequently taking level-based exams can have a major effect on motivation. Thus, a more flexible, tailored ESOL provision and progression to better meet the diverse needs and linguistic abilities of the learners is needed; alternative approaches might include: (1) a form of language learning education that does not solely oblige learners to experience a centralised curriculum and assessment regime; (2) integrating a course of study skills in the ESOL learners’ own language into the ESOL provision to teach low-educated learners how to study and approach language learning; (3) an additional literacy course for those with little or no literacy in their first language to enable them to tackle the complex task of learning how to write and read; (4) and special training to ESOL teachers working with Pre-entry ESOL learners or learners with little or no literacy.

Finally, the data in this project questioned the effectiveness of the job search and the charity organisation, WELT, in Northeast College which were thought to be helping the

Syrian refugees find work (see Chapter 6, Section 6.7.4). As the data has shown, they were not as effective as they should be and they contributed to the learners' marginalisation - the learners expressed strong feelings of frustration about the gap between these work-based initiatives that were implemented top-down and their future aspirations and imagined identities. Some potential suggestions include (1) providing ESOL learners with schemes that enable them to work and study English at the same time; (2) offering ESOL learners integrated courses in ESOL with vocational qualifications; (3) accessing work that includes on-the-job language development and training; and (4) facilitating opportunities of volunteering where ESOL learners can develop or upgrade their careers, learn English, and feel valued and needed. Such approaches appear to be good fits for ESOL learners (and for many refugees in Europe in general), for whom years of accredited, college-based instruction would unlikely be effective. These suggestions need not to be imposed in a top-down way (as was the case with the job search and WELT); they need to be negotiated and agreed upon by all partners involved, including ESOL learners and teachers and policy makers. Dialogue and negotiation are key elements that seem to be missing in policy making around ESOL learners.

### **9.3.2. Practical implications for policy makers**

The themes that emerged from the project illustrate that the individual Syrian language learners who participated in the study were diverse and had different investments in learning English; consequently, their learning of English progressed at varied paces (see Chapter 8, Section 8.3. and the above Section). This diversity among the Syrian learners raises many questions and concerns about the statement made by Louise Casey, who wrote a report for the government on integration in 2016, that the British government should fix a date by which all residents in the UK should be able to speak English. A common language, she argues, would help to "heal rifts across Britain" (BBC 2018). However, as the findings of this project demonstrate this statement seems to be impossible and unrealistic and would have many problems had it been implemented. It has potentially damaging implications for ESOL learners and immigrants and refugees and for intercultural understanding in the UK. "It promotes the view that having many languages is a problem, and exposes speakers of other languages to potential discrimination and even abuse" (Karatsareas 2018).

My project findings also problematise the language level of the British citizenship test, B1 (Entry 3), set by the Home Office that refugees and migrants need to take before becoming British citizens (Home Office 2019). Setting levels of competence and deadlines for learning English that are unattainable for some learners will prevent access to the full range of rights and responsibilities that these refugees should enjoy in the UK. It is also a denial of the diversity of refugees and immigrants in the UK, and it goes against the grain

of who they are as individuals. It ignores the dynamics and complexities of learning English. Most European and UK language learning and teaching policies seem to ignore the fact that the refugee and migrant language learners who arrive in the host countries could be individuals with no or little literacy in their own language. They could be elderly or sick people, individuals with learning difficulties, or extra-vulnerable people who are traumatised and have a history of fear. The presence of these groups is typical of the migration contexts (Parliamentary Assembly 2013). Policies need to contribute to and facilitate the processes of learning the target language and integration of these groups, and all groups in fact, not become barriers to it. By uncovering the Syrian refugees' experiences of learning English and integration in the UK from their own perspectives, and providing space for their voices to be heard, this project can help our understanding of their varied experiences and perspectives, the challenges faced and the ways in which they might be most effectively supported. It is to be hoped that this can now contribute to practices and policies that effectively and appropriately support ESOL learners while they are learning the target language and integrating in their new communities.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1. A sample of the job search form

**Job search** – getting key information out of job adverts

After getting key information from job adverts, you need to follow-up.  
To follow-up means to phone, to send emails with a covering letter, to send your CV, and to fill in application forms online or on hardcopy.

1 Job title (job name)	2 Posting date	3 Company	4 Job Reference Code and Job ID	5 Job Type • Full Time (FT) • Part Time (PT) • Permanent • Temporary	6 Application Methods (How to apply)	7 Location (place)	8 Salary (money) EEEEEE
A Cleaning Operative/cleaning	2/10/17	[redacted]	[redacted]	Part time	[redacted]	[redacted]	7.80 per hr
B cleaner	3/10/17	[redacted] Ltd	[redacted]	Part time	[redacted]	[redacted]	7.50 per hr
C cleaner	2/10/17	[redacted]	[redacted]	Part time	[redacted]	[redacted]	7.50 8.50 per hr
D cleaning Operative	3/10/17	[redacted]	[redacted]	Part time	[redacted]	[redacted]	7.50 per hr
E Kitchen Assistant	4/10/17	[redacted] Ltd	[redacted]	Full time	[redacted]	[redacted]	7.50 per hr

## Appendix 2. The responsibilities of the support worker

26/5/2017 Friday

Information about the responsibilities of Support Workers

The [redacted] are here to help you settle and integrate into your local community. We are here to help you access services and your Support Worker will help you with this and any other issues which arise during the time we support you.

Your Support Worker is your main contact for the first year of your stay in [redacted]

Your Support Worker will provide you with the information you need to find your way around the area where you live. They will give you maps of your local area, bus timetables and other important information. Within the first month after arrival your Support Worker will aim to:

- Register your family with a Doctor, also known as a GP.
- Register your children with a local school
- Register your family with a dentist
- Register you for benefits. This is how you will receive money until you find employment
- Register adults in your family for English lessons
- Help you to open a bank account
- Register you with gas and electricity companies and set up a payment method for you
- Show you where you can do your shopping
- Show you the bus stops and other important facilities in your local area
- Talk to you about the kind of jobs you can do, or any training you may need and help you to look for work.

During the first year your Support Worker will be in regular contact with you. During this time your Support Worker will create a Support Plan to help your family integrate into life in the UK.

معلومات عن مهام موظفي الدعم

فريق دعم اللاجئين هنا لمساعدتك على الاستقرار و الاندماج في المجتمع المحلي. مهمتنا مساعدتك للوصول الى الخدمات التي تحتاجها و التعامل مع اية امور او قضايا تحدث خلال فترة دعمتك لك. موظف الدعم هو مرجعك الرئيسي خلال السنة الاولى من اقامتك في [redacted]

سوف يقدم لك موظف الدعم المعلومات التي تحتاجها للعثور على اشياء حول المنطقة التي تعيش فيها و يعطيك خرائط عن الاماكن المحليه و الجداول الزمنية للباصات و غيرها من المعلومات الهامة. في غضون الشهر الاول بعد الوصول عامل الدعم سوف يساعدك في:

- تسجيل عائلتك مع الدكتور و المعروف ايضا بالطبيب العام ✓
- تسجيل طفلك في مدرسة محلية ✓
- تسجيل عائلتك مع طبيب الاسنان ✓
- تسجيل نفسك للحصول على المساعدات. لتحصل على النقود حتى تجد عمل ✓
- تسجيل البالغين في عائلتك لدراسة اللغة ✓
- مساعدتك لفتح حساب بالبنك ✓
- تسجيل نفسك مع شركة الغاز و الكهرباء و تحديد طريقة الدفع المناسبة لك ✓
- ارشادك الى مراكز التسوق ✓
- ارشادك الى مواقف الباص و المرافق الاخرى المهمه ✓
- تتكلم معك حول انواع الوظائف التي يمكنك القيام بها او اي تدريب قد تحتاج له و نساعدك لتبحث على عمل

خلال السنة الاولى سوف ندعمك و نكون على اتصال منتظم معك. خلال هذا الوقت سيقوم موظف الدعم باتشاء خطة دعم لمساعدة عائلتك على الاندماج في الحياة في المملكة المتحدة.

(9)

### **Appendix 3. The summary of the project**

#### **Syrian refugees in the UK: the journey of linguistic and socio-cultural identity construction**

My project aims to investigate the language learning and socio-cultural experiences of recently arrived Syrian refugee language learners in the North East of England. More particularly, how changes in their identity are shaping and shaped by the language being learned, the culture being experienced and their position as recently arrived members of the British society. When people move into new countries and new cultures, their identities undergo through many changes as they learn language and integrate into the receiving society. This project hopes to find out about how their present, changing identities and aspirations intersect with their investment in language learning in society and in the language classroom. To examine this, I aim to employ a variety of methodological tools: interviews, classroom observations, and language learner narratives.

Thus, I would like to volunteer at \_\_\_\_\_ College to get a sense of TESOL institutions in the North East of England and to develop links with learners and teachers who will be approached to participate in my research. I would be very happy to help in the college in the way you find it possible. Being an English language teacher myself back in Syria, I hope this could be of benefit to the institution and to language learners. Volunteering would also help me to establish a rapport with learners before starting collecting data. The research would involve carefully planned and ethically aware data collection

Although there is much more which could be said about my project, I hope this brief summary is of interest to you. Thank you very much in advance!

#### Appendix 4. The Syrian learner consent form (The Arabic version)



قسم العلوم الانسانية  
جامعة نورثمبريا  
مدينة نيوكاسل  
NE1 8ST

الايمليل: [amina.al-dhaif@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:amina.al-dhaif@northumbria.ac.uk)

موبايل: .....  
التاريخ: 2017/03/20

#### مشروع البحث: اللاجئين السوريين في انكلترا: رحلة تعلم اللغة وتكوين الهوية الثقافية والاجتماعية

الى متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية السوريين:

أنا طالبة دكتوراة سنة ثانية في جامعة نورثمبريا، يهدف مشروع بحث الدكتوراة إلى اكتشاف تجارب وخبرات اللاجئين السوريين في شمال شرق انكلترا أثناء تعلم اللغة الانكليزية داخل وخارج الكولج. عندما ينتقل الأشخاص الى مجتمع جديد و يحاولون تعلم لغته و الاندماج فيه فأنهم يواجهون العديد من التحديات من ضمنها شعورهم بهويتهم (من هم في هذا المجتمع الجديد). لذلك يهدف المشروع الى اكتشاف الصلة بين التغيرات الحاصلة على الهوية و تعلم اللغة. بشكل أساسي يهدف البحث الى التوصل الى أفضل الطرق والوسائل لمساندة ومساعدة اللاجئين السوريين أثناء رحلة تعلمهم اللغة وتأقلمهم مع المجتمع البريطاني بالإضافة الى مساعدة المدارس والمدرسين لتقديم الأفضل للمتعلمين السوريين.

بعد الحصول على موافقة جامعتك XXXXX أود دعوتك للمشاركة بمشروعي الدراسي، أثناء دراستي سأقوم بحضور بعض الدروس وتسجيلها صوتياً وإجراء مقابلتين سيتم تسجيلهم صوتياً أيضاً. كما تتضمن المشاركة بالمشروع كتابة مذكرات تتعلق بتعلم اللغة الانكليزية لمدة 5 أشهر، ليس هناك طريقة محددة و يمكن أن تكون المذكرات بشكل مكتوب أو مسموع. جميع المعلومات (المرئية و المسموعة) ستعامل بسرية تامة من دون ذكر أسماء وهويات متعلمي اللغة المشاركين اطلاقاً، ستكون عملية جمع البيانات بأسرها ودية وسلسة قدر المستطاع.

كجزء من تصميم المشروع من المهم جداً أن يفهم المشاركون أن المشاركة طوعية ويمكن الانسحاب من الدراسة في أي وقت ومن دون اعطاء أي تبرير، ومن المهم أيضاً أن يفهم الراغبين بالمشاركة طبيعة الدراسة وأهدافها و أن يوافقوا على المشاركة. ولذلك فالهدف الأساسي من هذه الرسالة شرح الدراسة ومعرفة رأيك بخصوص مشاركتك في الدراسة. سأكون ممتنة حقاً إذا كان باستطاعتك استكمال الطلب المرفق أدناه (في الصفحة الثانية) لبيان ما إذا كنت تفهم أهداف المشروع وتود المشاركة بالدراسة.

للاستفسار عن أي شيء يرجى التواصل معي على بريدي الالكتروني أو رقم الموبايل المرفقين في أعلى الصفحة. كما يمكنكم التواصل مع المشرفين على المشروع البريفيسور غريم هول ([g.hall@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:g.hall@northumbria.ac.uk)) والدكتوراة رولا النائب ([rola.naeb@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:rola.naeb@northumbria.ac.uk))، سيكونون سعيدين للإجابة عن أي أسئلة أو استفسارات.

مع تمنياتي الطيبة ولكم جزيل الشكر

الاسم: \_\_\_\_\_

يرجى الاجابة على السوالين التاليين اما بوضع دائرة أو بوضع خط تحت الاجابة المرادة

(1) أفهم أهداف الدراسة وكيف سيتم تنفيذها / لا أفهم

(2) موافق على المشاركة في الدراسة / غير موافق

التوقيع: \_\_\_\_\_

التاريخ: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 5. The Syrian learner consent form (the English version)



Department of Humanities  
Northumbria University  
Newcastle upon Tyne  
NE1 8ST

Email: amina.al-dhaif@northumbria.ac.uk  
Mobile: .....

20<sup>th</sup> March 2017

Dear Syrian language learner,

### **Project: Syrian refugees in the UK: the journey of linguistic and socio-cultural identity construction**

I am a PhD student at Northumbria University, now entering the second year of my studies. As part of my PhD research project, I am finding out about the in- and out-of-class English learning experiences of Syrian refugees in the North East of England. When people move into new countries and cultures, they face a variety of challenges as they learn language and integrate into the receiving society, including how they think and feel about their identity. My project hopes to find out about how Syrian refugee learners' identities and their language learning experiences in and outside the language classroom affect each other. Ultimately, the project has at its core the desire to be informed and inform others about how to support and encourage Syrian refugee population while they learn language and adjust into life in the UK, and to help ESOL colleges and teachers give the best experience possible. It is hoped that the findings of this study will result in action.

With the permission of xxxxx College, you are invited to participate in this project, which will involve me observing and audio-recording some of your classes and interviewing you twice. The interviews will be audio-recorded as well. It also involves you keeping a diary for five months. All information (seen and heard) will be confidential and remain anonymous, and the whole process will be as open and friendly as possible.

As part of the project's design, it is important to understand that taking part in the project is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. It is also clearly important that you both understand the project and its aims, and agree to take part. This letter, therefore, is to explain the project to you and invite you to take part. I would be

really grateful, therefore, if you could complete the form below to indicate whether or not you understand the aims of the project and would like to participate.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions (my email address/ contact phone number are at the top of the letter). My project is supervised by Graham Hall, Associate Professor in the Department of Humanities at Northumbria University ([g.hall@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:g.hall@northumbria.ac.uk)) and Dr Rola Naeb ([rola.naeb@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:rola.naeb@northumbria.ac.uk)) who will also be happy to answer any enquiries you might have.

Best wishes and many thanks,

Name of language learner: \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle or underline the option you choose:

- I understand/do not understand the aims of this project and how it will be carried out.
- I agree / do not agree to take part.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 6. Syrian learner interview questions

The three main areas of inquiry and their associated questions in the initial learner interviews:

**a) to get to know Syrian learners in terms of their immigration journey, their educational and professional backgrounds, how they were settling in, their initial impression of coming to the UK, and if they faced any racist abuses or Islamophobia**

1. Can you talk about yourself for a bit...how old are you...which city are you from...how many children, etc.?
2. Did you have any knowledge of English before coming to the UK?
3. How was the situation in the country you lived in before coming to the UK?
4. What were the criteria through which you were chosen by the UNHCR?
5. What was your reaction when you were told that you will travel to the UK?
6. How was it when you first came here?
7. How did you get on with life without English and how did it feel?
8. How is your relationship with the neighbours?
9. Have you been subjected to any instances of racism or Islamophobia? You might not understand what the person is saying, but have you felt that someone is talking to you in an angry or unpleasant way?

**b) to explore about their language learning experiences inside and outside college, language contacts, investment in learning English and their inspirations for the future**

10. How do you feel now in the classroom? To what extent are you comfortable?
11. Is there anything in the class you are not happy about?
12. Which learners do you feel most comfortable working with?
13. Apart from college, what do you do to improve your English?
14. What do you like the most about the college?
15. Tell me about the job search? What do you do on Friday mornings?
16. Who speaks English in the house?
17. What are the main challenges in learning English?
18. Who do you go with when you do your shopping, go to the GP, or the dentist?
19. When do you speak English? How do you feel when you speak English?
20. Why are you learning English?
21. Can you tell me about your aspirations for the future?

**c) to enquire about the identity changes, if any, that learners felt or experienced since arrival in the UK**

22. Obviously, when we move into new countries and cultures, we face a variety of challenges as we learn language and integrate into the receiving society, including how they think and feel about our identity. When we are integrating in a new society, we are integrating with a new sense of self. Personally, I have experienced many identity changes starting from the way I am dressed to the way I see myself in this new culture. I have become more sociable, still not that much though, and more liberated. I sometimes feel devalued and weak as I can't express everything I wanna say in English...I feel I don't belong here...another change is the way I view myself as a Muslim woman...in Syria I felt proud to practice my religion while here there are some challenges I would say...My question is: have you noticed any changes in your identity or the way you see yourself since you came to Britain?

Appendix 7. A sample of Jean's diaries

١٣ / ٦ / ٤  
في هذه الفترة لا أشعر بالراحة كوني أقيمت في بلد أجنبي بعيداً عن بلدي الأم وذلك بسبب الأحداث الأخيرة التي حدثت في بريطانيا، فمنذ أحداث مانشستر أشعر أن هناك شيء كبير قد حدث بيننا وبين الإنكليز. ~~لكنهم لم يعرضوا~~ بشكل شفهي لأي تصرف مقهري وبك لا يخلو الأمر من بعض النظرات الغير مريحة عندما أركب الباص أو أمشي في الشارع أو أذهب إلى السوق وذلك أكثر كبراً مني تحدثي باللغة الإنكليزية مع أي أحد حيث أقصر صديقي هذا الأسبوع مع تلاميذي في المدرسة حيث أكون مضطرة لشرح كل شيء ومعاني الكلمات والجمل باللغة الإنكليزية كونهم لا يتحدثون اللغة الإنكليزية. ~~أضف~~ إضافة إلى صديقي مع السائق الذي يعلمني القيادة. آفردرس قيادة أخته كانت يوم الخميس ~~كالمعادة~~ أظنني أنني علي أن أكون حذرة في تعاملتي مع الإنكليز وأن لا أخرج إلا للضرورة والأفضل أن أخرج مع زوجي. أظنني أيضاً أنه لو استلمت زمام الأمور سيقوم بتحويل كل من لا يحاول الاندماج في المجتمع البريطاني من حيث ~~تعليم~~ تعلم اللغة الإنكليزية وعدم العمل والإستمرار على المساعدات وأيضاً سيقوم بيمس جميع ~~المواطنين البريطانيين~~ الذين حصلوا على الجنسية البريطانية بكم مولدهم في بريطانيا ويبدون نفوراً من المجتمع البريطاني الغير مسلم. هذا الحديث بينت لي نظرة المواطن

- البريطاني العادي لنا كملهين . وجاوت اصدات لندن  
تزيد الضيق بله اصبغ الوضع مكووناً  
أكثر والنظرات اصبحت حادة أكثر لدرجة اننا اصبينا  
نحاف من أعمال انتقامية لدرجة ان زوجي اضربني  
بجزرة ظلمي للكعب صفاظاً من صياي الكعب الذي  
ارتدتيه اول الامر بناه على طلب منه اول ما تزوجنا .  
• هذه الامور بهيجها اسرت كل تعلمي للفتة .

## **Appendix 8. My translation of Jean's sample diary**

Date: 04 June 2017

I am not feeling comfortable these days living in England away from my home country because of what is going on. I have a feeling that Manchester attack created a very large gap between English people and us. Personally, I have not been subjected to racist abuse. However, I got some suspicious looks when I get on the bus, walk on the streets or do shopping. In effect, what is happening has greatly impacted my opportunities to speak English. My speaking opportunities have been restricted to my students who know no Arabic and my driving instructor. In my last driving lesson on Thursday, my driving instructor, as usual, warned me to be careful when dealing with English people and not to get out unaccompanied by my husband. He said that had he been in charge, he would have deported people who do not integrate with the English society in terms of not learning English and living on benefits. He went further and warned that he would put behind bars the people who were granted the British citizenship just because they happened to be born here, but they made plain their aversion to non-Muslim British people. This conversation with my driving instructor revealed to me how English people might think of Muslims. Then, London Bridge attack poured gasoline on the fire. The atmosphere has become much more intense and the looks even more suspicious. We are feeling fearful of acts of revenge to the extent that my husband, who is worried about my safety, has asked me to take my Hijab off. It is the Hijab that he had convinced me to wear it before getting married. In general, all these happenings affected my English learning.