Multilingualism, literacy and the acquisition of English as an additional language among Iraqi refugees in regional Victoria

MICHÈLE DE COURCY

The University of Melbourne

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of home language literacy in the acquisition of English as an additional language. The data for this paper were collected from a group of Iraqi refugees in a country town in Victoria. Participants were interviewed twice about their backgrounds and their experiences of learning English as a second language and adapting themselves to a new community. Participants' English speaking proficiency was described using the ESL Bandscales (McKay, 1993). In looking at the eventual attainment of all the participants, the ranking of their English speaking proficiency could not be explained by age, gender, educational setting or background. Closer analysis of the qualitative data collected through interviews revealed complex interactions between literacy in the first language, literacy in a language other than English, and English profi-

Address for correspondence: Michèle de Courcy, Faculty of Education, The University of Melbourne, Victoria, 3010, Australia; Email: m.decourcy@unimelb.edu.au. This paper was presented at the University of Sydney TESOL Research Network Colloquium, September 2, 2006.

University of Sydney Papers in TESOL, 2, 1-31.

 ISSN: 1834-3198 (Print) & 1834-4712 (Online)

ciency. A particularly important role was found for a mother's literacy in her children's first language.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the role of literacy in languages other than English in the acquisition of English as an additional language (EAL). This issue is investigated using data obtained from a group of Iraqi refugees who have settled in a town in regional Victoria. Economic and social researchers have conducted a number of studies with similar groups of refugees in Australia, and some of these have paid attention to language issues (See Chiswick, Lee & Miller, 2002; Marston, 2003; Waxman, 2000). While yielding interesting findings about the role of the family in EAL acquisition, they do not use sophisticated analyses of language proficiency, relying instead on self-assessment of ability in English, using undefined terms such as "weak" or "excellent." Therefore, these findings do not give us as much information about language development as we would like from a TESOL perspective.

What Others Have Found

Bell (1995: 687) states that "most English as a second language (ESL) literacy teachers would agree that learners who are literate in their native language generally make better progress than those without native language literacy." However, the precise nature of this relationship is still not fully understood. It is not clear whether the relationship is correlational or causal. It is also unclear from the literature whether it is literacy per se or familiarity with being in a classroom that leads to the positive relationship usually found between L1 literacy and English literacy. Hornberger (1989: 282) cautions that the relationship between the first and other languages is so highly complex that it has been difficult to explore empirically. Therefore, research has tended to focus on the extent to which knowledge of one language transfers to another, as well as the extent to which knowledge of one language interferes with another.

A key principle in the field of bilingual education which is used to attempt to explain this relationship is based on the Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis proposed by Cummins (2000). This hypothesis holds that a child's achievement in a new language partly depends on his or her level of competence in the first language. Part of the Interdependence Hypothesis is the idea that there are two "thresholds" that bilingual children need to cross in their language development. If they can cross the first threshold, they will avoid the possible subtractive or negative effects of bilingualism. To cross this threshold, children need to have developed age appropriate competence in one of their languages. To cross the second threshold in order to experience the additive benefits of bilingualism, children need to have developed age-appropriate competence in *both* of their languages. A cautionary note needs to be added about minority children, such as those in this study. Skutnabb-Kangas (1979) found that minority children who receive *all* instruction in their L2 and *none* in their L1, can fail to achieve full competence in either L1 or L2, and also experience problems with their cognitive development.

There have been criticisms of the threshold theory for a number of reasons, principally that its terms are ambiguous, and that it has not been subjected to empirical testing. Also, the theory "fails to account for a child's cognitive learning strategies" (Baker, 2001: 179). Nevertheless, a particularly important role has been found for L1 *literacy* in a bilingual child's language development. Literacy skills acquired in a child's L1 are able to be transferred to an L2 (Cummins & Swain, 1989), even when the L2 "does not share the same writing features, grammar, graphic conventions or even the same type of writing conventions" (Arefi, 1997: iii).

Influential work in this area has found that the higher children's literacy in their L1, the higher their achievement in EAL (Collier 1995; Collier & Thomas, 1989). There is also considerable research on how children's writing in EAL develops (See Edelsky, 1986; Hudelson, 1987, 1988; Urzua, 1987).

It is particularly interesting to investigate instances of biliteracy where the two languages in question do not share a common script. Arefi (1997) conducted research with children of Iranian background in Sydney. Her findings suggested that students transferred linguistic and holistic skills to their L2, thereby suggesting that some Farsi language literacy skills are linked to English writing competence (p. 233). She did not find a similar correlation between technical skills in Farsi and English. Wakabayashi (2002) found that early schooling in Japanese was crucial in order for international school students in Japan to be proficient in Japanese (L1) and English (L2). Research with Hebrew-English bilingual children in Australia (de Courcy, 2006) has also found a positive relationship between literacy in the L1 and literacy in EAL.

Much of the literature deals with language learning by either sojourners, as with Arefi's group, or with immigrants. This paper, however, deals with refugees. In their discussion of refugee pupils in Great Britain, Menter, Cunningham and Sheibani (2000: 213) highlight the fact that refugee children are a highly diverse group, and list several factors that will impact on their development, namely:

- their experience of their home country (e.g., trauma caused by civil wars, atrocities, witnessing their parents' persecution);
- the length of disruption to their education prior to their departure;
- their mother tongue and its proximity to the language of the host country;
- their age when they arrived in the host country;
- their varying educational experiences (some cases may have been extremely repressive);
- the possible loss of their parents/carers;
- their experience of fleeing their home countries as unaccompanied children;
- their home culture and parent-child relationship;

- access to appropriate accommodation in the host country; and
- tension between some refugee communities

Research Questions

The questions addressed in this paper are:

1. How does literacy in the first language (L1) relate to achievement in the second?; and
2. What is the relationship between literacy in a second language (L2) and the acquisition of English as an additional language?

Although data were collected on many of these aspects of the refugee experience, this paper will concentrate on the language and educational issues outlined above, with a particular focus on the role of literacy in an L1 or L2 in the acquisition of English.

METHODS

Participants

The participants in this study are members of family groups who fled Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Refugees from the southern part of the Iraqi-Kuwait region have come in increasingly large numbers to settle in particular rural towns in southern Australia. The data were collected from refugees in one town, "Laketown," which is culturally diverse with an indigenous population of around 10 per cent. Overall, some 10 per cent of the population was born overseas, with the largest groups coming from Italy, Turkey, Macedonia, Greece and Albania.

The participants were largely Shi'a Muslim, but one family was Sabean, an older Christian religion that had existed in the area before the conquest of Islam. All had suffered persecution and discrimination, including the death or imprisonment of family members before they arrived, and had also endured considerable hardship en route to Australia. Many so-called 'boat people' had arrived illegally through people-smuggling operations in Indonesia, and had spent

time in detention centres before being allowed to join other family members in the wider community. Some had come straight from Iraq; others had spent years in refugee settlements in Iran, Syria or Jordan, often separated from other members of their immediate family. Often, the father had come to Australia first, and the rest of the family followed when they were able to.

Data Collection

Data were collected from this group in order to examine their language learning over several months, using not only measures of language development from a cognitive and general proficiency perspective, but also drawing on recent socially oriented perspectives which emphasise the importance of social context and opportunities (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). This research project aimed to record two interviews with each of the 39 community members in the study, six to eight months apart. Where possible, families in which children of primary school age, adolescents and at least one parent were involved in English language instruction were of particular interest. These families were either permanent residents of Australia or holders of 'temporary protection visas' which did not entitle them to social benefits or eventual access to Australian passports. The language development data for this paper come from the 26 community members (from eight families) with whom two interviews were recorded.

The interviews were conducted partly in English, partly with the assistance of an interpreter, and either at school or at home. In the English part of the interview, there was "free" conversation based on an interview protocol, and specific tasks (vocabulary and picture prompts, grammar, pronunciation and pragmatics) were administered. In English (or Arabic if necessary because of limited skills in English), attitudes, daily lives, feelings, language learning experiences, hopes and needs were discussed.

In order to judge attitudes and adjustment, a questionnaire was administered in one of the two interviews. Usually, the interviewer

read the questions aloud and asked the participant to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements, or else were not sure of their responses. These responses were then noted on the questionnaire by the interviewer. Sometimes this was done with the interpreter translating the questions and answers, but some participants were able to read the questionnaire themselves and write their answers on it. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix A. The first part of the questionnaire was adapted from that used by Waxman (2000) for his exploration of English proficiency and adjustment of refugees in Sydney, which dealt with social networks and access to media in different languages. The second part of the questionnaire was adapted from one used by Kim (1989) to investigate the personal, social and economic adaptation of new arrivals in Illinois. Only results from the first part of the questionnaire will be used in this paper, but the responses from all 39 participants are reported.

Data Analysis

At the end of the data collection period, a research assistant transcribed each interview in full. The NUD*ST qualitative data analysis program (QSR) was then used to perform a content analysis for the sociological information found in the interview data. The data for this paper were drawn from an analysis of the media use questionnaires and from those sections of the interviews that the author coded in relation to literacy and multilingualism. A summary of this information about each participant, as well as some other background information, is provided in Appendix B.

Part of the research question necessitated measuring language development. One of the measures chosen involved examining the interview data using a general proficiency measure, developed for students learning EAL in Australian schools. The ESL Bandscales (McKay, 1993) were used to look at the language performance at Time 1 and Time 2 of the participants for whom there were two interviews.

For the general proficiency rating, two of the researchers were provided with anonymous, randomised samples of language use, taken from the "free conversation" and "picture tasks" sections of the interviews with the participants. The two researchers rated independently, and then met to moderate their ratings and reach consensus. The levels of the ESL Bandscales that were used for the teenagers and adults were Secondary Speaking levels 1-4. One adult female was the only person to reach level 5. For the primary school children, we used the Middle and Upper Primary Speaking levels 1 to 4 (MP/UP S 1-4).

While there has been no direct testing of the claims that the intervals for these scales are identical, the broad theory that underpins the scales is the same for both and the indicators used are similar. All the participants have been ranked, based on their agreed rating at time 2.

The results relating to uses of print and audio-visual media in L1 and L2 for the group as a whole will be presented first, followed by the results of the language proficiency assessment. An explanation of the proficiency data will then be attempted, using data obtained from the individual interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaire Results

The first part of the questionnaire examined the use of various media by the participants. Here, the responses of the Laketown group as a whole are compared with those of Waxman's Sydney respondents, in order to emphasise the difference between the rural and metropolitan contexts. Furthermore, the data potentially relate to literacy in both L1s and L2s. Several participants do not read in Arabic, for example, because they are not able to.

The first question asked, "How often do you read English newspapers?" For this and the other three questions about media, participants were given the following response options: Never,

rarely, once a month, once a fortnight, once a week, twice a week, three times a week, four times a week, and almost every day. The results are presented in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1

Reading of English Newspapers

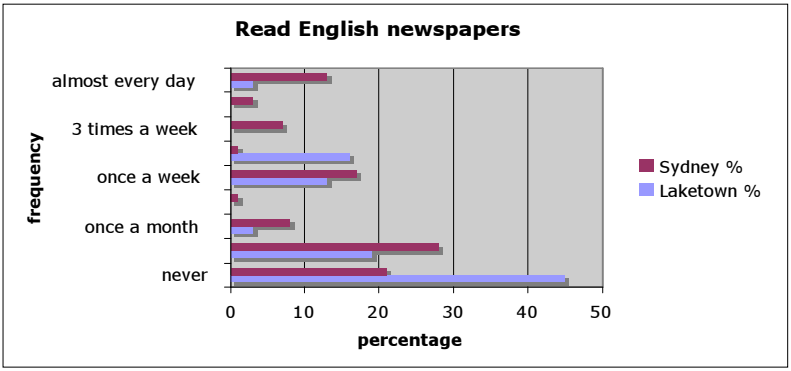
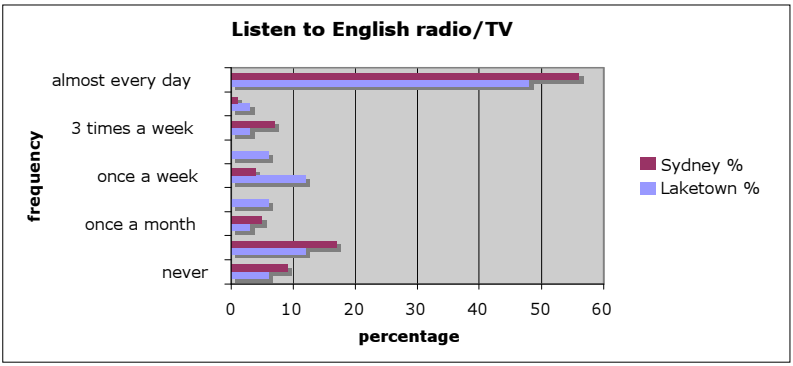


Figure 1 shows that very few of the Laketown respondents read an English language newspaper more than once a week. This compares with 12 percent of the Sydney respondents who report reading an English newspaper daily. Forty-five percent state that they *never* read a newspaper, compared with only 21 percent in Sydney. Also, several participants reported that the newspaper they read was the local free paper. Some also included junk mail in the category of newspapers.

The second question asked, "How often do you listen to English language news programs on radio or TV?" The results are shown in Figure 2. Figure 2 shows that the responses of the two groups are very similar. Access to mainstream audio-visual media is probably similar in both settings. Because of the interview format, the Laketown participants were able to indicate that they usually accessed TV rather than radio, which they found more challenging, and several gave details of their favourite programs.

FIGURE 2

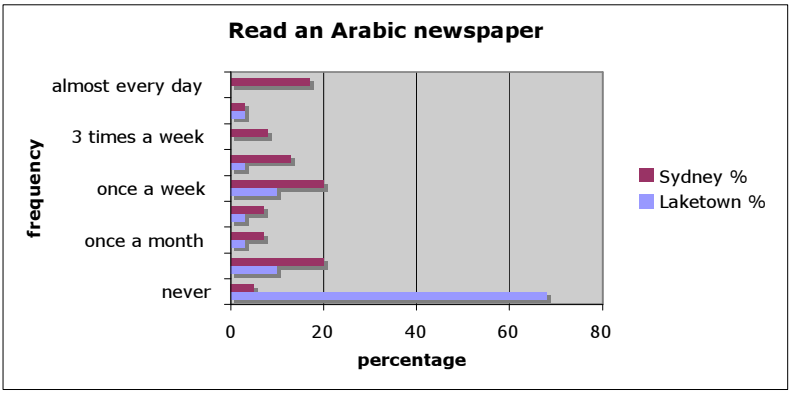
Listening to English Radio or TV



The next question asked, "How often do you read an Arabic language newspaper?". The results are presented in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3

Reading of Arabic Newspapers

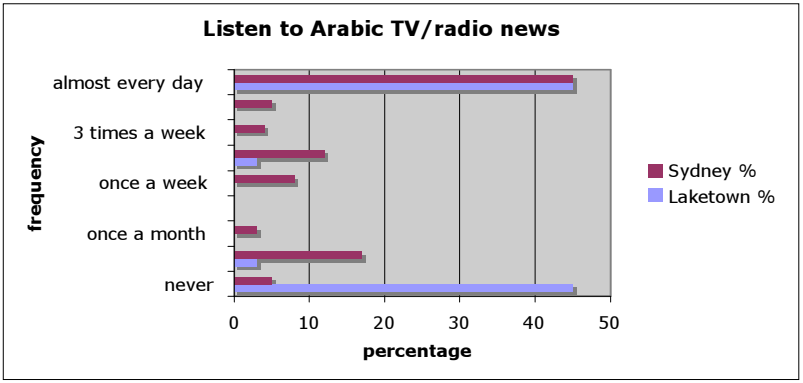


The results for this question indicate that reading in Arabic (outside the practice of reading aloud from the Koran) is not part of the daily lives of members of the Laketown community. Nearly 70 percent of the participants indicated that they never read an Arabic newspaper, compared with only 3 percent of the Sydney respondents. One possible reason for this difference is that Arabic newspapers are not as accessible in rural areas as they are in metropolitan areas. In Laketown, the papers are only delivered once a week, and can only be read or bought at the *halal* butcher's shop.

Different results for Laketown and Sydney were also found on the final question of this part of the questionnaire, "How often do you listen to Arabic language news programs on radio or TV?" These results are shown in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4

Listening to Arabic TV/Radio News



Access to cable television or satellite is a clear divider of the community in Laketown. The 45 percent of respondents who watch Arabic language news every day, have cable; those without cable TV report that they never watch it. The few respondents who watch it only sometimes, do so when visiting others' houses. This is very different from the spread of responses from the Sydney respondents,

where, again, 45 percent watch cable TV every day, with only 5 percent never watching it. Without cable TV, the only Arabic language programs on TV in Laketown are the few that are shown on SBS. Furthermore, there is not a wide range of Arabic language videos available in the community.

The next analysis aimed to show how often the participants accessed the various media, examining potential differences between age groups and genders. The frequency options from the questionnaire were assigned a number from 1 to 9, with "never" being assigned 1 and "almost every day" being assigned 9. A mean score for each question was then calculated for the group as a whole, for the adult women, the adult men, the school-aged girls and the school-aged boys. The results of this analysis are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

TABLE 1

Access to Media by the Whole Group, Women and Men

	whole group	women	men
English newspapers?	2.61 < once a month	2.77 < once a month	4.00 Once a fortnight
English radio/TV news?	6.51 > twice weekly	6.66 > twice weekly	7.25 > 3 x a week
Arabic newspaper?	1.96 rarely	1.22 never	4.25 Once a month
Arabic radio/TV news?	5.03 once a week	4.55 < once a week	5.00 once a week

TABLE 2

Access to Media by Girls and Boys

	girls	boys
English newspapers?	2.40	2.00
	rarely	rarely
English radio/TV news?	5.66	7.75
	once or twice a week	almost daily
Arabic newspaper?	2.22	1.62
	rarely	rarely
Arabic radio/TV news?	5.55	5.62
	once or twice a week	once or twice a week

A "translation" into words of the calculated mean is provided. Thus, for example, 2.61 was the mean of responses for the whole group to the question "How often do you read English newspapers?" A score of 2 would equate with "rarely" and a score of 3 with "once a month," so the score of 2.61 has been expressed as "less than once a month" in Tables 1 and 2.

The data in this summary table indicate that the adult males appeared to be the most serious users of media in English and Arabic, reporting that they watched the news on SBS, WIN or Channel 10. The boys accessed English TV even more often than their fathers, but, rather than saying they watched the news, they expressed a liking for cartoons, especially, *The Simpsons*. The girls, in contrast, tended to watch TV programs or videos in Arabic rather than in English. This could, however, be an issue related to the cultural suitability of content as much as the language. The adult women had the lowest use of the media. This is not surprising in light of the large number of home duties many of them had to

perform. We will now turn to examination of the data on language development.

Language Development

As described above, Middle/Upper Primary and Secondary Speaking levels 1 to 4 of the ESL Bandscales were used to rate samples of the participants' transcripts. Level 1 is 'Beginning English' where learners are drawing on L1 and L2 literacy and knowledge of the world. Learners use mainly non-verbal gestures or single words and may have some learned courtesy formulae. They may use an L1 speaker or a dictionary to help find key words. At Level 2 learners are becoming familiar with English, and orientation to learning through English. Predictable face-to-face interactions are achievable but they are reliant on attentive and supportive listeners. Their speech draws heavily on L1 pronunciation, utterances are fragmented and they have a very basic vocabulary. Level 3 is described as 'Post-beginning English.' Learners can participate in contextualised interactions beyond immediate needs. They can ask for help and repetition and use basic cohesive features, but unreliably. They can use more common tense features and some question forms. Level 4 learners are becoming confident in English and in learning through English. They participate in expanded interactions with a supportive interlocutor. Most success is experienced in short, spontaneous utterances on familiar topics. There is a tentative use of polite request forms.

As noted by McKay (1993, p. A5), although proficiency scales do provide "an initial consensus" and "an overview of … ESL proficiency development across learners," they are not always able to capture fine differences between individuals' abilities. She cautions that the terms are by their nature vague and imprecise, having more the status of hypotheses to be tested.

The ranking of all the participants, plus some background information about each person, is found in Appendix B. On examining this ranking according to proficiency, it was difficult to find a

pattern in the data that would explain the apparent variability. An examination was then made of the information on various socio-cultural factors (as defined by Norton, 2006), which had been collected about the participants. A brief introduction to each of the participants with the highest proficiency will be provided here.

Participant number 26 from Family Q (*26Q*) obtained the highest score on the English speaking proficiency measures (i.e., Secondary 5). She had been a biology lecturer in Iraq, was 33 years old and had been in Australia for about seven months at the time of the study. Her husband had come to Australia three years previously, and she and her daughter had spent a year in Syria, while waiting for their family reunion visas to Australia to be approved. *26Q* completed her college study in Iraq in English. She had started teaching Arabic to the children of the Laketown community in Saturday school because "I don't let them to forget the Arabic language." She was also training to be an interpreter. She said her two problems in reading English were "the silent letters and the different meaning". She used to like to read poetry in Arabic. She felt that, "the grammar … of the Arabic language is very, very important."

The second highest proficiency level (i.e., Secondary 4) was reached by three members of *Family S*. The members of this family had been in the rural community for one year, having spent a year in Sydney. They had come to Australia to join the remaining members of the father's family, who were already settled in Sydney. The parents felt that their children were speaking too much Arabic in Sydney, so they moved to the rural community to give the children a better chance of learning English. The father had been a jeweller in Iraq, as had his brothers, and, as relatively well-off non-Muslims, the families had suffered persecution, torture and execution of some members while in Iraq. The family had spent two and a half years in transit in Jordan, while waiting for their Australian visas. They took out Australian citizenship soon after we completed our interviews.

02S, the 15 year old boy, had started using an English name instead of his Arabic name and told us "I'm going to be Aussie.

That's my country." *01S*, the 17 year old girl seemed more conflicted about her identity, and felt she was an Arabic girl, but not Muslim, living in an Arabic community, but in an English speaking country. Their 13-year-old brother, who was in primary school, had tried to adopt the same English name as his older brother, but was soundly discouraged from adopting the same name as his brother, and was still using his Arabic name.

The next highest-ranked participant, who was on the borderline between S3+ and S4, was participant 20, from family N (*20N*). *20N* was 39 years old, and had been in the community for only four months. He had been a student in Iraq before his family escaped to Iran, and had been working in a cake decorating factory in Melbourne before moving to the country.

Participant 07 from family R (*07R*), who reached S3+, was 14 years old, and a high school student. His father had kept a grocery store in Iraq, and obtained his electrician's certificate, but, after fleeing to Iran, had, like many of the fathers in our study, been a religious student there. *07R* had undertaken all his schooling in Iran, in Farsi, his second language. It should be noted that those participants who had fled to Iran typically came to Australia via an overland route through Afghanistan, then to Indonesia, then to Australia by boat. They usually spent some time in one of the northern Australian detention centres before making their way to the peace and work opportunities of the rural community.

An examination of the information about all 26 participants, as well as their rankings, as shown in Appendix B, reveals that age on arrival in Australia did not seem to be associated with higher proficiency for this group. Adults, teenagers and primary school children were dispersed across the entire list. It is important to note that, because several of the participants had arrived without papers, their exact age was not always known. The ages of the participants, ranked from highest to lowest proficiency levels, were as follows:

33, 17, 15, 13, 39, 14, 9, 15, 12, 16, 13, 16, 19, 11, 30, 12, Adult, 40, 15, 40, 11, 45, 19, 40?, 19, 46, 10.

These data reveal no clustering of age groups together with proficiency levels. Males and females also appear to be randomly spread across the list in Appendix B, so proficiency cannot be simply related to gender, any more than it can to age. The predictor variable might have been educational setting, but again, there was no evident link between attending school, TAFE, or receiving no instruction at all. The complex issues related to educational settings and the teenagers in this study have been discussed in previous papers (Nicholas, Yates, & de Courcy, 2004; de Courcy, Yates & Nicholas, 2004), where teenagers' progress in English was explored. The assumption that girls who were educated with the older women in the community in TAFE classes would not make as much progress as those in the high school, was not borne out by the data.

Many of the participants had experienced interrupted or no schooling before coming to Australia. Therefore, in view of the literature on the effect of literacy in an L1 on L2 acquisition, this factor was examined using the qualitative data to see if literacy in the L1 was related to higher proficiency in English.

The high literacy of participant *26Q*, who reached the highest proficiency level, has already been described above. Participant *20N*, who was also placed in the higher proficiency group, is highly literate and multilingual. He speaks Farsi, Kurdish, Indonesian and English as well as Arabic. He claimed "very well I can speak; not just 'Hi how are you?'" He had been a secondary student in Iraq before the family escaped to Iran.

However, in contrast, one of the other highly ranked learners, *02S*, could "no write, no read in Arabic. Just speak." Then there was participant *07R*, who was schooled in Iran, and learned to read and write in "Iranic." He said he could read and write Farsi ("Iranic") well, but could not read or write in Arabic "very good." His use of Arabic seemed to be limited to the reading aloud of the Koran with his father. He ranked his language proficiency as highest in Farsi, then Arabic, then English. If the assumption about the importance of

L1 literacy had been correct, one would not have expected the above mentioned two students to perform as well in their L2 as they did.

According to Appendix B, those who ranked highly in spoken English were not all literate in Arabic. Of the ten participants who reached a spoken proficiency of S3 or higher, six (*01S*, *02S*, *03S*, *07R*, *09R* and *32Z*) were not literate in Arabic. However, as noted above, and in Appendix B, many participants were schooled only in Iran, in Farsi, and not in Iraq, in Arabic. Several participants had experienced interruptions to their schooling, or indeed had no experience of schooling at all. Perhaps literacy in *any* language acquired prior to English might have accounted for participants reaching S3 or higher, but again, in this group, there was the same degree of variability when this factor was examined as with all the others discussed thus far. Interrupted schooling, and not being literate in one's L1, seemed not to have as strong a negative effect as predicted by the literature.

Finally, a possible explanation emerged from a further examination of the qualitative data. Those who reached the highest proficiency in English had a mother who was literate in Arabic. On examining the ranking in Appendix B, a clear difference can be seen between participants who had a literate mother, and those who did not. To further test these results, a Fisher's exact test was conducted, with the four cells of the table being: 'proficiency equal to or greater than three,' 'proficiency less than three,' 'having a literate mother,' and 'having a mother who was not literate.' A Chi squared test was deemed inappropriate because of the small numbers of participants. There were some participants for whom data on their mother's literacy was not available. In these cases, the cells were left blank. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 3 below.

TABLE 3

Tabulated Statistics: Proficiency >=3 and Maternal Literacy

Proficiency	Literate mother	Non-literate mother	Missing	All
>/=3	9	0	1	9
	100%	0%	*	100%
<3	4	5	7	9
	44.44%	55.56%	*	100%
All	13	5	*	18
	72.22%	27.78%	*	100%

***Note*:** Fisher's exact test: P-Value = 0.0294118

The results of the Fisher's exact test indicate that of the nine participants in the higher proficiency cell, all had a literate mother. Of those in the lower category, fewer than half had a mother who was educated. The mother's proficiency in English could be quite low, and often was, but if she was literate in Arabic, her children reached a higher level of proficiency in English, with a score on average almost one more than for those without such a family background.

Future studies have been planned to investigate this phenomenon in greater depth, but the following extract from a conversation with the primary school-aged girl, *26Q*, are indicative of the types of interactions which occurred between a child and a literate mother:

Interviewer: Do you go to the library and borrow books?
26Q: Yes
Interviewer: And take them home to read them?
26Q: (nods)
Interviewer: Do you read them to your mum or your dad?
26Q: Take books every day [mmm] I to Mum [mmm] yes.

Interviewer: And is it fun to read to your mum?
26Q: Yes
Interviewer: Does she like your reading?
26Q: Yes
Interviewer: Does she ask you questions?
26Q: Yes
Interviewer: What sorts of questions does she ask you?
26Q: Don't know
Interviewer: Does she ask you in Arabic or in English?
26Q: In Arabic
Interviewer: In Arabic, that's good. So you can talk about the books in Arabic?
26Q: Yes

CONCLUSION

The results indicate a strong role for parental influence in L2 learning, which has also been borne out in other studies. For example, Arefi (1997) studied the writing in English and Farsi of Iranian children in Sydney primary schools. She used linguistic (number of words and complex sentences), holistic (well-structured and organised) and technical measures (spelling, grammatical correctness and punctuation) to assess the children's writing, and also attitudinal and motivational questionnaires. She found that parental influence on children's proficiency in written English was not as significant as she would have expected. Parental influence was not important in the linguistic and holistic measures she used, but only on the technical measures. She concluded that this could imply that students who were proficient in technical skills were more likely to have parents who were involved directly with their English writing skills.

Li Wei (2000) conducted a study into the acquisition of Chinese by children of Chinese immigrants in Tyneside, England. The children had largely shifted to using English as their main language, but were studying Chinese in Saturday school. He used a self-developed, fairly broad 4-point scale, to measure his subjects' profi-

ciency in Chinese. He found that there was a strong and unexpected correlation between parents' proficiency in *English* and their children's proficiency in Chinese. He hypothesised that parents' proficiency in English meant that they were closer and more active participants in their children's life worlds, and thus the children felt more motivated to succeed in their parents' language, Chinese.

Why would having a literate mother be such an important predictor of success in acquiring English as a second language? Note that the mother does not need to be literate in *English*, even though some mothers are. A study by Guardado of Spanish-English bilinguals in Vancouver found a role for the "father tongue" in language maintenance. However, as noted by Guardado (2006, p. 92), mothers are usually credited with having a critical role in passing on the L1 to children, as they have traditionally been the principal caregivers, and also the ones who more commonly nurture children and socialize them into language use.

Several of the families where Arabic language and literacy are maintained are one-parent families. Guardado (2006) cites a number of studies where minority language families with two parents were not able to pass on their language to their children, the classic reference being Wong Fillmore's 1991 study, while in his study some one-parent families maintained the L1. Guardado (2006: 65) attributes this to the use of the L1 for "bonding and creating intimate spaces".

Perhaps it is the modelling of literate behaviours that is important. In the qualitative data from the interviews conducted in this study, several of the children reported their practice of reading the Koran with their Mother. Does the mother's valuing of educational experiences (and knowledge of how to "do school" in the broadest sense, help her children to succeed in school in English? Corson states that "exposure to the culture of literacy gives us the necessary foundations for vocabulary development within meaning systems that derive from it" (1997: 682).

Even where children have English as the language of home *and* school, they "cannot just transfer the spoken language they have developed in their homes and communities to the school context" (Schleppegrell, 2004: 24). Greater success is achieved by children from homes where they have engaged in activities that mimic or model those they will encounter in school. Heath's 1983 book, *Ways with words*, is the classic reference on these home-school differences.

It is possible that the mother's use of literacy in Arabic may have the benefit of helping her children to maintain and develop their competence in their L1, thus enabling them to cross Cummins' second threshold, that of age-appropriate competence in both languages. This finding is particularly important in a country where the government issues pronouncements urging Muslim immigrants to learn to speak English. Australian Prime Minister John Howard says: "Fully integrating means accepting Australian values, it means learning as rapidly as you can the English language if you don't already speak it" (Kerbaj, 2006). However, as noted by Woodlock (2006), this is not easy in rural communities like Laketown where, unlike Sydney, there is no intensive language centre and little support for EAL children in mainstream schools.

It can happen that immigrant families make the shift to English in the home in the hope that this will help their children to succeed at school, or because it is the children's preferred language (as in Li Wei's study), but this paper has demonstrated the importance of maintaining not just oral competence in the family's L1, but also literacy.

THE AUTHOR

Michele de Courcy is Senior Lecturer and Coordinator of the post-graduate programs in TESOL at the University of Melbourne. Her current research interests are in the acquisition of English as an additional language, especially children's experiences of literacy in two languages, and in the education or formation of second language educators.

REFERENCES

Arefi, M. (1997). *The relationship between first and second language writing skills for Iranian students in Sydney: an application of the interdependence hypothesis*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, the University of Western Sydney, Australia.

Baker, C. (2001). *Foundations of bilingual education and biling-ualism (3rdEd.)*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Bell, J. (1995). The relationship between L1 and L2 literacy: Some complicating factors. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29, 687–704.

Chiswick, B., Lee, Y. L., & Miller, P. (2002). *Family matters: The role of the family in immigrants' destination language acquisition*. Discussion paper 02.06, Department of Economics, The University of Western Australia. http://www.ecom.uwa.edu.au/research/discussion_papersworking_documents. Accessed 14/9/06.

Collier, V. P. (1995). Acquiring a second language for school. *Directions in Language & Education*, 1 (4), 1–15. Retrieved August 3, 2006 from http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/directions/04.htm.

Collier, V.P. & Thomas, W.P. (1989). How quickly can immigrants become proficient in school English? *Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students*, 5, 26–38.

Corson, D. (1997). The learning and use of academic English words. *Language Learning*, 47, 671-718.

Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Cummins, J. & Swain, M. (1989). *Bilingualism in education*. London: Longman.

de Courcy, M. C. (2006). The influence of bilingual children's experiences of literacy in Hebrew on their acquisition of English

as a Second Language. *Babel: Journal of the AFMLTA*, 41(2), 1-8, 38.

de Courcy, M, Yates, L., & Nicholas, H. (2004). *The cognitive and the social in the second language use/development of English by Iraqi Arabic speakers in a regional centre in Victoria*. Paper presented at the conference of the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia, University of South Australia, July 15-17, 2004.

Edelsky, C. (1986). Writing in a bilingual program: The relation of L1 and L2 texts. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16, 211–228.

Guardado, M. (2006). Engaging language and cultural spaces: Latin American parents' reflections on language loss and maintenance in Vancouver. *The Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 9, 51-72.

Heath, S. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univer-sity Press.

Hornberger, N.H. (1989). Continua of biliteracy. *Review of Educational Research*, 59, 271–296.

Hudelson, S. (1987). The role of native language literacy in the education of language minority children. *Language Arts*, 64, 827–841.

Hudelson, S. (1988). *Children's writing in ESL. ERIC Digest*. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED303046. Retrieved January 15, 1999 from http://www.ericae.net/edo/ED303046.htm.

Kerbaj, R. (2006). *Howard stands by Muslim integration*. The Australian [01sep06] http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/. Accessed 4/9/06.

Kim, Y. Y. (1989). Personal, social and economic adaptation: 1975-1979 arrivals in Illinois. In D. W. Haines (Ed.), *Refugees as immi-*

grants: Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese in America (pp.86-104). Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Li Wei (2000). Extending schools: Bilingual development of Chinese children in Britain. In M. Datta (Ed.), *Bilinguality and literacy* (pp.176-189). London: Continuum.

McKay, P. (1993). *ESL development: Language and literacy in schools*. Canberra: NLLIA.

Marston, G. (2003). *Temporary protection, permanent uncertainty: The experience of refugees living on temporary protection visas*. Research report. RMIT University, Melbourne: Centre for Applied Social Research.

Menter, I., Cunningham, P., & Sheibani, A. (2000). Safe at last? Refugee children in primary schools. In M. Datta (Ed.), *Bilinguality and literacy* (pp.209-227). London: Continuum.

Nicholas, H., Yates, L., & de Courcy, M. (2004). *Iraqi families learning English: social and cognitive factors*. Paper presented at the conference of the American Association of Applied Linguistics, Portland, Oregon, USA, May 4, 2004.

Norton, B. (2006). Identity as a sociocultural construct in second language education. In K. Cadman & K. O'Reagan (Eds.), *Tales out of school: Identity and English language teaching* (pp.22-33). Journal of ACTA (Australian Council of TESOL Associa-tions) TESOL in Context 2006, Series S: Special Edition 2006.

Schleppegrell, M. (2004). *The language of schooling: A functional linguistics perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1979). *Language in the process of cultural assimilation and structural incorporation of linguistic minor-ities*. National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education. (Report No:ISBN: 0-005-X). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED181724).

Urzua, C. (1987). 'You stopped too soon': Second language children composing and revising. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21, 279–304.

Wakabayashi, T. (2002). Bilingualism as a future investment: The case of Japanese high school students at an international school in Japan. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 26, 632-658.

Waxman, P. (2000). The impact of English language proficiency on the adjustment of recently arrived Iraqi, Bosnian and Afghan refugees in Sydney. *Prospect: A Journal of Australian TESOL*, 15, 4-22.

Wong-Fillmore, L. (1991). When learning a second language means losing the first. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 6, 323-346.

Woodlock, R. (2006). What about the other language barrier? *The Sunday Age*, Extra p. 19, 10 September, 2006.

Zeungler, J. & Miller, E. (2006). Cognitive and sociocultural perspectives: Two parallel SLA worlds? *TESOL Quarterly*, 40, 35-58.

APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE

Please tick the correct column for you. (These questions adapted from Waxman, 2000)

How often do you read English newspapers?

Never	Rarely	Once a month	Once a fortnight	Once a week	Twice a week	3 times a week	4 times a week	Almost every day

How often do you listen to English language news programs on radio or TV?

Never	Rarely	Once a month	Once a fortnight	Once a week	Twice a week	3 times a week	4 times a week	Almost every day

How often do you read an Arabic language newspaper?

Never	Rarely	Once a month	Once a fortnight	Once a week	Twice a week	3 times a week	4 times a week	Almost every day

How often do you listen to Arabic language news programs on radio or TV?

Never	Rarely	Once a month	Once a fortnight	Once a week	Twice a week	3 times a week	4 times a week	Almost every day

Are refugees from your former home country among your closest friends in Shepparton?

Yes ☐ No ☐

How often do you contact your closest friends?

Daily	Twice weekly	Weekly	Twice monthly	Monthly

How many of your friends or close friends are from your former home country?

Less than 25%	25% to 50%	50% to 75%	75% to 100%

Please respond to the following statements by putting a tick in the correct box. (These questions adapted from Kim, 1989: 93)

"I feel awkward and out of place in Australia"

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know

"It is easy for me to make Australian friends."

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know

"The future looks very bright for me in Australia."

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know

"Many things my parents taught me in my home country are not useful in Australia."

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know

"As an individual, I can contribute something to Australian society."

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know

"It is difficult for me to understand the Australian way of life."

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know

"I feel like I belong in Australian society."

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know

"There is little I can do to improve my life in this country."

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know

"I feel that the Australians that I know like me."

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know

"I feel all alone in Australia."

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANTS ORDERED ACCORDING TO THE ESL BAND SCALE RATING

ESL rating	Code Number + family group	Age/type of school	Gender	Comments on educational experiences
S5 sec	26 Q	33	F	Was a biology lecturer in Iraq. Did her college study in Iraq in English. Is the Saturday school teacher and is training to be an interpreter. She can speak very articulately about her problems in reading English – silent letters and so on. She liked to read poetry in Arabic. She talks of the importance of teaching the grammar of Arabic to the children.
S4	01 S	17 HS	F	Only knows a little Arabic, but she can read Assyrian, her L1
S4	02 S	15 HS	M	"No write no read in Arabic. Just speak"
S4	03 S	13 PS	M	Can only speak Arabic. Can write name. Can't read it
S3+/4	20 N	39	M	Highly literate and multilingual. Speaks Farsi, Kurdish, Indonesian and English as well as Arabic. Was a secondary student in Iraq before the family escaped to Iran.
S3+	07 R	14 HS	M	Schooled in Iran. Learned to read and write in "Iranic". Can read and write it well. Reads and writes in Arabic "not very good". His use of Arabic seems to be mainly the reading of the Koran with his father. Says his proficiency is Farsi – Arabic – English in that order. See final lines of his interview re "Irani"-Arabic transfer easy, but English difficult.
S3	09 R	9 PS	M	Educated in Iran. Can't remember how to read and write in Arabic. Can a little bit in "Iranian".
S3	12 M	15 HS	M	Can read and write Arabic but left after yr 6 to go to Syria so there are some gaps. In grade 6 he was the "teacher" for the younger children. "Speak English is easy; writing hard"
S3	25 Q	12 PS	F	Did up to year 6 in Iraq, before the family

				fled to Syria. She learnt to read and write in Arabic. She could not go to school in Syria. She still writes letters in Arabic to her girlfriends back in Iraq. She reads stories and the Koran in Arabic, but she says her Koran reading is "not good". She is doing Saturday school in Arabic. Rapid growth in English t1-t2
S3	32 Z	16 TAFE	F	Schooled to Yr 8 in Iran. Writes to friends in Iran. She only knows how to read the Koran in Arabic. Can she write in Arabic? Check. Not sure.
S2-3	22 B	13 TAFE	F	Schooled only in Iran for a few years
S2-3	35 G	16 TAFE	F	Writes "small stories" in Arabic. Has never attended school. Kuwait->Iraq->Jordan
S2+-3-	34 G	19 TAFE	F	Kuwait->Iraq->Jordan
S2+	08 R	11 PS	M	Born in Iran. Learned to read and write in Farsi. "English, Arabic writing is no good. Just … Irani". Can't read and write in Arabic at all. Proficiency went down t1-t2?
S2+	10 R	30	F	Schooled in Iraq. Did 5 yrs English at school. Father was high school teacher
S2+	11 M	12 PS	M	Reads stories in Arabic. "It's easy to read and write in Arabic". Reads English with a bilingual dictionary.
S2	04 S	Adult	F	Did to Yr 10 in commercial school in Iraq.
S2	16 M	40	F	Is literate in Arabic. Keeps a wordlist in Arabic and English. She uses a bilingual dictionary to help her during our interview.
S2	21 B	15 TAFE	F	Schooled to Yr 3 in Iraq. Then in Iran. Reads an Arabic newspaper once per week
S2	27 Q	40	M	University educated in Iraq in Arabic & English. Reads books in Arabic. Has become de-skilled. He came out first and his wife and daughter followed. Proficiency decreased t1 – t2
S2	31 Z	11 PS	F	Can write in Arabic. Says it's hard. Was at school in Iran and learned to write Farsi there. Says "mm" about reading and writing in Arabic. She reads the Koran with her Mother and says it is easy to read (aloud). She is more literate in L2 but than in L1.

				Proficiency decreased t1-t2
S2	33 Z	45	F	Reads Arabic "official" magazines and writes letters in Arabic. She spent 21 years in Iran, where she was a radio announcer/news reader
S2-	14 M	19 HS	M	Schooling was very interrupted by the years in Syria, where the boys could not go to school. I think he was working as a car mechanic in Iraq to support the younger boys.
S2-	37 G	40?	F	Has not been to school. Cannot read or write in Arabic. Proficiency decreased t1-t2
S1+-2	15 M	46	M	9 years at school in Iraq. Final job in Iraq was land seller. Spent many years driving trucks.
S1-2	19 N	10 PS	M	Writes in English. Sometimes in Arabic. He showed me how he can write his name. Is going to Saturday school, so, he is acquiring L1 literacy later than L2.