The importance of regular visits to the home country in maintaining and transmitting the Arabic language to Arabic speakers in Toowoomba

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the significant impact of regular visits to the home country on the intergenerational maintenance and transmission of the Arabic language within the Arabic-speaking community in the regional Queensland city of Toowoomba, Australia. A qualitative approach was employed to explore the language maintenance phenomenon by engaging in the everyday life of Arabic speakers. Data was gathered through participant observations and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 adults who were selected using a mixed purposeful sampling strategy. The study's findings revealed that visiting the country of origin is seen to be the most effective factor for the maintenance of the Arabic language and culture among Arabic speakers. Parents are aware of the importance of taking their children to visit their home country to immerse them in the heritage culture and connect them with their relatives. The findings of this study are intended to expand knowledge and theories of language maintenance.

Keywords: Arabic; Heritage Culture; Intergenerational; Language Maintenance; Toowoomba.

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1. Introduction

The preservation of minority languages has always been a difficult challenge for immigrants who chose to settle in the host country (Belinskaya et al., 2020). It is extremely hard for minority language speakers to survive the linguistic and cultural power of the dominant language. In this inquiry, Arabic speakers in Australia face the same challenges as many other immigrants since they live in an English-speaking environment. These challenges include not only maintaining the heritage language but also preserving the heritage culture and identity as core values.

A community language's preservation is not considered complete until it reaches and benefits the next generation. Fishman (2000) contended that the continuance and transmission of the intergenerational mother tongue to the next generation is the responsibility of the family and the community. Hence, the lack of intergenerational language maintenance and transmission may cause language shifts or even language death because the language is no longer passed on through generations (Abdelhadi, 2016).

Due to the absence of intergenerational maintenance and transmission of this language, second-generation children tend to adopt the host country's language at the expense of their parent's native language. It is worth noting that the term "second-generation children" in this study refers to both children who were born overseas and those born in Australia (Abdelhadi, 2016).

To maintain the heritage language, some parents take their second-generation children to visit their home country during vacations (Kang, 2012; Nesteruk, 2010) to provide them with a suitable environment where they can be able to connect with their relatives and friends. In addition, children will have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the heritage culture and form their own identities.

1.1. Literature review

A number of studies have investigated the impact of frequent visits to the home country concerning the maintenance of minority languages (Clyne & Kipp, 1999; Holmes, 2013; Namei, 2009; Othman, 2011; Pauwels, 2005). Overseas visits to the home country are not seen as the single element in maintaining the Arabic language, but rather they're complementary to a variety of diverse factors such as political, social, economic, and institutional factors. These regular visits allow second-generation children to communicate and interact with their relatives while also allowing them to enhance their linguistic competence. Besides, the retention of the community language results in the preservation of culture, identity, and religion (Baker, 2011), but the loss of a language may lead to the loss of culture, identity, and religion (Cavallaro, 2005).

Othman (2011) researched Arabic language maintenance among Arabic speakers in Manchester. He found that regular visits to the home countries foster the development of the heritage language as well as preserve the identity and heritage culture. The constant interaction with relatives and friends in the homeland helped to pass on the parents' language to the children of the second generation.

 Regular travels to the motherland are one of the most effective factors for the conservation of the heritage language, according to Holmes's (2013) research about the Greek community in Wellington, New Zealand. He also mentioned the Greeks' commitment and attachment to their homeland, particularly the Greek girls who prefer to marry local Greek husbands during their vacations.

 Pauwels (2005) conducted an inquiry into the maintenance of community languages in Australia. She claimed that individual and family visits to the home country provide an excellent opportunity for children to immerse themselves in the community language, interact with their peers, and develop their Greek proficiency.

Qawar (2014) investigated the Arabic language maintenance among Quebec's Arabic-speaking community. She discovered that, in addition to the usage of English and French in various domains, the Arabic language has been preserved in numerous domains. Her findings also revealed that regular

visits to the homeland have aided in the effective maintenance and transmission of Arabic through generations.

In a similar vein, Namei (2012) researched language maintenance and shift among Iranians in Sweden, arguing that overseas visits are crucial in maintaining the heritage language. He discovered that frequent visits helped the students develop their language skills, particularly reading and writing so that they could converse with their relatives and friends in the Persian language.

There is a consensus among many researchers that regular visits to the home countries foster the development of the heritage language and assure the preservation of the identity and heritage culture. The connection and interaction with relatives and friends in the homeland on regular basis contributed to the transmission of the parents' language and culture to the second-generation children.

1.2. Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the significant role of regular visits to the home country among Arabic speakers in the regional Queensland city of Toowoomba, Australia.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

The concept of saturation was used to determine the sample size in this qualitative study. The researcher was looking for factors that might contribute to the maintenance of the Arabic language within the Arabic-speaking community in Toowoomba. The sample included 20 participants who were drawn purposefully from the community membership list at the mosque (Abdelhadi, 2018). To participate in this study, 20 Arabic speakers were recruited from the mosque in the regional city of Toowoomba, Australia, using a mixed purposeful sampling technique.

First, the researcher used a purposive sampling technique to select 12 adult male participants from the mosque's membership list. This list includes approximately 1,000 adult males who are members of the mosque and pay annual membership fees. The Arabic speakers represent the majority at the mosque (Abdelhadi, 2018).

The selection criteria for participation were: (1) adult first-generation Arabic native speaker, (2) Arab in ethnicity, (3) married with at least one child. Secondly, eight female participants were recruited by a female research assistant using a snowballing technique. In this technique, each participant who voluntarily agreed to participate in this study was asked to identify other participants who met the above-mentioned selection criteria and were willing to participate (Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

The snowballing technique was used because it was difficult to find female participants. After all, they did not regularly attend the mosque. There were also other constraints, such as religious and cultural concerns among Arabic speakers. Additionally, there were other constraints such as religious and cultural concerns among Arabic speakers. Because of that, the researcher was obliged to appoint a female research assistant to recruit, interview and observe female participants (Abdelhadi, 2018).

2.2. Ethical considerations

Approval for this research was gained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. All ethical concerns about all aspects of this research were clearly explained to the participants verbally, and they were also included in the participant information sheet as well as in the consent form (Abdelhadi, 2017). Participants in this study were informed that their contribution was entirely voluntary and they had the right to withdraw at any time during the study without any consequences. Participants were informed that their identities would be protected by providing a pseudonym rather than their real names (Abdelhadi, 2018).
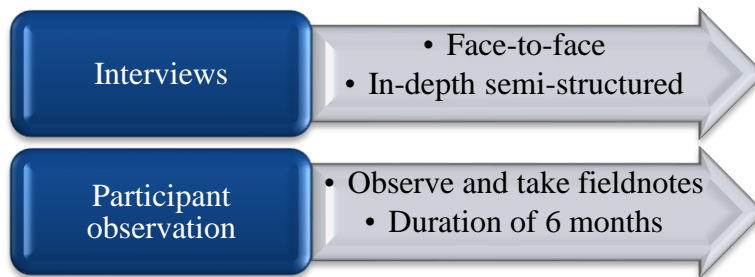
2.3. Data collection instruments

Firstly, to answer the research questions, data were first gathered using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the 20 Arabic speakers who met the sample selection criteria (Abdelhadi, 2018). Secondly, to gain a better understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences, data were gathered through observation, in which the researcher observes and takes field notes on the participants' interactions.

The combination of observation and interviews contribute effectively to forming a holistic perception of the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 2009). Figure 1 explains the data collection procedures implemented in this study.

Figure 1

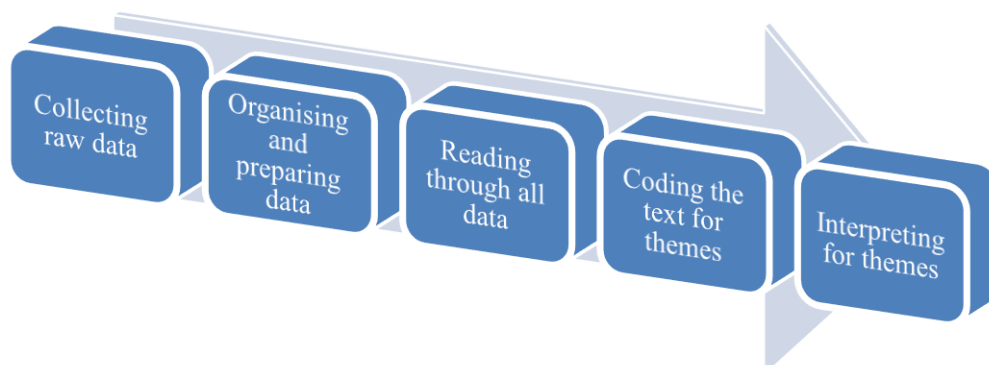*Data Collection Procedures*

2.4. Data analysis procedures

In the current study, the researcher followed the same steps for data analysis as outlined in Creswell's (2014) plan of analysis. This strategy entails several steps: (1) organizing and preparing data for analysis; (2) reading through all gathered information to get a general sense of it; (3) coding the data by detecting text segments and labeling them; (4) representing the data in tables or charts to convey information about each participant; and (5) making an interpretation of the data and comparing the findings with information found in the literature (Creswell, 2014).

The researcher found this plan to be very comprehensive and an easy way to deal with a large amount of raw data gathered. In this study, a thematic analysis was used, which entailed going through all of the following steps: organizing, transcribing, and coding data to extract themes and sub-themes that would represent the study's findings (Abdelhadi, 2018). Figure 2 refers to the data analysis strategies implemented in this inquiry.

Figure 2

Data analyses strategies

Source: Adapted from Creswell (2014)

3. Results

3.1. Visiting relatives and friends in their home country

The need to visit relatives and friends in the home country was found to be one of the most important factors contributing effectively to the maintenance and transmission of the Arabic language to second-generation children, as the participants believed. Even those who had not yet had a chance to visit their home country regarded frequent travel to see extended family overseas as crucial, especially for the children to practice the Arabic language and learn about the culture. This theme emerged from the participants' descriptions, and it was derived from the following sub-themes: visiting relatives and friends; challenges to visiting the home country; emergency visits to the home country; and instability in the home country preventing visits. Table 1 summarizes the theme and its related sub-themes that emerged through data analysis.

Table 1
Visiting relatives and friends in the home country

THEME: VISITING RELATIVES & FRIENDS IN THE HOME COUNTRY			
SUB-THEME 1	**SUB-THEME 2**	**SUB-THEME 3**	**SUB-THEME 4**
Visiting relatives and friends	Challenges in visiting the home country	Emergency visits to the home country	Instability in the home country preventing regular visits

3.2. Sub-theme 1: Visits to family and friends in the home country

In response to the interview question: How often do you and your children visit your home country? Table 2 describes the participants' visits to their home countries to provide an Arabic environment for their children where they can practice their Arabic.

Table 2
Number and percentage (%) of participants' visits to their home country

SUB-THEME		Visiting the home country	
		Yes	**No**
Participants	n=12 Male	7 (35%)	5 (25%)
	n=8 Female	3 (15%)	5 (25%)

As Table 2 indicates, about half of the participants (seven males and three females) reported that they visited their home country, while the other half did not have the opportunity to go home for a holiday with their children. The following statements from the interviews reflect the participants' perspectives about home-country visits:

I have been here for five years in Australia. Yes. I went ah twice, two times, to Libya. Yeah, both of the times I went there. On the first visit, after two and a half years, I went ah for a normal visit to visit my family and see my relatives and friends. (S3M)

I went back to my home, but my kids never go back… Yeah, but next year, I am trying to take my family to see my family in Morocco. To practice Arabic, playing together, fun, when my kids are coming to Australia are happy, and they always want to go to visit family in Morocco. (S4M)

Ah, we do that often, yes, because we need to keep close to them and not be away from their country, from their culture. So, we visit them every three months, we go back, every four months, we spend two weeks, three weeks with our family to get in touch with their kids and with their relatives and their cousins and so on. (S8M)

I told you I came here in 2008, and I just went last Christmas to my family after four years here, so I stayed there two months and came back in February. (S13F)

The participants' comments made above expressed their motives for visiting their home country, which included enabling their children to stay for a couple of weeks or months to practice Arabic with their relatives. Regular visits to the home country foster their children's language competence through daily interactions with their relatives.

3.3. Sub-theme 2: Challenges in visiting the home country

On the other hand, some participants were not able to visit their home country with their children. They had their reasons for this, such as the long distance, the cost of traveling, and study commitments. The following statements from the interviews reflect the participants' views about the challenges that prevent them from visiting their home country:

Because of money, because in Australia, you are working, and you get expensive bills to pay, you have to save, save, save money, it takes you longer, it is nothing easier. (S4M)

My children are only four years old, so I did not have a chance to take my children to Morocco yet. I hope it will happen very soon Inshaa' Allah [By God's willing]. I travel as I can the last trip that I have done, was about four years ago. So, it has been four years, and I am due for another one. (S5M)

Once every four years, yes, very far. Of course, I am taking my kids, but it is very hard because we are very far from the world. You know, traveling 14 hours with the kids, it is not easy. (S10M)

Well, since I came, I did not go back, I mean last year, because it was a long trip, very far from, and I prefer to complete the three semesters. (S11M)

These sorts of challenges were considered a big challenge for some participants. Also, these challenges may deprive second-generation children of having a chance to practice their Arabic language in the Arabic environment with relatives overseas.

3.4. Sub-theme 3: Emergency visits to the home country

One of the male participants mentioned that he went to visit his country when his mother-in-law passed away. He said:

The second one [visit] for a special occasion, a relative when my mother-in-law passed away, so we went to the funeral that is it. (S3M)

3.5. Sub-theme 4: Instability in the home country preventing regular visits

One of the female participants reported that the reason for not going to visit her relatives overseas was due to instability and war in her home country. She said:

We are planning for that, but because we do not know what is happening to our country. (S16F)

Due to these challenges, half of the participants in this study did not have the opportunity to travel to their home country with their children. As mentioned earlier, in the previous themes of communication with relatives and friends, these communications gave them a sort of relief by keeping them in constant contact with their home country.

Besides the data from the interviews, the researcher's observational notes at the mosque revealed that many Arabic speakers, including those who contributed to the interviews, were not around. Their absence could be felt especially during Friday prayers, which are mandatory and require everyone's presence. Some Arabic speakers go every year to their home countries to visit their relatives and come back either to finish their studies or return to their jobs. However, not all Arabic speakers have the chance to go on holiday with their children. The reasons are varied and include the financial cost of traveling with four or five kids, the long distance between Australia and the Arabic countries, and

sometimes the time issue because of their children being at school. Other reasons include political reasons; some Arabic speakers were under protection visas and were not allowed to travel at the time of the data collection. However, all the Arabic-speaking parents desired to take their children to visit their relatives in their home country and interact with other children and practice the language. Parents believe that frequent visits to the home country are seen as an essential way to expose children to the heritage language environment and prevent its loss.

4. Discussion

Research on language maintenance has found that regular visits to the home country contribute effectively to intergenerational language maintenance and transmission (Holmes, 2013; Namei, 2012; Pauwels, 2005). In the current study, regular overseas visits to the homeland had a great influence on the maintenance and transmission of the community language from one generation to another. All Arabic speakers noted the importance of frequent visits to their original country to enable their children to engage in the Arabic-speaking environment, learn the language, and be exposed to the Arabic culture. This finding is supported by Holmes (2013) and Pauwels (2005), who claimed that frequent family visits contributed to the maintenance of the community language and created an opportunity to use the language and keep it alive. Holmes (2013) gave an example of the commitment of the Greeks toward their home country. Pauwels (2005) argued that individual and family visits to the home country offer an exceptional opportunity for children to immerse themselves in the community language, communicate with their peers, and become proficient in Greek.

As reported in the data analysis, only 50% of the participants had the opportunity to visit their home country, and most of them were males (35%), with female visitors visiting home accounting for only 15%. The length of time that Arabic speakers spent with relatives overseas were between one month and four months. Additionally, the majority of Arabic-speaking parents preferred to take their children with them to their home country to be exposed to the language and culture. This finding is consistent with Namei's (2012) study about Iranians in Sweden. He found that 47% of Iranian parents had a chance to visit Iran occasionally, 7% traveled every year, and 46% did not go to their home country. The majority of the parents who had a chance to visit Iran took their children with them and stayed between one and three months.

As previously stated, participants in this study did not come from a single country, but rather from various Arab countries. All the Arab states are very far away from the host country, Australia, and it requires time, money, and effort to travel to see relatives and friends. As reported in the findings, half of the participants did not have a chance to visit their home country. Many reasons were given by the participants, including "long distance," "the expensive traveling costs," and "the study commitments." Furthermore, the findings revealed that men had a greater opportunity to travel than women. Only three females out of eight had the opportunity to visit their home country, accounting for only 15% of the participants in this study. This is due to cost and distance, as wives prefer to stay at home with their children, caring for them, while husbands travel for quick visits to see relatives and friends.

 Regardless of the distance and cost of travel, some participants were obliged to travel unexpectedly for family emergencies in their homeland, such as funerals, sicknesses, or accidents. In the Islamic Arab culture, it is a duty to be with family during difficult times to provide comfort. If a member of the community lost a relative overseas, the Imam of the mosque would usually announce the news to offer condolences and support. In this case, if a member of the community had lost one of their family members and decided to make an emergency visit to his/her family, the other members would collect the money to cover the cost of travel as a sense of group solidarity within the Muslim community.

Another factor preventing Arabic speakers from visiting relatives in other countries is the instability in their home country. Participants who came from Libya and Iraq reported the problem of safety in their countries, which prevented them from traveling. This security issue led all the people who came from these two states, including the participants, to settle permanently in the host country.

The instability in their home country is another factor preventing Arabic speakers from visiting relatives in other countries. Participants from Libya and Iraq reported a lack of safety in their respective countries, which prevented them from traveling. Because of security concerns, everyone who came from these two countries, including the participants, decided to stay in the host country permanently.

Overseas visits, as suggested by the Arabic-speaking parents in this study, have numerous advantages. The majority of participants believed that frequent visits to their home country provided their children with exposure to their parents' language and culture. In addition, the children have the opportunity to interact with relatives as well as play and spend time with other children their age. Also, the children become accustomed to Arabic because no one will understand or speak to them in English. One of the participants reported that when his children arrived, they began speaking in English, but when none of their relatives understood them, they automatically switched to Arabic. Furthermore, when the second generation speaks Arabic correctly and understands native Arabic speakers, they will feel a sense of pride and self-esteem.

This finding is supported by Namei's (2012) study, which demonstrated the significance of international travel. He discovered that regular visits helped students improve their language skills, particularly reading and writing, so that they could communicate with relatives and friends in Persian.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, regular visits to the home country are regarded as critical for intergenerational transmission of Arabic among members of the Arabic-speaking community under investigation. Regular visits to the parent's home country, where children can learn about their parents' language and culture.

The maintenance of heritage languages and cultures has long been a concern for many ethnolinguistic groups. These groups face the threat of language shift or even language loss if the heritage language is not transmitted to second-generation children. Intergenerational language transmission from parents to children necessitates a combination of factors such as community, home, media, education, communication, and so on. In addition to these factors which are parts of a larger study of Arabic speakers in Toowoomba, Australia, this inquiry shed light on the importance of regular visits to one's home country. All Arabic speakers agreed that taking children on vacation in their country of origin provided them with the opportunity to immerse in the Arabic environment, allowing them to build their cultural identity and ensure the transmission of the language.

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