

“It would be nice if someone took the load off you” Arabic-speaking new-Australian mothers and the challenges of heritage language maintenance

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Abstract

Despite a general expectation for immigrants to Australia to shift quickly to the use of English, many new-Australian families maintain strong attachments to their heritage languages. Little research has explored how recently arrived families of Arabic-speaking background in Australia preserve their heritage language while acquiring proficiency in English. In this paper, we report on part of a study that explored the family language policies of four Arab-Australian mothers as they negotiated their new language reality. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews revealed that the participating mothers considered it vitally important for their children to be proficient in both English and Arabic and they employed a range of strategies for developing their children’s bilingualism. However, they also acknowledged that maintaining their children’s heritage language could be difficult and stressful. Our paper offers insights into family language policy and the challenges of heritage language maintenance for bilingual immigrant mothers in assimilationist contexts.

Keywords: family language policy, bilingualism, heritage language maintenance, new Australians, Arabic-English speaking immigrants, mothers, Muslim women

Introduction

Australia has always been culturally diverse and, with first or second-generation immigrants now making up almost half the population, its diversity is increasing. At least 300 languages other than English are spoken at home and one Australian in five speaks a language other than English¹. However, strong assimilative forces propel the children of immigrants to learn English quickly, (Clyne, 2005; Ndhlovu & Willoughby, 2017; Ozolins, 1993) and in many immigrant groups these forces have resulted in rapid language shift to English (Kipp & Clyne, 2003). Non-English-speaking immigrants to Australia face the challenges of settling in a new society, understanding its cultural norms and values and acquiring English, a process that can

be daunting and lonely. Mothers may face particular challenges as they are often the primary caregivers in the family and, in this role, they carry the main burden of responsibility for their children's education, socialisation and language development. Immigrant mothers may also be particularly challenged by lack of English proficiency, different parenting styles in the new culture and loss of family and community support.

This paper considers the case of four new-Australian mothers of Arabic-speaking background as they negotiate their new language reality. We report on part of a research study that explored the language beliefs, practices and planning efforts of four mothers. We found that they perceived Arabic-English bilingualism as a source of pride and a means of improving their children's future prospects, but they also acknowledged that maintaining their children's heritage language could be difficult and stressful. Our paper offers insights into the challenges of heritage language maintenance for bilingual immigrant mothers in assimilationist contexts.

Family language policy and the role of mothers

We locate our paper within the field of family language policy, defined as explicit and implicit planning in relation to language use and literacy practices within home domains and among family members (King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008). One of the key drivers for maintaining a heritage language is its use in the family domain (Fishman, 1991). Fishman stresses that the home is a critical setting for transmitting language between generations (p. 6). As he asserts, the family is "the most common and inescapable basis of mother tongue transmission, bonding, use and stabilization" (p. 94). Other scholars also stress the central role of the family in intergenerational heritage language transmission (e.g., Appel & Muysken, 1987; Coulmas, 2005; García, 2003; Pauwels, 2005; Schwartz, 2008; Schwartz & Moin, 2012; Spolsky, 2004). It is family language policies that primarily determine whether or not a heritage language continues to be spoken within the family and transmitted to the next generation (Pillai, Soh & Kajita, 2014). As these authors note, in this respect, the planning actions parents take in bilingual immigrant families form the foundations of their children's bilingual development (p.76).

Interest in the experiences of Arabic immigrant mothers led us to survey the literature for previous research. The fairly small body of research on immigrant mothers' efforts to maintain heritage languages in their families shows that they play a central role in developing family language policy. Studies by Janik (1996) and Johnston (1967, 1985) note that mothers acted as the pillars of the heritage language maintenance in the home. Kondo (1998) highlights mothers' roles as communicators in the heritage language with their children and as facilitators of their children's heritage language education. A study by Li Xiaoxia (1999) shows how a mother's positive attitude to the heritage language and her interactions with her children in that language benefitted both their language development and positive identity formation.

More recent studies in the field of family language policy also highlight the active role of mothers. Okita (2002) draws attention to the unseen work mothers did in linguistically intermarried families as they resolved the conflicting pressures and demands of childrearing,

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language acquisition and education. Kirsch (2012) shows how mothers raising their children bilingually in Luxemburgish and English in the UK carefully planned their children’s exposure to and use of the heritage language. King and Fogle (2006) show how bilingual parenting was regarded by the mothers in their study to be good parenting. Becker (2013) and Tatar (2015) highlight the role of mothers as holders of cultural knowledge, confirming that the mothers in their studies felt responsible for maintaining family cultural identity and believed it was their responsibility to teach their children the heritage language at home.

Although the mothers in all these studies were highly motivated to maintain their children’s heritage languages, the studies show that raising children bilingually presented them with many challenges. The mothers in our study were just as highly motivated to sustain their children’s command of Arabic, and support their English, but they also found maintaining Arabic to be a difficult and demanding task. They had great deal in common with the mothers in the literature we have reviewed here. To set the context of our paper, we now provide some background information on Arabs and Arabic in Australia.

Arabs, Arabic, Islam, Muslim women and belonging in Australia

Arab-Australians are a well-established group with a long-standing presence in the country. The Australian Arabic-speaking population is increasing and Arabic is now the third most widely spoken language in Australia after English and Mandarin Chineseⁱⁱ. Modern Standard Arabic expresses a common ethnic identity among Arabs all over the world (Elkholy, 1966; Rouchdy, 2002) and, while the Australian Arabic-speaking community is religiously diverse, it is the Arabic language that makes them a distinctly identifiable group (Mansouri & Trembath, 2005, p. 517). Classical Arabic unites the Islamic community worldwide because it is the language of the Muslim Holy Book, the Qur’an (Hage, 2002; Johns, Mansouri & Lobo, 2015; Rane, Nathie, Isakhan & Abdalla, 2011) The fact that Muslims attach strong cultural significance to Arabic as a sacred language (Clyne & Kipp 1999, pp. 154–155, 211) and consider it to be the language of Allah as well as that of the Qu’ran (Saeed, 2008) means that they place high value on maintaining Arabic (Abdelhadi, 2016) and want their children to learn it (Hatoss, 2013). However, although there are a number of heritage language maintenance programmes currently offered in state schools in Queensland (the mothers’ state of residence), as far as we are aware, there are no Arabic language programmes available at the time of writingⁱⁱⁱ and only one after-hours school offering Arabic, operating through the Ethnic Schools Association of Queensland (personal communication, August 8, 2017).

In an age dominated by fears of terrorism and extremism, recent events in Australia, and in other parts of the world, have added to widespread negative perceptions of Arabs. Recent Australian research highlights growing anxiety about Arabs, and Muslims in particular (Johns et al., 2015; Mansouri, 2012; Mansouri & Wood, 2008). As Mansouri and Trembath (2005, p. 517) observe, in the wake of September 11 and the so-called War on Terror, Arab-Australians have experienced significant social and cultural marginalisation and exclusion (see also Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2004; Noble, 2006; Noble & Pointing, 2007; White, 2004). Anti-Muslim stereotypes and sentiments in the mass media have had an adverse

effect on Australian public opinion about Islam (Mansouri, 2012; Rane et al., 2011). It is well documented that, as the most visible icons of Islam on account of wearing the *hijab* (headscarf), Muslim women encounter verbal and sometimes physical attacks (e.g. Hassan & Martin, 2015; Mansouri & Trembath, 2005; Mansouri & Wood, 2008; Yasmeen, 2008). The participant mothers in this study had directly experienced such abuse and their experiences affected their attitudes towards English and their consequent family language policies, as we will show in this paper.

Study significance

A sense of inclusion and belonging are essential to successful settlement and are strongly linked to the networks and supports that enable immigrants to participate fully in the receiving society (Pe-Pua, Gendera, Katz & O'Connor, 2010, p. 12). Research shows that maintaining the heritage language promotes educational success and integration into the host society (Duff, 2008; Lee, 2002; Tse, 2001). Research also shows that while some Arabs feel they are accepted in Australia, others do not – and that Muslims feel particularly marginalised (Pe-Pua et al., 2010; Yasmeen, 2008).

Marginalisation can lead to the closing off of opportunities for interaction between the host society and the immigrant group (Berry & Sam, 1997; Glick, Walker & Luz, 2013; Klimidis & Minas, 1995). While this tendency may, to some extent, support the maintenance of Arabic, it can also have adverse social outcomes. Wise and Ali (2008) point out that as a result of marginalisation, immigrants can tend to “retreat into their communities” (p. 61). Retreat into one’s language community limits opportunities to connect with English-speakers and thus to enhance one’s English proficiency. It also restricts the use of Arabic to home and community domains. Our study suggests that the sense of marginalisation among Arabs in Queensland may be compounded by a lack of support and services, including provision for Arabic after-hours schooling. In Queensland’s relatively small Arabic-speaking population (compared to New South Wales and Victoria), families may also be maintaining a low profile in terms of participation and accessing support as a result of feeling vulnerable. We suggest that marginalisation and social isolation hinder both the maintenance of Arabic and the establishment of links to the broader Australian community (see also Pe-Pua et al., 2010, p. viii, 13).

The positioning of immigrant communities in the host society has profound effects on their sense of belonging and inclusion (e.g., Colic-Peisker, 2002; Collins, 1991). It is in this respect that we argue the study of family language policy in Arabic-speaking new Australian families is important. Our paper provides some insights into how the mothers perceive and respond to their situation in Australia. At this point we turn to a closer description of the study, the participants and research methodology.

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Study design

This research, which was done in Brisbane, Queensland, took the form of an exploratory case study using a qualitative approach which made it possible to explore the participants’ family language policies and their underlying assumptions. The data were collected by the co-author of this paper, Areej Yousef. The data collection tools consisted of a questionnaire, a single focus group session and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire elicited information about the demographics of each family and the degree of their bilingualism. It was conducted just before the focus group and so served as a good primer for the ensuing focus-group discussion, which lasted approximately an hour. The focus group schedule consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit the mothers’ family language policies by exploring their beliefs, practices and efforts to maintain Arabic in their families. Each mother was then invited to participate in a semi-structured interview two weeks after the focus group and conducted at the family home for their convenience. There was a set of pre-prepared interview questions that were modified according to each of the mothers’ responses in the focus group.

Data from the focus group and semi-structured interviews were analysed by means of qualitative thematic analysis. The focus group session and the semi-structured interviews were conducted in Arabic, audio-recorded, transcribed into Word documents and uploaded into Quirkos^{iv}, a data analysis package that supports Arabic. After all the transcripts were coded and grouped in Quirkos, they were thematically analysed using Spolsky’s family language policy framework (2004). These emergent themes were then translated into English by Areej, a native Arabic speaker who is also fluent in English.

Participants

The mothers were part of a social network living in a large Brisbane suburb where many Arabs have settled. The mothers met regularly so that their children could play together. A non-probability, convenience sample was drawn from this network because of its accessibility and proximity to the researcher. Initially, six mothers were invited to join the study and four agreed to participate. Two of these mothers had arrived in Australia in 2004, one in 2009 and the last in 2013. They were all in their thirties and were all born and raised in Arabic-speaking countries. Three women originated from Jordan and one from Syria and they were all practising Muslims.

The four participant mothers were all well-educated, having obtained at least a high school-leaving diploma from their home country. One had completed a Bachelor’s degree and another two had commenced a degree but had ceased studying before graduation. One had dropped out because she got married and immigrated to Australia with her husband. The other was studying in Syria while living with her husband in Saudi Arabia but had to drop out because she could not take the final exams after war broke out in Syria. The mothers had between two and three children, whose ages ranged from two to ten years at the time of the study. Table 1 presents a profile of the participants. Interestingly, as the table shows, they all rated their own English proficiency as ‘somewhat proficient’ while rating their children’s English as ‘very fluent’. All the participants were given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1 Profile of the participants

Name	Education	Age	Time in Australia	Children	Country of origin	Self-rated English proficiency	Ratings of their children's English proficiency
Maya	B. Law (unfinished)	32	12 years	2	Jordan	Somewhat proficient	Very fluent
Noor	B. Eng Lang/Lit (unfinished)	32	3 years	3	Syria	Somewhat proficient	Very fluent
Huda	B. Bus. Admin (graduated)	33	7 years	3	Jordan	Somewhat proficient	Very fluent
Jomana	TAFE	31	12 years	3	Jordan	Somewhat proficient	Very fluent

Researcher position and sampling limitations

The mothers in the network had frequently discussed the challenges of learning a second language and maintaining their children’s Arabic. It was these conversations that inspired the research study. Being a member of this network, it was not difficult for Areej to elicit support for her project. Coming from the same cultural and religious background and sharing a similar role in the family, she could relate to the women’s points of view and experiences. Because the participating mothers trusted her, Areej’s role as a researcher caused minimal disruption to the routines and relationships in the network. A further advantage was that speaking Arabic allowed her to access experiences that might not have been available to a researcher who did not share the same language background. Knowing the culture and the values and conventions that had to be respected had a beneficial effect on data collection and analysis. For example, Areej’s understanding of the nature of Muslim families and the boundaries that needed to be respected when interviewing the mothers helped the focus group session and the semi-structured interviews run smoothly.

In her role as an insider-researcher, Areej was conscious that to obtain accurate and comprehensive responses from the mothers, she had to listen actively and respectfully and strive to avoid bias or preconception (DeLyser, 2001). To remain as objective as possible she kept a researcher diary in which she wrote analytic memos and reflected on her subjective reactions and responses to the interviews. She also checked and confirmed her coding with the participants.

An equally important aspect of Areej’s position as a researcher was the fact that she was a woman researching women. The study did not adopt a feminist perspective but rather was influenced by researchers like Reinharz and Davidman (1992) who extol the value of adding women’s views to contemporary research studies, “because this way of learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women’s ideas altogether or having men speak for women” (p. 19). Closely related to these points, a clear limitation of this sample was the fact that only four mothers were recruited to reflect the ideas of Arabic-speaking families in

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Queensland and therefore the findings are not necessarily generalisable. Moreover, the fact that mothers were the only interviewees meant that fathers and children were excluded from the discussion and the mothers were the sole representatives of their families. Fathers were excluded from the interviewing process both for cultural reasons and reasons of accessibility. Arabic cultural mores do not favour a lone female interviewer meeting with male interviewees. In addition, even though the children’s language practices were a focus of this study, they were not interviewed due to the range of ethical considerations that would have had to be taken into account, which were beyond the time limit available for this study.

Thematic analysis

The mothers’ primary motivation for preserving Arabic lay in the fact that they regarded it an expression of their religious and cultural identity. All the mothers considered literacy in Arabic essential so that their children could read the Qu’ran. Their second source of motivation was that fact that without Arabic their children would not be able to connect with their extended families and friends in their countries of origin. There is an extensive body of literature documenting people’s attachment to their heritage languages as languages of emotion and belonging (e.g., Kramsch, 2006; Pavlenko, 2007). For these mothers, Arabic was not only the language of their religion and culture, it was part of their family identity. Without it, they feared their children would lose their connectedness to the Arabic language and culture. As Jomana exclaimed, “what will happen to them if they don’t learn Arabic? They will be lost - LOST!”

However, the desire to maintain Arabic was not as easy as they wished it to be. The focus group and interviews revealed that while the mothers placed high value on both Arabic and English, they found it difficult to maintain Arabic because of lack of support outside the home. They repeatedly voiced their concern that there was not sufficient support in the community to help them maintain Arabic in their families. Jomana spoke for all the mothers when she said, “you know I feel [sighs] that. I feel that we really ... mmm REALLY stressed about this topic ... you really want to want your children to learn Arabic but you can’t find a place to put them there”. This lack of support left the mothers feeling abandoned and affected their views of English. In what follows, we discuss the key issues and challenges for the mothers that were raised by our findings from the thematic analysis, with illustrative extracts.

Ambivalence towards English

In contrast to their clarity about the need to preserve Arabic in their families, the mothers’ relationship with English was ambivalent. On one hand, they felt the obvious need for English in everyday communication in Australia, and yet on the other hand, they held back from using it because they did not want to expose their children to more English at home. Maya and Noor described the frustration of constantly having to switch between Arabic and English and the difficulties in expressing emotions or opinions in English. Maya commented, “it’s easier if [what you speak] outside is like the inside”, and Noor remarked, “I feel that it gives me a hard time when I ... I reeeeeeally need to talk - talk ... really express myself”. Huda felt it was important for the mothers to use English as a main language in order to increase their

confidence. She said, “I feel... if we speak only in English, it is easier not only for dealing with the little ones but with the society. Anything that happens with you, you will be courageous ... you will be confident.”

In contrast, Jomana did not seem to be worried about her English because she mostly interacted with Arabic speakers from her own community and used English for basic needs only. As she observed, “I talk Arabic only with my community the people I know and when I am outside it is really okay... it is basic things [in English] that you will say”. Similarly, when asked if she used English to talk to her children when they were out with their English-speaking friends, Jomana replied, “honestly, we do not go out with foreigners ... at all”. The fact that she calls English speakers “foreigners” indexes her sense of separation and resonates with the social research we have mentioned, documenting how many Arabic speakers feel marginalised and retreat into their communities.

However, Jomana was not simply refusing to interact with others in the community because they were “foreigners”. Further discussions revealed her fear of subjection to humiliation or verbal abuse. This fear was creating a linguistic barrier for her. In fact, all the mothers talked about their daily struggles as Muslim-Arab women in Australia. They had experienced hostility on many occasions and often expressed a sense of discomfort at how they were perceived after terrorist attacks both at home and abroad. For example, after the Lindt Café Siege^{vi} in Sydney in December 2014, Jomana recounted how a man had verbally abused her in a shopping mall. In front of her children he had shouted at her to get out of Australia because she was a Muslim and all Muslims were terrorists. She said that this incident had made her feel extremely insecure and she feared that her children would be subjected to the same abuse one day. Maya also mentioned her frustration at not being able to respond to such abuse because she lacked the language to do so, saying, “it’s like you want to say something but you can’t! You don’t have the words”. By excluding themselves from social interaction with the host community, the mothers were avoiding the risk of insult or humiliation due to their appearance and limited English proficiency. It seems clear that the mothers’ mixed feelings about English are strongly influenced by their sense of exclusion from the wider society.

Representing Islam

All the mothers stressed the importance of their children acquiring English for a successful future. Noor remarked, “it’s the main language in the world now so anything they want to apply for (work/study) they will need English they will immediately be asked about English so I am all about them learning it”. The mothers’ concern for their children’s ability to fit in and succeed is common in studies documenting the experiences of immigrant families as they negotiate their changing identities and language practices in the host society (e.g., Lanza & Li Wei, 2016; Zhu Hua & Li Wei, 2016).

However, for the mothers, English was not only a tool for their children’s future success. It was also a means to successfully convey their beliefs and pride in their identity as Muslims. As Maya emphasised,

We should give a good picture of Islam ... we should understand,
we should interact better with people and all that and so all this you

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need to be good in English so that you can get across what you really want to say.

The mothers regarded English as crucial for their children to be able to represent their cultural identity and break down stereotypical views of Muslims. As Maya put it,

I feel that it's a must. They must learn and be excellent because we are here ... we came to represent our country when they know that (we are) Arabs or Muslims you feel like we have something on us like you are blacklisted ... so we need to be clever wherever we are so that we can prove ourselves ... I mean we can do something for ourselves ... so that they stop whenever they hear Arabs or Muslims that these are stupid they don't understand, they whatever. So yes like this we should develop ourselves and develop our children.

Travelling home

In a globalised world, the mothers' international mobility played an important role in how they perceived and responded to their children's bilingualism (e.g., Lanza & Li Wei, 2016; Zhu Hua & Li Wei, 2016). Travelling back to the home country to immerse children in the heritage language is a common strategy among immigrant families around the world (Caldas, 2006; Grosjean, 2010) and for the mothers in our study, travelling back to their home countries was an effective way of fostering their children's fluency in Arabic. Jomana said, “We speak in Arabic and they [her children] speak Arabic because we go a lot to Jordan”. Huda too was convinced that going to Jordan for vacations was a good way to get her daughter to speak Arabic. As she explained,

When I went um six months when I had the baby, she forgot English and she only spoke Arabic... so I feel that if every vacation is the same thing and everyone over there speaks (Arabic). They have no choice but to speak Arabic, so she has the potential so I am not worried.

The mothers believed that immersing their children in an Arabic-only environment would help balance their bilingualism. Maya said, “we want them good in English and Arabic... so vacations can help”. Noor had not seen her family since war broke out in Syria in 2010 but nevertheless encouraged her daughters to keep using Arabic so that when they were eventually able to travel, they would be able to speak to their relatives in Syria. As she remarked, “they have the idea that when they go to Syria they want to talk to their grandmas and their aunts so that they understand them”.

Although travelling from Australia to the Middle East is costly, it gave the mothers an emotional boost and support for developing their children's Arabic literacy. As Maya said, “my mother in law, when we went to Jordan she sat with them and she would write sentences for them and like this umm [they would] write it and read it”. Thus, although travel presented a financial burden, it played a valuable role in maintaining Arabic. Researchers note that making return trips to the country of origin is one of the best means of heritage language retention (e.g., Lee, 2002). According to Kennedy and Romo (2013), connecting with relatives provides a

good reason for sustaining bilingualism. As a result of travel, children see more reason to use their heritage language.

The search for support

The mothers repeatedly voiced their sense of responsibility for preserving their children's Arabic and the frustration they felt at the lack of support from their partners and the wider community. As Noor asserted,

I think it is my responsibility, my duty, mine, because they are spending more time with me ... they sit for six hours at school, and six hours with me ... so it should be me. Maintaining this or strengthening that.

Maya wished someone was there to help her, saying, "it would be nice if someone took the load off you". Jomana was particularly emotional when she talked about this issue, declaring,

some people take it easy ... they like start speaking English with him because it is easier ... but I feel that the child could ... I mean he could be lost in this way ... I mean if I didn't pay attention to him what about the ones coming, his children in the future ? They will be lost!

When asked what she meant by "lost" she said that if she did not help her children maintain Arabic, they would lose a fundamental part of their identity. She added, "you know there is something inside you, saying he has to learn Arabic he HAS TO... he needs to learn reading and writing ... but there are no schools here, I wish they would have something".

In their search for support outside the home, the mothers looked to after-hours language schools. They discussed their experiences with these schools, expressing disappointment at what they saw as the lack of organisation and discipline in the schools their children had attended and agreeing that that by and large, their children disliked attending them. The two main problems for the mothers were the limited availability of Arabic-language after-hours schools in the first place and the lack of professionally trained teachers in those schools that were available. Jomana pointed out that although there were Islamic schools, she was more interested in finding a non-religious school, as she believed she could impart her faith to her children without additional help, stating,

there is a school ... it teaches Qu'ran and the prophet's story and all that. I am against that ... we are religious we can teach them ... but we need Arabic... so I would not enrol them in it because I want Arabic.

Noor said that she found an after-hours school for her daughters where Arabic and the Qu'ran were taught but she soon withdrew them because she thought it was disorganised. Maya concurred, saying that "disorganisation" had led her to withdraw her children from one after-hours school.

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A recurring opinion was that the teachers in these schools were volunteers and not properly trained to teach children. As Jomana explained,

look, I am not against it, but the people [directing it] need to be understanding and educated, I mean for example they bring us people with no experience ... regular people and they start just memorising memorising memorising and they make the children hate the school, and Arabic... so I am with it but it has to have specialised professional people. And it should be supported by the government; it should be in a school not a mosque or something.

In a similar vein, Maya remarked,

I feel that teaching is a responsibility ... here [at the mosque] you feel that any one available comes and teaches, so this is really not good. You need to deal with the children depending on their personality you should make each one of them enjoy it.

For Maya, there was a clash between her expectations and the Islamic schools' ethos. She added, “they are tough with the children ... regarding clothing [signalling with her hand about wearing the veil] - so I don't know... it's like they annoy the children.” As she concluded, “at the end you are between two difficult decisions - either they don't learn anything or they go learn and hate Arabic”. It seems that the mothers were expecting a more secular and interactive pedagogic approach than what they encountered in the Islamic after-hours schools.

Discussion

Our thematic analysis shows that the mothers in the study were highly motivated to maintain Arabic but the lack of support for heritage language maintenance outside the home increased their sense of isolation and consumed a considerable amount of their energy. Fear of abuse and discrimination also led them to interact more with families from a similar background than with the host society. While they appreciated the need for their children to speak good English, they saw it mainly as a tool for essential communication, for fitting into the wider society and for presenting themselves well as Arabs and Muslims to English speakers. They were concerned about their children's potential loss of Arabic and frequently travelled to their hometowns to facilitate an Arabic learning environment for their children, believing that travelling home was a means of preserving their Arabic identities.

In terms of family language policy, the findings suggest that the mothers largely favoured what is known as “the minority language at home strategy” (Grosjean, 2010; King et al., 2008), albeit applying it in a rather unconscious way. The mothers were well educated and mobile, with the financial means to travel back to their countries of origin to maintain contact with their extended families. Clearly, having these means makes exposing their children to Arabic easier. However, in the English-dominant environment of Australia, the broader social conditions for heritage language maintenance are limited.

The lack of institutional resources and the clash between mothers' expectations and what Islamic after-hours schools could offer led them to feel unsupported in their language maintenance efforts, despite the advent of a new national curriculum in the formal Australian school system in which Arabic is one of a suite of languages which can be offered to all state school students in Years F-10^{vii}. It could therefore be predicted that the children's bilingualism may prove to be subtractive (Lambert, 1981) and the rate of language shift to English in these families is likely to increase.

On the other hand, as Clyne (2005) has noted, Arabic is well maintained in Australia due to its role as the symbol of Arab ethnic identity and its cultural value as the language of the Qu'ran and Islamic teaching. As De Houwer (2007) observes, successful intergenerational language transmission depends on how parents plan ahead and modify language patterns to suit family needs. The strong association of Arabic with Arab identity and Islam undoubtedly means that Arabic will remain a core value in the home. Yet, as Appel and Muysken (1987) warn, the value of minority languages may decline if they are used only in very limited domains.

On a final note, we endorse Hatoss's (2013) recommendations for promoting literacy education for the growing population of school-aged children from Arabic-speaking backgrounds in Queensland. Establishing effective after-hours schools that teach young children Arabic could resolve many of our participants' concerns. The platform for initiating such schools is available in Queensland through the Ethnic Schools Association. A recurring concern for all of the mothers was that teachers in Islamic after-hours schools were not qualified and lacked basic teaching skills. Therefore, equipping such schools with adequately trained language teachers could enhance the quality of teaching and learning, and potentially attract more students.

In closing, family language use at home plays a major role in children's cognitive development, positive identity formation and formal school success (King et al., 2008; Melo-Pfeifer, 2015) as well as laying a strong foundation for language maintenance. We have focused in this article on the challenges that Arabic-speaking new-Australian mothers faced in their efforts to lay down such foundations. We hope that our study has contributed in a small way to understanding family language policy and heritage language maintenance for bilingual families in assimilative immigrant contexts like Australia. Future larger-scale research on family language policies among new-Australian families may reveal more not only about the role of mothers but also fathers and parental partnerships in home language maintenance and the promotion of bilingualism in immigrant settings.

NOTES

ⁱ <http://www.abs.gov.au>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.sbs.com.au>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.qld.gov.au/education/schools/find/pages/specialist.html>

^{iv} <https://www.quirkos.com/get.html>

^v Editor's note: All examples have been translated from Arabic to English by the first author.

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^{vi}<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-12-16/hamad-sydney-siege-confronting-our-anti-islam-backlash/5969636>

^{vii} <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/languages/>

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