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**BECOMING BILINGUAL: A JOURNEY OF ENGLISH-ARABIC BILINGUAL  
COMPETENCE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Bilingualism is a diverse and complex phenomenon, and each individual's experience of bilingual competence is unique. This paper provides an in-depth case study of an English-Arabic speaker born in Lebanon but growing up in Australia. Her personal journey is considered in light of current research in the academic field, and is shown to reinforce many theories of bilingual development, and highlight the complex nature of bilingual competence. Important aspects of her bilingual experience include her own and her family's positive attitudes towards language and cultural heritage; the combination of formal language instruction and communicative language use; social networks among both monolingual and bilingual speakers of both languages; the challenge of diglossia in her first language, Arabic; and her high personal motivation to develop balanced bilingualism despite difficulties and setbacks. The study considers the interrelationship between her first and her second language, observing that her L1 has the developmental characteristics of an L2 due to immigrating at a young age, and that while she learnt her L2 in early childhood, both her languages display non-native phonological systems. Finally, the study argues that bilingualism is a complete language system, showing that for this speaker, her language ability is best displayed in bilingual English-Arabic settings where she can implement code-switching to make full use of her entire linguistic repertoire.

**Key Words:** bilingualism, Arabic diglossia, code-switching, bilingual phonology, language maintenance

**INTRODUCTION**

Bilingualism is a diverse phenomenon, with as many varieties as there are bilingual speakers. The road to bilingual competence also varies from speaker to speaker. Mackey notes that 'bilingualism is the property of the individual' (2000, p. 22), so it seems fitting to use in-depth case studies to map the personal acquisition of bilingual competence. Case studies can provide rich, insightful data (Dörnyei 2007, p. 155), and while Myers-Scotton recommends caution regarding the validity of self-reports (2006, p. 79), the following reflections on one individual's experiences nevertheless highlight some key factors that promote and hinder the development of bilingualism. Firstly, a history of her language learning context, motivation, and opportunities will be explored, followed by a survey of her current language profile including skills, usage patterns and confidence, and finally her personal reflections on likely and desirable future language development. Throughout, her personal journey will be considered in light of current research in the academic field. To conclude, reasons for the development of her bilingual proficiency will be evaluated.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The participant in this case study is a personal acquaintance of the researcher. The data was collected over a period of three weeks through a series of four half-hour semi-structured interviews, both face-face and by phone.

## **DISCUSSION**

### *History of the language learning context*

Faith<sup>1</sup> is an English-Arabic speaker in her thirties, who was born in Lebanon. As an Arabic country, Lebanon is traditionally described as a diglossic community (Myers-Scotton 2006, p. 81), though Brosh and Olshtain suggest that the Arabic language situation is more 'dynamic' than 'strictly dichotomous' (1995, p. 249). Faith herself describes the situation as consisting of a colloquial variety known as Lebanese, and a formal variety known as Arabic, which is written, and is shared by all Arab countries. This is the distinction that will be made here, but for simplicity, spoken Lebanese will generally be subsumed under the cover term 'Arabic', as Faith points out that she is able to use Lebanese to converse with speakers of other colloquial Arabic varieties. Faith's father spoke Arabic, and her mother received a French education, so spoke both Arabic and French. Faith's older sister started school in Lebanon, where she said children as young as three start learning to read and write Arabic. Faith's parents had relatives living in Melbourne, and immigrated to Australia themselves when Faith was three, seeking a peaceful, prosperous home for their young family. Her parents spoke no English when they arrived, so attended lessons at TAFE, and while her mother continued these for some time, her father soon abandoned them in favour of the more pressing necessity of finding work. The close-knit extended family embraced the language of their new home, while actively maintaining their L1, a symbol of their heritage and identity. This was the context in which Faith learned English, and developed her Arabic proficiency.

### *Language learning motivation*

As Faith was first exposed to her L2 at 3;8, she said motivation was not an issue in learning English, rather acquisition was simply natural and necessary because she now lived in Australia. Ng and Wigglesworth observe that motivation impacts adult language learning (2007, p. 13). Accordingly, it was her parents who showed high integrative motivation (Ellis 2008, p. 678), as they worked hard at learning English and instilled in their children an impression of its value and necessity. For Faith, personal motivation features more highly in her maintenance of Arabic, a point that will arise later.

### *Language learning opportunities*

Faith reports learning English by watching children's television shows such as Playschool and Sesame Street. While Hoff-Ginsberg and Shatz comment that watching television is not adequate for the acquisition of adult language (1982, pp. 22-23), research suggests that young children are

at least able to learn new words from child-specific educational programs (Rice 1983, p. 220; Rice & Woodsmall 1988, p. 421). Faith also attended preschool when she was four, which provided interaction with English-speaking children. She considers herself to have been quite competent in conversational English by the time she started kindergarten in an English-medium mainstream school, but in year one she participated in ESL classes, and still remembers learning the difference between *swim* and *swam* there. Her formal English continued to improve throughout her schooling, as it was both the medium of instruction and a compulsory subject itself. Her informal English was enhanced as her social sphere expanded to include English speakers in the neighbourhood, in sports teams, and through continued exposure to Australian media. Conforming to Rothman's observations (2009, p. 157), English gradually gained prominence in home language use too, as the family's proficiency grew. This mixture of formal and informal learning accords with findings in SLA research, that a combination of form-focused instruction and communicative language use is most conducive to effective L2 acquisition (Ellis 2008, p. 855). As for Faith's Arabic development, she attended an Arabic church until the age of twenty, and during high-school attended Arabic school for four years. In year seven she joined the beginner class, but in year eight there was no intermediate class, so she found herself floundering in an advanced class, and was unable to keep up with the other students. Consequently, her grasp of Arabic did not improve beyond the beginner level. As Haeri (2000, p. 71) notes, the difference between spoken Arabic varieties and the formal ones found in education pose many difficulties to students, and being able to speak the vernacular doesn't necessarily help a student studying the written form. So for Faith, L1 development was complicated by diglossia. Evidently, Faith's experiences are similar to those of other early bilingual immigrants, 'who may not have fully acquired or stabilized their L1 in early childhood...as a result of living in an L2-dominant environment...[so their L1 has the]...developmental characteristics of an L2' (Bolonyai 2007, p. 4).

### ***Current language skills***

In assessing Faith's current skills, Mackey's guide for determining the degree of a bilingual's competence proves useful. He divides language ability into 'four basic skills': listening, speaking, reading, and writing; and five 'linguistic levels': phonological, grammatical, lexical, semantic and stylistic (2000, p. 23). Faith reflected on her competence in light of these subdivisions. Her English skills rate higher than Arabic on all counts. She regrettably describes her ability to read Arabic as being at 'kindergarten level', recognising the letters, but only able to sound words out slowly. Her writing skills are even poorer. She quipped that on a scale of one to ten, she would score 'minus one' in Arabic! She understands Lebanese very well, but finds a lot of concentration is needed to understand spoken formal Arabic. She describes her L1 production as very colloquial, a kind of 'street talk', and if she doesn't use it for a while, her 'tongue feels heavy' and she just can't form the words. In contrast, her skills in written English are much higher, though she isn't confident in her academic writing ability, and reads slowly. She does not enjoy reading and writing. Faith loves speaking English however, and describes her speaking (and listening) skills as 'perfect'. She describes her competence in both languages on a scale, with listening skills most advanced, followed by speaking, then reading, with writing skills poorest. As for her skills on Mackey's five linguistic levels, her English ability is comparable to that of most monolingual

speakers, though she feels that her grasp of syntax in writing is not strong, and a keen ear can sense an Arabic accent in her speech. For Arabic, she describes her phonology as slightly 'westernised', her written syntax as 'the worst' (though she has a good grasp of Lebanese grammaticality), and her lexicon as fairly narrow, but enough to 'get by'. In addition, her semantic ability and style range are limited to casual everyday language use. Regarding her phonology, some research suggests that children under six acquire native-like pronunciation (Flege 1991, pp. 404-405; Ng & Wigglesworth 2007, p. 12). However Faith has a slight accent in both her languages, both of which she acquired under six years of age. Kehoe, Lleó and Rakow used Voice Onset Time to study German-Spanish bilingual children, and concluded, 'the phonetic/phonological systems of bilingual children do not develop independently but interact' (2004, p. 82). And Khattab noted that when the English-Arabic speaking children in her study were engaged in code-switching, their phonology 'contained a mixture of features that belong to both languages' (2002, p. 350). This appears to be Faith's experience, as she too often employs code-switching, as outlined below.

### *Language usage patterns*

Clearly, Faith is English dominant. Her current language use can be assessed on two dimensions, each highlighting pertinent facets of her language habits: they can be mapped in relation to social networks, and according to domains of use. Stoessel writes of the role of social networks in language use (2002, p. 95), and concludes that they play an important role in language maintenance or shift for bilingual speakers (2002, p. 124). Thus social networks are a crucial factor in considering bilingual competence. Faith has large networks of English-speaking friends and colleagues, and now attends a church with services in English. Most of her family are bilingual and speak English fluently and often, however her grandparents, who immigrated to Australia in their sixties, do not speak English at all, so she converses with them in Arabic. But Faith feels most at ease with other bilingual Arabic-English speakers, where she can switch constantly and conveniently without thinking about it. This is where her linguistic ability comes to the fore, and she can freely use her whole linguistic repertoire to say what she wants. This she does at home with her parents and siblings, and with her extended family. But she also finds it a useful resource at the school where she teaches. A large number of the students there are Arabic, many of whom are recent immigrants with limited command of English. Code-switching with these students builds rapport, establishes authority and indexes a shared cultural understanding. Faith sees this cultural connection as a crucial feature of their shared language, and maximises its potential in communicating with both students and their parents. As for domains of use, Hoffmann observes that different sociolinguists have identified various domains (1991, pp. 177-178), but notes that the key determining factors are person, place and topic (1991, p. 178). Faith sees her language choice as being defined by person only. If her interlocutor speaks Arabic, she employs code-switching, though with monolingual English speakers present she tries to limit herself to English. Mackey comments that '[b]ilingualism is not only related to external factors; it is also connected with internal ones. These include non-communicative uses, like internal speech...' (2000, p. 32). This could be seen as the internal dimension of Hoffmann's domains. For Faith, almost all internal language use occurs in English, with Arabic only used for planning external production. Internal uses such as counting and note-taking are all carried out in English.

Lastly, Hoffmann notes that some bilingual speakers feel more able to pursue a particular topic in one language than the other (1991, pp. 178-179). Faith asserts that for her, English trumps on all occasions, with her Arabic ability weaker in all domains. Much of this discussion separates Faith's competence into two distinct languages, but care must be taken not to apply the monolingual 'yardstick' that Grosjean decried (1985, p. 468), and to accept that bilingualism is 'a different but complete language system' (1985, p. 471), as is evident in Faith's adept code-switching practices.

### *Language confidence*

Summarising her linguistic abilities, Faith described herself as being 'bilingual to an extent'. She is highly confident in her verbal English skills, and while she says that her Arabic is 'very limited', she is confident that she could 'get by' very well in any Arabic country. This linguistic confidence correlates with her outgoing and spontaneous personality. She is more reserved in her estimations of her written language skills in both languages, again linked to her dispreference for reading and writing.

### *Future language development*

Faith feels that her skills in both languages could be developed, largely through practice. Faith loves Arabic, indeed she loves all cultures and languages, and prizes multilingualism. She describes Arabic as 'beautiful', and wishes she were fluent in both the written and spoken language. Thus her 'ideal self' (Dörnyei 2006, p. 53) includes a greater command of Arabic. She sees visiting Arab countries as a key factor in developing her Arabic skills, and indeed has done this in the past, visiting family in Lebanon, and teaching English for a month in Jordan. Faith values Arabic as a communicative tool, which explains her focus on learning through interaction. Ellis's survey of SLA research suggests that language learning in an immersion setting such as Faith described is likely to enhance 'oral fluency, lexical breadth and narrative ability', however educational settings lead to 'greater gains in morphosyntactic control' (2008, p. 290). Many factors mentioned above show that Faith's L1 functions similarly to an L2. Thus motivation is more relevant for L1 maintenance than L2 acquisition. Dörnyei described motivation as a process (2006, p. 52), which fluctuates depending on achievement (Ellis 2008, p. 688). But in Faith's experience, her determined nature overrides learning setbacks, as shown by her continuing positive attitudes to improving her Arabic despite her disastrous experience at Arabic school. Her motivation rests on an underlying desire to accomplish her goal of balanced bilingualism. But this is counter-balanced by the factor of time, a necessary investment for the development of language ability, and which for Faith is currently prioritised elsewhere.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the above discussion, a number of factors affecting Faith's bilingual competence stand out. First, her family's attitude to language played a large role in promoting bilingual development. Second, a combination of formal language instruction and communicative language use aids balanced development across all linguistic skills - Faith's bilingualism was considerably affected

by educational priorities in English. Third, the diglossic nature of her L1 imposed further difficulties due to the extra cognitive load of two distinct Arabic varieties. Fourth, social networks continue to play a significant role in shaping language use and maintenance. Fifth, Faith's attitude to her languages and cultures are crucial in directing efforts of language development. Sixth, immersion through international travel was helpful for developing greater competence in her weaker language. Seventh, personal motivation can override discouragements and setbacks. And lastly, having the time to devote to language development is a necessary element for the acquisition of greater competence. Thus Faith's journey has reinforced many theories of bilingual development, and provides a fascinating insight into the complex nature of bilingual competence.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>All names and identifying features have been changed for anonymity.

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