

## Conversing in L2 English with Saudi Arabic (L1) Children at Home

**Mazen Mansory**

English Language Institute (ELI)  
King Abdulaziz University (KAU), Jeddah  
Saudi Arabia

### Abstract

This qualitatively based research study aims at critically examining the linguistic practises of a particular group of Saudi parents who chose to use the host country's language (English L2) instead of the mother tongue (Arabic L1) with their children. Specifically, the study aims at answering two research questions: Why Saudi do parents chose to speak English to their child/children? And What are the effects of mostly speaking English on the children and their home language: Arabic? A total of ten participating parents took part in this research study where semi structured interviews were utilised to gather the primary data. Thematic analysis of the data revealed three main emerging themes and six subthemes. The findings from the data analysis revealed that Saudi parents speak English with their children so as to allow them the opportunity to be bilingual and linguistically (English – L2) proficient as well as the fact that those parents were pleased to see their children speak English with a British accent. Also, the analysis revealed that that children of Saudi parents speaking English only has led to the weakening and loss of their Arabic L1 language. The study concludes that parents should provide a linguistic balance for their bilingual children in order to preserve the native language. Additionally, the study recommends that further parallel research studies with bilingual children of various L1(s), are conducted.

**Keywords:** Bilingualism, critical period hypothesis, language loss, language and identity

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## 1.0 Introduction

It is estimated that more than 150,000 Saudi students have been given the opportunity to study outside of Saudi Arabia to gain graduate and postgraduate degrees in more than 25 countries all around the world (Al-Iqtisadi, 2015). On top of the list of countries are the US, UK, and Australia. According to the UNESCO report on student movement in 2009, Saudi Arabia was the fourth country around the world in the number of students studying abroad and the first with regards to the number of students on scholarships in comparison with the total number of Saudi citizens (M.O.H.E, 2018).

In this small study, a critical approach will be adopted to explore the reasons behind Saudi Arabian students living in the United Kingdom neglecting their children's mother tongue (Arabic) and mostly speaking English to them. This study would also address issues related to the children's identity and sense of belonging. By adopting the critical paradigm, this practice is problematised and argued that the parents here are depriving their children of their basic human right to speak their mother tongue. This is supported by Skutnabb-Kangas and May (2017) in their book *Linguistic Human Rights in Education* in which they state that each child in the world has the right to maintain and develop his/her mother tongue. They clarify that most individuals can identify positively with their mother tongue (MT), this identification should be accepted by others regardless of it being a minority or a majority language.

### 1.1 Theoretical Framework

The nature of the current research is inspired by the theoretical framework that believes that 'social reality' is historically constructed and that it is produced and reproduced by people (Olssen, 2017). As such, this research aims to raise the awareness of the parents and possibly to change their linguistics practices with their children in the future.

### 2.1 Literature Review

#### 2.1.1 Language Maintenance and Language Loss

This issue of first language loss is relatively a new concern when compared with what policymakers have considered as more important, namely acquisition of the language of the host society (Kormos, Csizér, & Iwaniec, 2014). This could be understandable in situations of permanent immigration. However, in the case of the children of Saudi students where immigration is a temporarily issue, then language loss should be a huge concern. This loss of confidence in the home language may occurs as a result of the restricted use of the language (Murtagh, 2011). The younger the children are, the greater the risk of losing their home language (Brady, 2018). This issue of home language loss, however, might not always be under the control of the parents. However, the research warns that some parents, after living in the host country for a couple of years, report that their children's English is better than theirs and that their children are completely ignoring and/or avoiding the use of their home language (Verdon, McLeod, & Winsler, 2014). Only then, do the parents try to reverse this trend to encourage the children to learn the home language, but their efforts are usually rejected by the children. Al-Jarf (1992) argues that this could be avoided when the home language is perceived in a respectful manner within the family and the community as possibility of its loss becomes less likely.

*Language and Identity*

Both identity and language are dynamic and change depending upon time and place (Oxford, 2016). A person's identity and language are strongly related, but in a very complex way partly due to the dynamic nature of these concepts and partly due to the human subject involved. Weber (2015) argues that language influences culture and thus identity, and that culture is sometimes regarded as a marker of a persons' identity. Tatto, Menter, Burn, Mutton, and Thompson (2017) argue that our perceptions of ourselves are constantly changing and this change with our community of practice is allowing us multiple identities. With regards to immigrants, this depends on how they view their 'home language' and that determines whether they are going to make an effort to maintain it or not. For example, Daher (1988) presents a case study of Lebanese immigrants living in the United States who do not intend on going back to Lebanon for various reasons. He clarifies that they are in search of a new 'identity' in the US; therefore, these parents do not see any value in their home language— Arabic. This resulted in parents not making any effort of maintaining it. Their children do not attend any Arabic schools and parents choose not to speak any Arabic to their children believing that it would affect the English learning, thereby affecting the 'new' identity. On the other hand, one of the ways minority groups choose to maintain their children's language and identity is through establishing community language schools. Saudi schools have been established in most of the major cities in the United Kingdom where a recognizable population of Saudi students was present. Before 2010, the attendance of the children at these schools was relatively mandatory each weekend. However, a new law was established at the end of 2010 and the attendance of these schools became optional as the Saudi Ministry of Education started accepting and recognizing the school degrees obtained from British schools. The Saudi Educational system now allows returning Saudi students children to continue from where they stopped in their UK schools without the loss of one year like the system was prior to 2010. Unfortunately, this encouraged many parents to withdraw their children from the Saudi schools thereby depriving them a chance to learn more about their religion, culture, identity and home language: Arabic.

*Critical Period Hypothesis*

Although there is no certain age for a child to start learning a second language, the critical period hypothesis first introduced by Lenneberg (1967) is the name assigned to the idea that children acquire a second language better than adults do, therefore it supports introducing the second language early in a child's life (Smalle, Muylle, Szmalec, & Duyck, 2017). This hypotheses also indicates that any language acquisition that happens after puberty is not quite the same as learning the language as a first language (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978). However, a number of studies were conducted that prove the hypothesis while others argue that advantages of learning English at an early stage are less clear when the target is learning a language as a foreign language. However, many researchers favour learning a second language at an early age, while others argue that older learners acquire the language at higher levels of proficiency than younger learners do (Richards & Yamada-Yamamoto, 1998). For example, a study was conducted on 17,000 British children who were learning French over a five-year exposure in school indicated that older children learned French at a much higher rate than younger children (Stern, Burstall, & Harley, 1975).

### *Bilingualism*

Most Saudi Arabia students studying in the United Kingdom want their children to be bilingual. However, some families enable this more than others for example if one parent speaks one language while the other parent speaks a different language and both of the parents interact with the children on regular basis this usually provides the children with the perfect opportunity to learn both languages at the same time (Baker, 2014). Another scenario is when children learn one language at home and another language at school or a community school. In some families, bilingualism is more challenging than in others. For example, when the parents are very busy studying or working and they are the sole source for the home language, this will result in the children being completely immersed in English because most of the interaction and learning will happen in school in English. (Baker, 2014) argue that children who have strong foundation in their mother tongue are better learners with better cognitive abilities that enable them to learn reading and writing much easier in the host language if they already know about reading and writing in their first language.

### **3.0 Methodology**

In order to carry out this piece of research, two research questions were formulated. They aim to explore the reasons behind the parents' choice to speak mostly/only English with their children as well as the consequences that choice is having/ had on the children. The two research questions are:

1. Why Saudi do parents chose to speak English to their child/children?
2. What are the effects of mostly speaking English on the children and their home language: Arabic?

### **3.1 Participants**

The 10 Saudi parents who took part in the study have been chosen based on two reasons: purposiveness and accessibility (Orcher, 2016; Robinson, 2014). Participants were either graduate students on scholarships from the Saudi government attending universities or spouses of graduate students in the UK. Ten parents who have been in the United Kingdom for three years and more and who chose to speak only/mostly English to the children, were interviewed. They all had child/children aged 0-4 years when they first came to the UK and therefore children had not completely developed their home language yet.

### **3.1 Research Instrument**

Due to the high importance of the validity of the data, the researcher tried to minimize as much as possible the amount of 'bias' in the interview questions (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013). Participants were interviewed individually for about 30-45 minutes each. This allowed the ease with which to involve participants in both the transcribing and translating the data by emailing the full transcriptions to them after each interview in order to validate what has been documented in the interviews. Then, the participants were requested to correct, add or delete any part of the transcription which they do not think that they have mentioned, or it might have been mistranslated since the interviews were conducted in Arabic and then translated into English while transcribing. Four of the participants slightly corrected their interview transcripts while the remaining six sent e-mails confirming their approval of the transcripts. All of the previous steps were taken to make the researcher's data valid, true, and ready for analysis.

### 3.2 Ethical Issues

The conventional ethical procedures for undertaking qualitative research were followed by filling an Ethical Approval Form at the Graduate School of Education, University of Exeter. The form was approved thereby giving me permission to start data collection. After that, permission was obtained from each of the parents interviewed prior to each interview. Each participant was assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and that all the information and transcriptions would be confidential, and their identities will be hidden (BERA, 2004).

### 3.3 Analysis and Findings

Data analysis of the gathered data revealed three main themes. Two of these themes were major while the third emerged from the data. The following Table 1. shows the themes used in the data analysis.

**Table 1. Data Analysis Themes**

Data Analysis Themes	
1. Reasons behind Saudi parents speaking English to their children	2. Consequences of parents speaking English to the children
A. To help the children adapt in schools B. Belief that learning language is better while children are young C. Parents want children to be bilingual.	A. Loss of the home language 'Arabic' B. Parents are concerned about their children's identity
1. Emerging Theme	
A. Children to have a perfect British accent	

#### 3.3.1 Reasons Saudi Parents Spoke Mostly English to the Children

##### 3.3.1.1 To Help the Children Adapt in British Schools

The data revealed that seven out of 10 parents try to speak English to their children to help them adapt in the schools. For example, one parent said that his four-year-old daughter was reluctant to speak English at school when they first came to the United Kingdom:

“Only after her mother and I started speaking only English to her... and explaining how wonderful and beautiful it is that she started to like school and eventually stopped giving us a hard time going to school every day” (P3).

This belief was also shared by another parent, who started speaking English to her children before they even went to school in order to familiarize them with the language that is going to be used in school, so they do not get surprised or shocked when they join the nursery:

“It helps in making [the new language] familiar” (P7).

The same view of using English in order to help children cope in school, was shared by five other parents in this study indicating that the majority of participants in the study believe that speaking English to children will help them adapt to the British educational system. On the other hand, the remaining three parents believe that a child coping in school has nothing to do with what language their parents speak to them at home:

“It wouldn't really affect them... they're going to learn English in schools anyways” (P8).

Another parent supports this by saying that:

“They benefit from school more than they benefit from home... yes they are taking the ‘proper’ English from school, I don't add anything to their language knowledge at home expect for the odd vocabulary input from time to time” (P1).

In addition, one parent explains:

“I don't think speaking to them in English will help them in school . . . this is the language they know and talk all day in school” (P8).

### 3.3.1.2 *Learning language is better while children are young*

Analysis of the data also revealed that parents speak to the children in English because they believe that learning English is better and more beneficial while their children are young. This was rather shared by all the parents in the study. For instance, one parent commented:

“Because children learn English while they are young, it will stick with them hopefully for all their life” (P3).

This was shared by another parent who stated that:

“They tend to learn it faster and easier ...and even to perfection” (P1).

Another mother stated that:

“Learning English is better when we are young... I have no doubt in that... this is from my personal experience... it doesn't have to be English it could be any other language like Turkish, French or any other language ... at this age would be easier for the child” (P7).

Although the literature mentions that it is a common misconception that parents believe that learning two languages at the same time might confuse the child (Baker, 2014), the data in this research clearly indicate that this misconception is not the case. This is because all of the 10 participants acknowledge that they are aware that children are capable of learning two languages at the same time and even more. Surprisingly, the same parents with the previous beliefs are the ones speaking only English to their children thereby providing them with access to only one language (English). This leads us to the second theme, which is that parents want their children to be bilingual.

### 3.3.1.3 *Parents want their children to be bilingual.*

The data revealed that all 10 parents wanted their children to be bilingual. One parent said:

“It would have been great if my children knew both languages equally” (P1).

He justifies this by stating that he wants his children to be able to communicate in their British school in addition to being able to communicate with their grandparents, which is currently not happening due to their lack of Arabic. Along the same line, another parent stated that:

“Ideally, I really would have loved it if my child was strong in both languages” (P9).

However, the data also revealed that most parents prioritized their children’s progress in school over their ability to speak their home language ‘Arabic’. One parent clearly indicated that:

“I think we are concentrating on our children's education in school more than we are concentrating on preserving their mother tongue... they will eventually learn ‘Arabic’ however we want them to concentrate on English while we are in the United Kingdom” (P3).

Another parent also stated that their children’s progress in their British school comes first. This is because when they go back to Saudi Arabia:

“They will learn Arabic ultimately... whether they want it or not” (P6).

In the same vein, one parent also clarified that:

“I'm going to focus on the academic achievement here... our concentration would be on her progress in school more than whether she loses the Arabic language or not” (P4).

The remaining seven parents had more or less the same attitudes of prioritizing the children's progress in school over their ability to speak their mother tongue. So, to summarise, under the category ‘Reasons’, parents gave three explanations for their use of English with their children. These included the parents wanting to help their children adapt in British schools, wanting them to be bilingual, and their belief that learning language is better when children are young. This led to the formulation of Finding 1 below.

**FINDING 1:** *Saudi parents chose to speak mostly English with their children because they wanted them to adapt in school, to be bilingual, and their belief that language learning is better when children are young.*

After examining the reasons parents gave for their use of mostly English with their children, I wanted to explore the consequences of this choice on the children from the parents’ perspectives. It appears that there were two consequences, which are explored below.

### 3.3.2 Consequences of Saudi Parents Speaking Mostly/Only English to their Children

#### 3.3.2.1 The Loss of the Home Language: Arabic

The data revealed that all parents in this study are having difficulty with their children’s Arabic. One parent stated that he has three daughters and has started having communication problems:

“The problem is that they don’t understand Arabic anymore” (P2).

Another parent declared that:

“Learning English came at the cost of Arabic, unfortunately” (P5).

More clarification was provided by a parent, who stated that his two children can barely speak Arabic and they cannot produce full sentences, but rather scattered words:

“Their speaking is not as bad as their reading and writing in Arabic” (P6).

Parents were slightly concerned about their children's identity. Losing Arabic is not about just losing the language because any language carries with it a sense of culture and identity. Six of the parents raised the concern about their children's identities in the interviews, while the remaining four did not raise this concern. The following extracts reveal the tone of concern from the parents about their children's identities. For example, one parent emphasized that:

“As a family, we would really like [our] children to be strong in both languages... in addition we don't want them to lose their identities” (P4).

Another parent also stated that his children losing the ability to speak and communicate in Arabic is really a sensitive issue:

“. . . especially for us as Muslim Arabs... it has to do with her identity... unfortunately there is a slight loss of this identity as we are Muslims and Arabs and should be proud of our language” (P4).

Also explaining that she was worried that her children could not read the Quran very well, one mother added:

“My children are Muslims...they should have memorized one chapter of the Quran by now” (P9).

So, to summarise, under the category ‘Consequences’, parents felt there were two consequences of their use of English with their children. These included the loss of their children’s home language and a concern for the children’s identity. This led to the formulation of Finding 2 below.

**FINDING 2:** *Saudi parents’ choice to speak mostly English with their children resulted in the loss (or weakening) of their home language and a concern for their identity.*

### 3.3.3 Emerging Theme

#### 3.3.3.1 Children to Have Perfect British Accents

A final theme, which emerged from the analysis of the data and which was not quite a reason nor a consequence, was the issue surrounding the children’s ‘accent’. The data analysis revealed the theme that this paper did not intend on uncovering. Nine parents out of 10 mentioned how proud they are of their children's native-like British accents. One of the parents stated that his children now have:

“. . . perfect British accents, which would definitely help them when they return back to Saudi Arabia as that English would be better than their peers in school” (P1).

Another parent stated that:

“My younger daughter is completely fluent in English; she is better than her sister ... if you would listen to her accent you would see it is flawless” (p8).

On the same note, one parent stated that:

“When children learn a language, they usually take the accent perfectly” (P6).

He also added that many of his colleagues’ children who studied abroad came back to Saudi Arabia and their children had:

“ . . . very good English with perfect American or British accents” (P6).

All of the previous extracts indicate how Saudi parents value that their children are not only getting the opportunity to learn English but also with the perfect native like accent, which led to the third and final Finding 3 below.

**FINDING 3:** *Saudi parents applied emphasis on the issue of their children’s British accents and were openly proud of this.*

#### 4.0 Discussion of Findings

As demonstrated in the analysis and findings section of this paper, this study produced three findings; these will be discussed critically and in light of the relevant literature.

**FINDING 1:** *Saudi parents chose to speak mostly English with their children because they wanted them to adapt in school, to be bilingual, and their belief that language learning is better when children are young.*

Saudi parents in the UK using mostly English with their children so as not to confuse them is an idea that is contradicted in the literature since a child’s language development in school is not to be affected by the parents speaking another language at home. In fact, speaking the ‘host language’ to the children -in this case English- will feel unnatural for the child and the parents together. In other words, it will be as the L2 English is spoken artificially by the parents (Baker, 2014). This ‘settling down period’ is important for the children because by moving to the United Kingdom they had been facing a lot of change in their language, country, and home. This will definitely put a load of pressure on children psychologically (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004). Baker (2014) also argues that if the parents start to speak the host country’s language to the children, then level of conversation will differ. This means that parent-child conversation will decrease since the parents’ level of proficiency in the host language is not the same as their home language and this simple and artificial language with the children is very likely to affect the children’s ‘conceptual growth’. Moreover, the data revealed that the majority of parents in this study think that they are helping their children cope in schools by speaking English to them, however, what they might not be aware of is that this ‘artificial’ communication with their children might actually harm them rather than help them in adapting to their new school and environment. The fact remains that children do not need the parents to speak the ‘host language’ when they are home as they will have several sources for learning the ‘host language’ outside the home, such as schools, neighbourhood children, and playgrounds (Harding & Riley, 2003). However, in the context of this research since Saudi students do not intend on continuing to live in the United Kingdom and

have to go back to Saudi Arabia after they finish their degrees along with their children, the level of importance allocated to 'English' should be equal to the level of importance allocated 'Arabic'. The data in this study revealed that parents believe that learning English is better when their children are young however; they are neglecting that fact that learning the home language is also better when the children are young. It appears that parents are replacing their children's home language with the host country's language.

Finally, participants appear to want their children to be good in school in addition to being bilingual as their quotes around bilingualism clearly indicate. However, I am arguing that they are not doing what needs to be done in order to ensure that their children become bilingual. Concentrating on English and speaking mostly the 'host language' will not contribute to bilingualism. Porter (2017) cautions that parents tend to fall in this trap of wanting their children to be bilingual, however, concentrating on only one language. The literature provides many solutions for this problem. Baker (2014) suggests two scenarios that lead to successful bilingual children. For example, in the first scenario parents are capable of speaking only Arabic to their children at home and leave the English to be used outside the house. Another suggestion is for one parent to speak English to the children and the other one only Arabic thereby providing the children to enough exposure to both languages. Along with many other parents around the world, Saudi parents wanted their children to maintain their home language and at the same time acquire the host language.

**FINDING 2:** *Saudi parents' choice to speak mostly English with their children resulted in the loss (or weakening) of their home language and a concern for their identity.*

With regards to the consequences of speaking only/mostly English to their children, all of the participants made it clear that they wanted their children to be bilingual as discussed in the previous section. However, it seems that what happened is during their stay in the UK they did not manage to add English to their children's Arabic, but rather English replaced Arabic. Their 'home language' (Arabic) was marginalized and the 'host language' (English) took its place. McKay (2012) and Skutnabb-Kangas and May (2017) discuss this as they clarify that learning an international language like English should be 'additive' and not 'subtractive', which is happening to the Saudi children in this study. The literature presents us with examples where children lost their mother tongue or home language due to studying and extensive focus on the foreign language. Hansen-Strain (1990) conducted a study on four American children aged three, four, seven and nine, who studied Japanese for two years and six months while living in Japan and he found out that the younger the children are, the more likely they are to forget and lose their mother tongue. Another study was done by Merino (1983) on 41 bilingual children -from kindergarten up to fourth grade- in the US for the duration of two years in order to monitor the loss of their mother tongue Spanish. She found out that younger children suffered more mother tongue loss than their older peers did. Orellana (1994) also did a study on 5-6-year-old children studying in the United States with Spanish speaking parents. She found out that after three years, children shifted to speaking only English and were resistant to Speaking Spanish or very hesitant. They would only do so when the parents asked them or pressured them to speak their mother tongue. In addition to the loss of their mother tongue, parents voiced some concern over the children's identity. In contrast to Beetz (2016) arguing that there is no "intrinsic link between language and

identity”, the current data suggests that there is a strong relation between language and identity, this is also supported by Beetz (2016) and Meakins (2008).

**FINDING 3:** *Saudi parents applied emphasis on the issue of their children’s British accents and were openly proud of this.*

The third finding indicates that Saudi parents value the fact that their children are not only getting the opportunity to learn English, but also with the perfect native-like accent. This could be understood in the context of parents want what is best for their children. However, according to Smith (2015), English language teachers around the world seem to be moving away from native speakers forms, while the data in this research suggests that Saudi parents in this study are doing the opposite and heading towards valuing and admiring their children's native-like speakers’ forms and maintaining it during their stay in the United Kingdom. This paper argues that the previous reasons were factors in determining the level of English the Saudi parents living in the UK want for their children, it is embedded in the minds that having native-like accent would make their children have perfect English. The previous two reasons suggest that parents did not develop this accent obsession while living in the United Kingdom but already came with that from their own context and backgrounds in Saudi Arabia.

### **5.0 Limitations of the Study**

From a methodological point of view, for example, the interviews might not have been the best research tool for asking about the parents’ language practises with their children as this could have been addressed better with actual observations of parent-child or child-child interaction, which did not take place due to the time limits of this research. Another limitation was doing telephone interviews due to geographical reasons as some of the participants were already back in Saudi Arabia after finishing their studies. In addition to that, the data was interpreted by only one researcher making the analysis of the data subjective, while having the data looked at by different, researchers would have given the analysis more robustness (Cohen et al., 2013).

### **6.0 Conclusion**

This study set out to critically examine the linguistic practises of a particular group of Saudi parents who chose to use the host country's language instead of the mother tongue with their children. The nature of this study enabled the researcher to investigate how these parents marginalize their home language Arabic and replace it with English when communicating with their children during their temporary stay in the United Kingdom. Through the data obtained from interviews with those parents, the study revealed the reasons behind these practices and their consequences on the children. One of the major reasons the parents gave for their practice is their wish for their children to be bilingual. However, the literature maintains that there are many ways to have bilingual children, but it takes dedication and planning on both part of the parents to give the children the best bilingual environment (Wooden & Hurley, 1992). This environment should include books, stories, media from both the home language and the host language. The interviews themselves seem to have raised some awareness since the parents' responses also showed some concern regarding their children’s identity and loss of the Arabic language. Finally, involving the parents in this critical research is an initial step to introduce change in their linguistic practises

with their children, however, this possibility of change needs to be transparent and transformative (Cornips, 2018).

### 7.0 Recommendations for Future Research

It would be truly beneficial to explore parallel studies with bilingual children with various L1 (e.g. Spanish, French, Japanese...etc). It would also be recommended to conduct research studies with mixed race parents and their bilingual (or even trilingual) children.

### About the Author:

**Dr Mazin Mansory** joined the English Language Institution (formerly the *ELC*) at King Abdulaziz University in 2008 after receiving his MA degree in English Language Teaching from Nottingham Trent University, UK. In the ELC, he contributed to the teaching and development of the *General English* and *English for Science* programmes. As part of his Doctorate thesis at Exeter University, completed in October 2016, he carried out research on teachers' roles in English Language Assessment, which remains a focal point of his research interests. Mazin is now an Assistant Professor teaching in the MA in TESOL programme in addition to being the Head of Academic Students' Affairs Unit at the ELI.

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