

Islam and English Learning in Australia: Female Learners Working Through Differences

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the way Islamic religion and culture influence Muslim immigrant women's participation in English learning programs in Australia. It presents a narrative of three married Iraqi Muslim Immigrant Women's (IMIW) experiences in both mainstream mix-gender and women-only English classes in Melbourne. Two data collection methods were employed, in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion, to generate data from the participants. The findings show that the participants struggled to cope with mixed-gender classes due to some social, cultural and religious attributes including familiarity with single-gender settings, family commitments and the culture of their community. The paper presents recommendations for the Australian government to pay more attention to women-only classes to stimulate immigrant women to English learning courses.

Key words: Islam and English Learning, Iraqis English Learning

BACKGROUND: IRAQI MUSLIM WOMEN MIGRATION TO AUSTRALIA

Thousands of Iraqi Muslim Women immigrate to Australia with their families each year. One of the many challenges these immigrants face is learning the English language, especially with their heavy family and home responsibilities. It is well-known, that Australia now has one of the highest populations of overseas-borne immigrants who come under various circumstances. As at 30 June 2011, 6.0 million overseas-born people live in Australia, most of them came from Muslim countries or regions (ABS, 2011). According to DIAC (2009), 42% of Muslim immigrants are women. The majority of them are mothers with children (Hassan & Lester, 2015). The Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP, 2015) annual report stated that people from Iraq represented the largest nationality group that granted humanitarian visas in 2014-2015 followed by the Syrians and Burmese.

In Iraq, English is treated as a foreign language. Therefore, the Iraqi immigrants' English competency is relatively very low at the time of their arrival in Australia. Some of them arrive in Australia with even no English skills (Bao, Abdilah & Chowdhury, 2012 & De Courcy, 2007). In Australia, for Muslim immigrant women including those who are from Iraqi background, English learning is not easy. Some recent studies (e.g. Abdilah and Chowdhury, 2013; Taylor, 2005 and Casimiro et al. 2007) have reported that they lack access to English classes due to certain sociocultural, identity and religious barriers. This greatly affects their settlement in Australia as well as their integration into the

broader Australian society. According to Lo Bianco (1990) low English skills restricts immigrants' social participation as well as limits their access to employment, technology, and many other services, which in turn affects the development of the nation. Acknowledging the high need of immigrants to English language, the Australian government sought to provide English learning opportunities for all immigrants through the national language policy which was firstly introduced in 1987 and named as *The national language policy* (Lo Bianco, 1990).

Even though the policy stressed the "support for the maintenance of ethnic community languages [and] Aboriginal languages" (Lo Bianco, 1990, p. 1), its main concern was to promote teaching English as a second language in the nation. The policy argues that there is a strong relationship between the immigrants' low social interaction and unemployment and English literacy. According to Ingram (2004), the policy was developed based on social as well as economic goals. It aimed at more social engagement of immigrants in the Australia society by equipping them with English language skills and also aimed to enable the immigrants get jobs and enter workplaces, as it would be very difficult for them to do so without having English skills. In the early 1980s, Australia had initiated many language planning and teaching centres as well as researching bodies throughout the country to foster the newly developed policy and implement it successfully. As education (including language teaching) is resulted at the federal level in Australia, each state articulated its own language plans and programs with common and shared goals. Working in their own states and territories, many language

centres developed their own ESL programs to teach NESB immigrants the English language. Some of these programs were nationwide and supported by the government such as the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP).

MUSLIM WOMEN AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN AUSTRALIA

In Australia, recent L2 research (eg. Abdilah, 2019; AMES, 2018, 2015; DEEWR 2009; Macrae, 2002; Mc Cue, 2008; Rida & Milton, 2001) reported that immigrant women in general and Muslims in particular access to this service was limited due to many sociocultural barriers such as gender, age, family, home duties, health issues, and unencouraging networks of friends and relatives. Some of these studies recommended offering women-friendly classes, local classes with flexible time and location, and home tutoring to immigrant women to stimulate them to English classes. In response to this, some women-only literacy classes at a number of educational institutions and community organisations in Melbourne were introduced. For instance, but not limited to, programs at Victoria University, Berwick Technical And Further Education institute (TAFE), Dandenong Neighbourhood Centre (DNC) and Broadmeadows Women Community House (BWCH). Most of these classes are offered free to immigrants through a government subsidy. The majority of students in such classes are Muslim women (Macrae, 2002). This action came in line with the Australian government's social inclusion policy in which Australia sought to increase the immigrants' level of participation in the broader Australian society. According to the Australian Social Inclusion Board (ASIB, 2010), people with poor English proficiency are less likely to attend community events, having less employment rates, having poor or fair health and mostly feeling unsafe at home.

The Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) (2009) asserts that immigrant women are the most disadvantaged group in regard to access to English learning. The department further maintains that acquiring English skills "will play a key role" in their settlement in Australia as well as in driving the Australian government's social inclusion agenda (p. 4). McCue (2008) also wrote a report funded by the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), and sought to identify the drivers and barriers to Muslim Australian women's participation in Australian civil and social life. She documented that Muslim women face difficulties in their participation in the Australian society because of their limited English competency and that their access to English language training programs is restricted by lack of information on such programs as well as lack of women-friendly classes. The report suggested that considerable support should be given to Muslim women to overcome the significant barriers that exist to their active participation in the Australian society, specifically the difficulties identified with regard to their access to English language classes (p. 8). The support that the report suggested is to provide these immigrants with "women-only English classes" (p. 4) to help them participate effectively in the Australian society.

As clearly asserted in the language policy, the provision of English classes was mainly to integrate immigrants in the broader Australian society. This social inclusion the Australian government seeks from equipping immigrants with English skills does not go unchallenged. L2 researchers state that most of the English classes that were available to immigrant women do not meet their social, cultural as well as personal needs. This makes a large number of them opt not to attend (see Abdilah & Chowdhury, 2013; Casimiro et al., 2007; Mc Cue 2008; Rida & Milton, 2001). Casimiro et al., (2007) for example, reported in a study examining the English learning experiences of Muslim women from Iraq, Sudan and Afghanistan in Western Australia, that they felt "uncomfortable" attending mixed-gender classes due to some cultural commitments (p. 64).

THE DISCOURSE ON ISLAM AND L2 LEARNING

For Muslims, Islam is a way of life, not just a religion. That is, their behaviours, traditions, cultural norms etc. are all linked to Islam. This makes it difficult, in many occasions, for Muslims to cope with other non-Muslim cultures when the cultural differences are not understood. Muslim people try to maintain their Islamic identity and practices which are taken from either the holy Qur'an or records of the Prophet Mohammed's sayings and deeds (*Hadith*) (Saeed and Akbarzadeh, 2003). The basic unit in Muslim's life is family and every member in it has a specific role as asserted by the Quran. The husband, for instance, is responsible for securing the family income and handling its issues in the outer society. Women, on the other hand, are responsible mainly for handling the family's house-hold issues includes taking care of the children. This doesn't mean that women in Muslim societies do not do work or secure income. Many of them do such things, but they usually manage their time between work and home responsibilities.

In diaspora – as in Australia – Muslims keep this way of life. According to Yasmeen (2007), most of immigrant Muslim women who arrive in Australia are married with children. This makes them focus more on their family-related issues such as children and house-keeping. Hence, learning a second language- English in this case – has less priority due to their limited interaction with the English-speaking people in the outer society. It is noteworthy that Muslim immigrants usually live in areas where the Muslim community is big. This is because of the availability of the Muslim's *Halal* food as well as the use of the Arabic language (the Islam formal language) in most retail shops and other local life-related services such as medical clinics and community centres.

The Muslim women's low presence in English programs is not only due to their limited need to this language. Many other social-related factors such as family commitments, gendered-nature of classes and support networks are strongly influencing their access to this service. Such factors are related to Islam in a way or another and Muslim women are the most influenced group by it because they (Muslim women) usually stand as remarkable signs of Islam due to their unique/easily identified Islamic dress. The way the Muslim women dress (*Abaya* and *Hijab*) makes them easily recog-

nized as Muslims; and sometimes subjected to anti-Islam behaviours. Hence, Muslim women prefer not to participate in activities that involve mixing with non-Muslims including English language classes, just to keep themselves away from “troubles”.

Muslims in Australia face many challenges that affect their integration in the new society such as the stereotype that portrays Muslims as terrorists, outsiders, extremists and “others” (Aly, 2007; Dunn, 2001; Mansouri, 2010; Poynting & Mason, 2008). These feelings were increased after the September 11, 2001 and Bali, 2002 bombings. The media, also, contributed to this by portraying Muslims as terrorists that threatens the Western societies, (Aly, 2007). This increase of anti-Arab and anti-Muslims feelings hugely affected Muslim’s relationships with other non-Muslim individuals including participation in English classes. It is widely acknowledged that negative stereotypes may impede effective interactions between people of different cultural backgrounds. Second language researchers assert that acquisition of a second language will be enhanced if both groups, the target language group and the second language group, have a positive attitude towards each other (Schumann’s, 1978 and Gardner, 2007).

Iraqi Muslim women in Australia usually have limited participation in social activities with non-Muslims. They tend to be with members of their ethnic group rather than with people from other different cultures. This closed social networks of Muslim friends and relatives usually limit the Iraqi women’s access to English classes in Australia as documented by Milton and Rida (2001) who studied the influence of Muslim women’s (including Iraqis) social network in their access to the free English hours offered to immigrant by the Australian government. The study reported that Muslim women’s network acts as a “barrier to fulfilling the language needs of the learner to such an extent that she never perceive a need for English” (p. 42).

THE FOCUS OF THIS ARTICLE

This paper is derived from a larger study that examined the sociocultural factors that influence the IMIW’s access to the women-only programs offered to immigrant women by the Australian government. Specifically, the paper is a narrative of three married Iraqi Muslim immigrant women’s (*Hamida, Najat and Janit*) experiences in both mainstream mix-gender classes and women-only classes to examine how do the Islamic religion norms and traditions affect Muslim Immigrant Women’s English learning in Australia. Further, the study tries to uncover the influence of learners’ gender and personal and social life in their decision to study in mainstream or women-only English classes. The three participants were chosen for this work because of the uniqueness in their stories especially with the role the Islamic religion and culture played in shaping their English learning in Australia in general and in choosing the study setting in particular. In so doing, the paper aims to provide a complete picture of the IMIW’s experience in English learning in Australia and the way social factors such as religion, family, support networks and culture affect their utilising of such service.

This is to help the language policy and program developers provide more optimized English courses to meet the needs of this important segment of the Australian broader community. It is worth mentioning that the study examines the English learning experiences of married immigrant women only. Single immigrants’ perceptions and experiences are not covered here due to the scope and design of the study (future research about this group is highly recommended).

THE METHODOLOGY OF THE CASE STUDY

This is a qualitative case study. Two collection methods were used to collect data for the research, in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion. This is to capture as much authentic information as possible about these immigrants’ English learning journey in Australia. The individual interviews were conducted in a public library to give the participants more freedom to express their feelings and opinions about the role of Islamic religion and culture in their English learning and social life in Australia. During the interview time (45 minutes), the participants were asked to answer open-ended questions on their experiences on both mainstream and women-only English classes in Australia. After completing the interviews, the three participants were invited to a focus group discussion where they shared rich information on English learning in Australia and particularly the Muslim women’s participation in it. The interviews as well as the focus group discussion were conducted in Arabic and then transcribed and translated into English. The collected data were integrated, coded and categorized based on themes. The patterns and themes that were produced, then, were analysed by referring to relevant literatures and in accordance with the study aims. As this study is a narrative of the participants’ English learning experience, it is essential, here, to present the personal story of each case before continuing on to the research findings.

The participants

The research participants are three married Iraqi Muslim Immigrant Women who arrived recently in Melbourne, Australia and now are studying English at the Broadmeadows Women Community House. They are Hamida (47 years old mother with three children), Najat (37 old mother with four children), and Janit (21 years old young wife with no children). Next is a short description of each case.

Hamida

Hamida and her husband immigrated to Australia from Iran in 2012. They left Iraq during the 2003 war and lived in Iran for nine years then they applied to come to Australia through the Australian embassy in Iran. They came together as a family (Hamida, her husband, and three children). Hamida comes from a very Muslim restricted family. Her father was an Islamic clerk in Iraq. Her husband was an Islamic teacher at a secondary school in Iraq where she was teaching Arabic language as well. She met him first at the school in 1999 and soon after that they got engaged and married. Because of the

war in Iraq and the unsettled security situation, they decided to immigrate to Iran. In Iran they couldn't get the permanent residency as well as a good income for their family. They, then, decided to come to Australia because they have relatives in this country. They applied to immigrate to Australia through the Australian embassy in Iran and got their visa in 2012, the same year in which they travelled to this country. After her arrival, she was offered the 510 free English learning hours at any accredited AMEP provider, but she opted to join the free women-only English classes at the BWCH instead.

Najat

Najat came to Australia in a spouse visa following her husband. Her husband arrived in Australia by boat in 2012 and left Najat with three children in Turkey. After getting his permanent Visa, the husband applied for the family to re-unite in Australia and they got the spouse visa in 2014. Najat fled Iraq with her family because of the war. They chose to come to Australia looking for a safe haven for themselves and their children because of the good reputation Australia has in terms of treating refugees. Najat is a very busy mother (she has four children now, with the youngest is only two years old). She has lots of home duties, which in turn, affect her going to every-day school to learn English. She studied English for few weeks at the Epping TAFE then stopped. Now, she is studying English at the women-only English program at the BWCH.

Janit

Janit is a young and beautiful wife. She came to Australia in a spouse visa following her husband too. Her husband is an Australian citizen from Iraqi background and met her in Lebanon while he was in a holiday. They liked each other and spent some time together in Lebanon before they decided to engage. Janit is from Iraq and was living in Lebanon with her family. Her father is a businessman and runs his business from Beirut. They got married in Lebanon, then, her husband returned to Australia and applied for a spouse visa for her. She got her visa few months later and arrived in Australia in 2014. Few weeks after her arrival in Australia, she enrolled at Epping TAFE to learn English then changed to the BWCH for the same purpose. Janit is a very social person and engages easily with people around her. As a young, rich and beautiful woman, she attracted many of her male classmates and they were competing to join her in the class activities or on a coffee at the school's canteen. Janit wears *Hijab*, however, she is not a religious person and has no issue mixing with stranger men in public.

PARTICIPANTS' VIEWS ON THE SELECTION OF MAINSTREAM CLASSES

The interviewed Muslim immigrant women generally prefer to study in single-gender classes rather than in mixed-gender ones. This is the most logical summary of the interview data in regard to the issue of single/mixed-gender English classes.

Some of the participants clearly expressed an unwillingness to attend mixed-gender classes due to feeling uncomfortable mixing with men they did not know. Hamida (47, mother), for example, said:

When I knew that the English classes at the TAFE are mixed (men and women), I didn't go because it is not good for a woman to mix with men that she does not know. (Hamida, interview)

As discussed earlier, Hamida immigrated to Australia from a very strict Islamic country (Iran) where she spent more than ten years of her life. It can be clearly seen from examining her quote that the mixed-gender nature of the classes was a major factor in her decision not to attend the TAFE classes. Coming from an Islamic religious background, Hamida perceived mixing with "stranger men" as "not good". This is due to the way she grew up in both Iraq and Iran where she learnt that a good "wife" should sustain formal relationships with stranger men and only mix with them in public places. This cultural practice is personal, and neither all Muslims nor all Muslim societies follow it. Many Muslim societies do not have such a practice and mixing between men and women is very normal.

Iraqi Muslim Immigrant Women in Australia, generally, come from a patriarchal society where husbands and other male relatives have a remarkable influence over women's activities. Having said that, it does not mean that men "control" women's actions or decide on their behalf. In Iraqi Muslims' culture, women usually consult their men in almost every activity they do, just to show more respect to them. Hence, Hamida's view on mixing with stranger men at the school and without her husband's knowledge is based on this foundation. Such behaviour, in her view, may damage her "reputation" because married women should not socialise with stranger men without the knowledge of their husbands. This is a show of respect that Muslim women usually like to give to their husbands and their families, as she believes.

Another participant, Najat, reported very interesting views when she talked about her experience in mainstream English classes:

Most of the students in my class at TAFE were males; with some females from Burma, Afghanistan and Vietnam and no one was from Iraq. I didn't feel comfortable and was very shy and embarrassed as I am not used to such setting. I even couldn't participate in the [class] activities because they may laugh at my English. (Najat, interview.)

Najat, views mixed-gender classes from different lenses. She does not refuse mixed-gender classes for religious reasons only. In addition to being new to her, Najat perceives the "presence" of stranger men as something that makes her "uncomfortable" and "embarrassed" in the class. This kind of discomfort is linked to the educational system in the Iraqi schools in which she studied where females, mostly, go to female schools only (and so do males). The male/female mixing at Iraqi schools is only at primary and most university levels. The secondary, high schools and most vocational training institutes are gender segregated. In Australia, the situation was different and Najat was placed in a mixed-gender class

in her language school. Being in this new environment, Najat had to socialise and mix with “stranger males” that she did not know. This “embarrassing” sphere made it difficult for her to socialise with the new classmates, especially the men.

The female peers who were with her in the same classroom were from Burma, Afghanistan and Vietnam and none of them was speaking Arabic. Because of her low English skills, Najat couldn’t communicate successfully or make friendships with any of them. Inside the classroom, she also could not participate in class activities due to feeling “embarrassed” to speak in broken English in front of stranger men. Such an environment was strange for Najat to the degree that she felt very isolated and uncomfortable in her study. This made her looking for a women-only classes in her area and when she knew about the women-only classes at the BWCH, she immediately joined them and left her study at the TAFE.

Janit’s experience with the mainstream mixed-gender classes is, again, different from that of Hamida and Najat. In the interview, she explained the reason why she left the mainstream classes at the TAFE institute and joined the single-gender classes at the BWCH as follows:

I attended the free English classes at the Epping TAFE for only four weeks. The classes were mixed and there were many male students. You know... if there are males in your classroom, you mix with them in [one] way or another because they are classmates. My husband was not happy with the situation. You know... there are many Iraqis at the TAFE and they might see me mixing with stranger men and “misinterpret” the situation. We didn’t like others to talk badly about me so I changed to women-only classes. (Janit, interview.)

Janit is a young and newly married Iraqi female who lives in the Epping area. She is a beautiful and active woman and has no children. When she joined the classes at the TAFE, many of the male students tried to make friendships with her. The TAFE school where she was going to was in Epping as well and many of her Iraqi friends and acquaintances were going to that school too. Coming from a high class family, Janit views gender mixing as a normal behaviour as she used to study and work in mixed-gender environments in Lebanon before immigrating to Australia. It is worth noting that the Lebanese society is more secular compared to other Middle-Eastern Muslim societies considering the large populations of none Muslim communities such as the Christian and the Druze who live there. However, Janit didn’t like to mix and socialise with stranger males in Epping’s school for many reasons. Most of all, she didn’t like people from her own community (the Iraqi community) to see her socialising with stranger men and “talk badly” about her due to “misinterpreting” this behaviour.

Her husband knew about the male students in her class and was “not happy with the situation”. It is not the purpose of this study to examine why her husband did not like her to mix with stranger men. It could involve religion, jealousy, reputation or just to keep his wife safe from other men. The most important thing here (as far as the study is concerned) is that both Janit and her husband were not happy with this situation. She continued:

When my friend (Najat) told me about the free women-only classes at the BWCH, I immediately left the TAFE and joined them. It is very good to study with women only. (Janit, interview)

A careful look at her quote reveals that Janit was happy to leave her classes at the TAFE and join the women-only classes that her friend “Najat” told her about. According to Janit, she found this new environment to be more “safe” and comfortable. It could be argued that both respecting her husband’s will, as well as protecting her family’s reputation, were strong motivators behind Janit’s decision to leave the TAFE and study at the women-only classes.

PARTICIPANTS’ VIEWS ON THE SELECTION OF WOMEN-ONLY CLASSES

Almost all the research participants reported that they felt comfortable, safe and happy attending the women-only classes at the BWCH because of the female-friendly environment of these classes. Hamida was one of the very first women who joined these classes. After withdrawing from the mainstream classes at the TAFE, Hamida and her husband started looking for women-only classes in the area. According to her, the receptionist at the TAFE told her husband that the BWCH runs similar classes at flexible times and in different locations.

She said:

My husband called them (the BWCH) and knew that they run the classes two days a week and in two different locations, one of the locations was in my area. I was very happy to know about the classes. They looked suitable to me. You know... women only participants, free transport and nearby location. It was an excellent opportunity, so I registered my name straightaway. (Hamida group discussion)

The women only environment encouraged Hamida to join these classes “straightaway” because they were very “suitable” to her. This suitability, according to her, is not only because of the female-only environment, but also because of other female-related services the centre offers. When the researcher asked her “what else, other than the female-only environment” she liked in the classes, she stated:

They also have free sewing classes and a female carer to look after the kids while we study. This is very good... as our children are also being looked after while we study. You know, this is very important because it makes it easy for us to study and bring our kids with us. (Hamida, group discussion)

These extra services (the free on-site childcare service and the sewing lessons) the centre is offering are very useful and encouraging to the women because they are available only at female-only centres and not in the mixed-gender mainstream schools.

Similar views were reported by Najat who left her English study at the TAFE and joined the women-only classes at the BWCH. Najat reported:

One of my friends told me that the Broadmeadows Women Community House offers free English classes for women. We checked with them (the BWCH) and knew

that they do offer free English classes for women only with free transport from and to the centre. They also told us that there are some Arab women in the classes (Iraqis and Lebanese). I was very happy to know about that and told my husband to register my name ASAP. (Najat, interview.)

As discussed earlier, Najat is “shy” in nature and has very poor English skills, a female-only environment is ideal for her as in such environment she can practise her English with non-English speaking female peers without feeling embarrassed. Najat, on the other side, also talked about another important motivator behind her decision to join the women only English classes. She stated:

Now [in the women-only classes] I can do anything I like without breaking my Islamic and cultural norms. For example, I can take off my Hijab (hair scarf) or wear short or tight clothes because there are no stranger men at the school. You know, we cannot do these things out in the public or when there are stranger men around us. (Najat, interview.)

According to these words, Najat now (at the women-only classes) feels more freedom in her behaviours. She can study, move, and socialise inside the centre without wearing her full Islamic dress because she is within a female-only environment. It is noteworthy that at mainstream schools, Muslim women usually go wearing their full Islamic dress. But when it comes to the women-only classes, the story is different and they can wear anything they like because they are within a same-gender setting. This women friendly environment at the BWCH classes does not only encourage Najat to wear anything she likes, but also gives her the courage to practise her English and participate in the class activities freely – a step that Najat was unable to take in the mainstream classes.

Janit’s experience with the single-gender classes was remarkable to some extent. However she has no issue mixing with stranger males, she agrees with Hamida and Najat that the women-only classes are more “comfortable” and “safe” when compared to the mainstream ones. In her interactions in the group discussion about the difference between the women-only classes and the mainstream classes, Janit said:

Yeah I do agree with you [all] that here [women-only classes] is better because you feel more satisfied studying with women like you and from your community as well. Here you can do anything you like, wear anything you like and talk to anyone you like without being watched or bothered by others. (Janit, group discussion)

As discussed earlier, Janit is a very social and active young female who is always surrounded by people including stranger males. Most of her female friends at the TAFE school were Muslims from her Iraqi community. This network of Muslim women did not favour mixing with stranger men due to cultural and religious practices (as discussed earlier) and, as a result, influenced Janit’s socialising with males at the school. When her friends at the TAFE knew about the women-only classes at the BWCH, many of them moved to these new classes. This (as well as her husband’s

will to avoid mixing with stranger men) made Janit leave the mainstream classes at the TAFE and join the single-gender classes at the BWCH. According to her, Janit is now very “satisfied” studying at women-only classes because such environment helps her avoid many social and family issues especially with her husband and friends who prefer the female-only environment for study.

INTERPRETATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS’ VIEWS

It could be argued that the nature of classes in terms of gender participants plays a key role in the IMIW’s selection of English classes. While the research participants show a clear reluctance to attend classes at the TAFE due to being mixed-gender, they indicate significant happiness and comfort in the women-only classes at the BWCH. This “comfort” or “happiness” the participants feel at single-gender classes is not related to Islamic restrictions only. Even though Islam is against free mixing of men and women privately outside the legal bounds of marriage, other factors such as embarrassment and family reputation contributed to this reluctance. According to the research participants, being in a female only environment is very encouraging at the personal, religious and cultural levels. In such classes, they can socialise and talk about their thoughts, experiences, as well as problems, within a group of peers who usually share them the same gender, cultural and religious background. They can also behave in any way they like without being watched or criticised by others, which is not available in the mainstream classes. This is because the behaviour of Muslim women, and particularly the married ones, in public or in mixed-gender settings has some religious and cultural bounds. On the other hand, there are no such bounds in female-only settings. For instance, going out in public domains without wearing the *Hijab* is against the Islamic teachings but in women-only settings such as female schools or gatherings, the *Hijab* is not a requirement anymore.

The social network of friends, relatives as well as the husbands of the learners contributed to this low presence of Muslim women in mixed-gender classes as well. This can be seen clearly in Janit’s case when her Muslim friends and husband influenced her study at the mainstream mixed-gender classes at the TAFE and made her change to the women-only classes at the BWCH. This suggests the support networks and relatives of the IMIW have the potential to limit these immigrants’ participation in mainstream programs and encourage their participation in women-only classes instead. Such findings come in line with Rida and Milton (2001) contention that Muslim women networks influence their participation in the wider Australian society in general and in English learning in Particular.

The other female-friendly services the centre offers such as the free sewing classes and the on-site childcare are another important factor why the participants feel happy attending the women-only classes at this community centre. The researched women see such classes as an ideal environment for them to study the language, meet friends and learn other skills, while their children are being looked after by a fe-

male carer at the same place. Such environment, also, offers them the opportunity to practise their English language with non-English speaking peers who are, usually, at the same level of English proficiency. A step that abolishes the “embarrassment” these immigrants might have when practising their English at mainstream classes amongst stranger males. The findings this study present support the current SLA research in terms of the difficulties the Muslim women face in English learning at mainstream schools. The writer reported elsewhere (Abdilah & Chowdhury, 2013) that mixed-gender classes is one of the factors behind many Muslim women’s failure to attend their free English classes in Australia. The data obtained from this research’s participants support this contention and show that single-gender classes is more attracting to Muslim women to the degree that many of them favoured it on the account of the mainstream mixed-gender ones. The findings also support Casimiro et al. (2007) argument that the needs of Muslim immigrant women should be given more attention to increase their social participation in the broader Australian society. It (the findings) come in line with their suggestions that “women-friendly” classes are a good option to attract immigrant women (and particularly Muslim women) to English classes and increase their participation in the Australian social life (Casimiro et al., 2007, p.57).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study concludes that the researched IMIW in Australia prefer to study in single-gender classes where they can practise their English and socialise with peers who share them the same gender and, sometimes, the same level of education and cultural background. This preference, according to the study, is due to some social, cultural and religious commitments including family, Islamic norms and traditions as well as the influence of their social networks of friends and relatives. Having said that, the paper does not argue that the Australian government should only offer women-only English classes to Muslim immigrant women. It rather maintains that female-friendly settings are more successful in bringing immigrant women in general and Muslim women in particular into English learning and practice in Australia. This is based on the data the study obtained directly from the participants which highlight that the women-only classes in Melbourne is a good initiative that many local Muslim women are greatly utilising. One should not forget to mention that female-only settings are not favoured only by Muslim women. Scholars (eg. Casimiro 2007 and Mansouri, 2010) state that women in general feel more comfortable in settings where they can interact, share thoughts/feelings as well as discuss personal issues within a group of peers who share them the same gender.

Nevertheless, the question arises as to what degree the women-only classes are successful in Australia? From the data that was collected directly from the participants, it can be argued that, on the one hand, these classes are very successful in attracting Muslim women to English learning. However, on the other hand, this success is not complete. The number of Muslim women who utilise such service is relatively low. The study has found that the number of women-only courses available in Melbourne is very low

and Muslim women, usually, have to travel long distances to attend such classes. This, according to the study, might limit the number of Muslim women who access women-only classes in particular and English learning services in general.

To sum up, this study is a context specific. That is, the findings from this study may apply only to the context in which it was conducted (married Iraqi Muslim Immigrant Women in Melbourne, Australia). A further research that can cover a large population of immigrant women in Australia would be interesting and valuable. Finally, it could be argued that the women-only programs is a good initiative that needs much attention from the Australian government, including more budget allocation, to include more non-English speaking immigrant women in English classes regardless of their nationality or cultural background.

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