

The Significant Role of the ICT in the Maintenance of Arabic Language and Culture Among the Arabic-speaking Community in the Regional Queensland City, Australia

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ABSTRACT: *The use of ICT (Information Communication Technology) is seen to be effective in the maintenance of the heritage language and culture among the ethnolinguistic groups living in the host country. The field of language maintenance and shift is characterized by its diverse factors, which contribute either to the preservation of the minority languages and cultures or limit their transmission to second generation children. This paper aims to investigate the role of ICT as an important factor allowing for opportunities to maintain the Arabic language within the Arabic speakers in Toowoomba, Australia. The findings revealed that information technology and its various tools; particularly the social media such as Facebook, Viber, etc., assisted the Arab community to practice their heritage language via constant communication with their relatives on a daily basis as well as to retain and promote their heritage culture and identity. This technology helps Arabic speakers in many ways, as it provides them with a sense of attachment and connectedness to their relatives in their home country. The study's findings are expected to improve knowledge and understanding of language preservation, as well as raise awareness among Arabic speakers and the community about the importance of using new technology to preserve their language, culture, and identity.*

Keywords: *ICT, Heritage Culture, Language Maintenance, Language Shift, Toowoomba.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Minority language preservation has always been a major concern for linguists, educators, language activists, and immigrant families who need to support and preserve these languages for future generations (Abdelhadi, 2018). Fishman (1996) posed an important question: "What do you lose when you lose your language?" (p. 80). It means, what are your plans for your mother tongue? This is a critical question because it determines the fate of the language: whether it will be preserved and transmitted to the second-generation or whether it will be lost.

Arabic speakers are increasingly aware of the importance of using technology, notably the internet, to engage in daily communication and interaction with their relatives and friends in their home country. They use the internet as a means of communication (online communication) with relatives and friends as well as digital media to access some films, entertainment videos and songs in Arabic to help them develop and preserve their heritage language and culture.

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of communication technology in the maintenance of the Arabic language and culture as well as its transmission to second-generation children.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have been conducted all over the world to investigate the survival of minority languages, particularly in multilingual and multicultural societies (Clyne, 2005; Rubino, 2010). The aim of these studies is to advocate for and preserve ethnic minority and immigrant languages in order to protect them from an unexpected shift or loss (Garcia, 2003). However, little research has been undertaken on the retention of the Arabic language among Arabic-speaking immigrants (Abdalla, 2006; Martin, 2009; Sehlaoui, 2008).

The majority of community language studies in Australia have attempted to identify multiple factors that are either beneficial or detrimental to language maintenance (Pauwels, 2005). These factors are diverse and include political, social, demographic, economic, cultural, linguistic, psychological, and institutional support factors. The maintenance of the Arabic language can be affected either positively or negatively by these factors (Abdelhadi, 2018). The primary focus of this paper will be on the role of ICT as a key factor in the intergenerational language maintenance and transmission among the Arabic-speaking community in Australia.

Bahhari (2014) investigated the maintenance of the Arabic language among Saudi children in Melbourne. The children's parents are international students, and the author refers to them as sojourners who have to go home after they finish their studies in Australia. The results indicated that the Saudi Arabic-speaking children maintained their Arabic language through many language maintenance factors. Among these factors were the use of communication technology with the extended family back home via video call, watching Arabic shows, and the use of the internet to access Arabic video games, which were also significant factors in maintaining the Arabic language.

Al-Sahafi (2015) explored the role of Arabic-speaking fathers in regards to the maintenance of their Arabic language in New Zealand. He found that the use of communication technology plays a crucial role in teaching children at home by using Arabic books, videos, and DVDs. Furthermore, the use of digital media, such as reading newspapers and magazines via the Internet, is very important for parents and their children as a way of having access to the written form of Arabic.

Clyne and Kipp (1999) identified some of the factors that contributed to the maintenance of the Arabic language among the Egyptians and Lebanese. Among these factors are the role of the internet in learning the community language, reading books in the Arabic language, and communicating with friends and relatives via the phone.

Othman (2011) investigated Arabic language maintenance within the Arabic-speaking community in Manchester, Britain. He employed a qualitative approach using observation, focus group, and semi-structured interviews with 17 Arab Muslim families. In addition to many other social, economic, and political factors, he found that communication technologies such as the internet, telephone, and satellite channels contributed effectively to the maintenance of the Arabic language by allowing the second-generation children to stay in touch with their relatives and friends in the home country. These technological tools tend to be faster and more cost-effective to use and practise oral communication in Arabic on a daily basis.

As noted above, communication technology plays an indispensable role in the maintenance of the heritage language and culture among the ethnolinguistic groups attempting to withstand linguistic and cultural power of the dominant language. Communication and interconnectedness via the internet are valuable for intergenerational transmission of heritage languages and cultures.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

In this qualitative study, the sample size was determined by the concept of saturation. The researcher was looking for the factors that may contribute to the maintenance of the Arabic language within the Arabic speaking community in the regional city of Toowoomba. The sample included 20 participants who were drawn purposefully from the community membership list at the mosque (Abdelhadi, 2018).

A mixed purposeful sampling technique was used to recruit 20 Arabic speakers from the mosque in the regional city of Toowoomba, Australia to participate in this study. First, the researcher conducted a purposive sampling technique in order to select 12 adult male participants from the membership list at the mosque. This list includes the population of about 1, 000 adult males who are members of the mosque by paying annual membership fees. The Arabic speakers represent the majority at the mosque (Abdelhadi, 2018).

3.2 Data collection strategies

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

3.3 Ethical considerations

Approval for this research was gained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. All ethical concerns about all aspects of this research were clearly explained to the participants verbally, and they were also included in the participant information sheet as well as in the consent form (Abdelhadi, 2018). Participants in this study were informed that their contribution was entirely voluntary and they had the full right to withdraw at any stage during the study without any consequences. Participants were informed that their identities would be protected by providing a pseudonym rather than their actual names (Abdelhadi, 2016).

3.4 Data analysis procedures

In the current study, the researcher adopted the same steps for analysing the data that are outlined in Creswell's (2014) plan of analysis. This plan involves going through several steps: (1) organizing and preparing data for analysis; (2) reading through all the gathered information in order to acquire a general sense of it; (3) coding the data by detecting text segments and giving them a code label; (4) representing the data in tables or charts to convey information about each participant, and (5) making an interpretation of the data and comparing the findings with information found in literature (Creswell, 2014). The researcher found this plan to be very

comprehensive and an easy way of dealing with the large amount of raw data gathered. A thematic analysis was utilized in this study, which involved going through all of the following steps: organizing, transcribing, and coding the data, to extract themes and sub-themes that would represent the findings of this study (Abdelhadi, 2018).

IV. FINDINGS

4.1 The use of technology for communication with relatives and friends

Participants in this study used new technology (Internet) as a medium of communication with their relatives and friends. This type of communication was varied and included the telephone, Skype, Viber, Tango, and email. Those modes of communication were useful in helping the Arabic speakers to stay in close touch with their relatives and friends in the home country. Table 1 refers to the use of technology among the Arabic-speaking community.

Table 1: Participants use different technologies for communication with relatives and friends

Sub-theme	The use of technology for communication with relatives and friends	
Participants	n= 12 (60%) males	Internet, telephone, Facebook, Viber, Email (Yahoo, Hotmail), MSN, Tango
	n=8 (40%) females	Telephone, Skype, WhatsApp

As shown in Table 1, both male and female participants depended on the use of available technology in their communication. The following statements refer to the different types of social media used by participants during their communication with relatives and friends overseas:

Ah yeah, phone and ah, social networks. Yeah! Skype or Viber. Ah yeah, something like that, through the internet. No, I think it is enough just with the phone and social communication. Yeah, they (children) like to use the phone ah yeah, especially if we get connected to the internet, which is, ah, less expensive. They can spend more time talking so they like that one, talking and there are ah, the facilities of watching their faces, now that they can see the video and see their relatives there as well, Yeah. It's good. That keeps them connected (S3M).

I speak to them in Arabic, yep, through Skype. Yeah, using Skype, sometimes using Yahoo, sometimes Hotmail, MSN, talking to them online. (S4M).

I used the telephone, Skype, WhatsApp, and Viber for communication. (S14F).

The participants, as mentioned above, use different types of technological tools to communicate with their relatives and friends overseas. The use of new technology is an important instrument to strengthen ties and affiliation with the family, as well as to preserve the Arabic language and culture.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 The use of ICT (internet communication)

All Arabic-speaking parents reported the use of new technologies to keep in touch with their relatives and friends in the home country. These new technologies include different media of communication such as Skype, email, Facebook, Viber, telephone, etc. In spite of the geographical distance between Australia and the Arab countries, the participants were very attached to their home country and valued close relationships with their relatives and friends (Abdelhadi, 2016). The use of new technologies, notably Internet communication, or what is called "online communication," helps to bridge the gap between immigrants and their home countries.

The results of the data analysis revealed that Arabic speakers are in regular contact with their relatives and friends via the Internet as a medium of communication in order to maintain the Arabic language for their children. This finding is in line with Al-Asmari's (2004) study, which explored the importance of using new technology (the Internet) within the Arabic-speaking community in Melbourne as a tool for Arabic language maintenance. Apart from internet communication, SMS (via telephones) was found to be a preferred method for the maintenance of Arabic.

This finding is similar to Lee's (2013) findings, which revealed that the Chilean community tended to maintain their Spanish language via communication with their relatives and friends through the use of the Internet. She found that Facebook, Skype, and email were crucial in keeping in keeping ties with family members living abroad. Her findings also revealed that the Chilean community set up a Facebook group to communicate with the Latin American community, which included all Latinos in Auckland, and the author herself joined the group.

Furthermore, this finding is consistent with Fitzgerald and Debski (2006)'s findings, who investigated the use of Internet technologies by Polish-Australians in Melbourne. According to the findings, Polish-Australians used the Internet for a variety of purposes, including communicating with relatives, chatting with

friends, playing online games, online banking, learning, and conducting research. They used various Internet applications such as the phone, SMS, chat, video, and email. The latter was the most widely used mode of communication among the Polish community in Australia. In addition, the authors proposed that children be encouraged by their parents and ethnic schools to have early access to the Internet in their community language. In terms of affordability and cost-effectiveness, this study matches Othman's (2011) investigation into the Arabic language maintenance within Manchester's Arabic-speaking community. His findings revealed that all 17 families, both first and second generation, reported that communication via the internet is easy and inexpensive, allowing them to maintain close contact with relatives and friends in their home country.

Within the Arabic-speaking community in the regional Queensland city of Toowoomba, Australia, information and communication technologies (ICT) were viewed as critical for intergenerational transmission of Arabic. Communication in Arabic with relatives and friends helps the Arab-speaking community maintain family ties and pass on the language to future generations. The use of various forms of Internet communication, such as Skype, Facebook, and emails, bridges the distance and contributes to the preservation of the Arabic language.

VI. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study revealed that information technology aided the Arab community in practicing their heritage language on a daily basis through constant communication with their extended family members and friends in the home country, as well as in retaining and promoting their heritage culture and identity. This technology benefits Arabic speakers in a variety of ways, including providing a sense of attachment and connection to relatives in their home country.

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