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Opportunities And Challenges: Afghan Youth Learning English

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OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES: AFGHAN YOUTH LEARNING ENGLISH

By: Khesraw Emam Nazar, Hon. BA., York University, 2011

A Major Research Paper

Presented to Ryerson University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in the Program of

Immigration and Settlement Studies

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2012

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Author's Declaration

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Opportunities and Challenges: Afghan Youth Learning English

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Master of Arts

Immigration and Settlement Studies

Ryerson University

“It is through language that a person gains access to – or is denied access to powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak” (Peirce, 1995; 13).

ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is to understand what the opportunities and or challenges are for Afghan immigrant youth in the process of acquiring the English language. This research documents the experiences of Afghan high school students in their effort to obtain the English language during several years of residence in Canada. Based on a one-on-one interview of eight participants, including: seven high-school students and one community leader; this study found that there were a number of opportunities used by the students to learn the English language and a number of factors that made learning English challenging. The opportunities that helped the students include, learning the language in informal settings, such as with friends, sports activities, the workplace, and the internet. The challenges that many of the students indicated, mainly involved formal programs in schools, for example, short time period spent in ESL classes, the facilitation of after-school help by other students who did not know the material well, and the embarrassment of participating in class discussion due to disrespect from classmates.

Key words: Afghan, Students, English, Language, Immigrant

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Dedication

To my family

&

To my lovely fiancé, Yasmeeen Rashidie, for her immeasurable support, patience, invaluable advice throughout the research and just sitting next to me.

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Introduction

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) states that newcomer youth who cannot successfully and productively integrate into the school system in countries to which they have migrated are ‘at risk’ of being “unsuccessful in making the transition to work and adult life and as a consequence... unlikely to be able to make a fully contribution to active society” (OECD, 1995; 21). Afghan youth arriving as refugees in Toronto probably fit into this category. According to the Toronto District School Board Student Census (TDSB, 2006), Dari and Pashto-speaking students are one of the most ‘at risk’ students (Brown, 2008). Brown, a researcher at TDSB, identifies students ‘at risk’, as those who are less likely to graduate from high school and less likely to apply to post-secondary school (Brown, 2009).

In a recent study, Amir (2009) found that Afghan immigrant youth in Toronto encountered numerous challenges in trying to integrate into the school system because of lack of proficiency in English, discrimination by teachers and other students, and economic problems. The lack of proficiency in English is a key factor in their social and academic integration in schools, and also affects their subsequent entry into the labour market. It is, therefore, important to investigate how Afghan immigrant youth, who arrive in Toronto as refugees, learn or do not learn the English language, and what facilitates or impedes their learning.

I have chosen to focus on the Afghan community for several important reasons. The people of this community come from one of the most devastated countries in the world. It is a country that has been torn by decades of war, have experienced extreme poverty, and hence, six million of them live as refugees in many countries, including Pakistan, Iran, Russia and Canada. Afghans are one of the most recent immigrant groups in Toronto (Amir, 2009). Due to their relatively recent arrival, and a dearth of Afghan-origin scholars or community organizations,

there are very few studies about Afghan youth now living in Canada. Among them is a study by Soroor and Popal (2005) which shows that the majority of Afghan families face many challenges in their attempt to adequately integrate into the Canadian society. These challenges include but are not limited to: cultural differences, prejudice and discrimination, and poor socio-economic conditions. These challenges often make it difficult for Afghan youth to acquire the English language quickly and effectively, and as a result, many of them perform poorly in schools.

These challenges are very similar to ones I had to experience when my family was forced to leave Afghanistan and move to Ukraine. I was young when my family moved to a new country, where the culture, language, social, and economic circumstances were new and foreign. Although I was able to acquire the Ukrainian language quickly [because of my young age], it was difficult to adjust to the new school system. These challenges continued, because my family [later] moved to Canada. In the new country I had to learn English without any prior knowledge. In fact, I even began school from grade seven, due to my age, thus I skipped several other grades, including, 4th, 5th, and 6th. Such factors reinforced the barriers I was already facing in acquiring the English language as an immigrant youth.

The question that I will investigate in this research study is: what are the opportunities and challenges that Afghan immigrant youth have in learning the English language while they are in high school. In the following research paper I would like to investigate this group, draw attention to the matter, and pose questions that will prompt future researchers to look carefully into the settlement and transition processes of existing and newly arriving Afghan immigrant population to Canada.

Theoretical Framework

This research will be guided mainly by the critical theory perspective. This theory was first defined in the essay *Traditional and Critical Theory* by Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School of sociology. A critical theory perspective offers an understanding of current social conditions, how these conditions developed, how they interrelate, and how they can be transformed (Jensen, 1997). Ultimately, Horkheimer sees the goals of critical theory as one "...to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (Horkheimer, 1982; 244). The circumstances he refers to are the systemic and institutional forms of oppression, including in spheres of the political, economic, and social conditions. The scholarly contribution to critical theory was also extended by the influence of Marxist scholars such as Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas. Approaching critical theory with a Marxist perspective brings into question the structural and global issues that influence an individual's lived conditions.

The practical aim of critical theory is to identify and safeguard against the circumstances that limit human freedom (James, 2012). In order to achieve this goal, Horkheimer had established three criteria that should be met: first, the theory must be 'explanatory', that is, one must be able to explain the reasons for the existing problem associated with a social condition. Second, the problem must be 'practical', where the associated agents are able to address the social condition at hand. Third, it must be 'normative', that is, one must be able to provide two things; first, a purpose for addressing the social problem; and second, the social alternative within a reasonable reach must be offered (Bohman, 2005). According to critical theorists, in the effort to identify the practical goals and alter the circumstances that inhibit human freedom, the 'explanatory' component of critical theory must be achieved by drawing on interdisciplinary

fields that includes historical, cultural, economic, and social conditions, as well as institutional forms of domination (Bohman, 2005).

Critical theorists argue that human beings are perceived as conscious and self-reflecting agents who are “self-creating producer of their own history” (Horkheimer, 1993). Drawing on critical theory, we can utilize an already established framework for asserting immigrant integration into the mainstream society (Jensen, 1997). In light of this theory, the findings by Soroor and Popal (2005) that racialized newcomers, such as Afghan youth who have arrived in Canada as refugees, are undereducated and underemployed becomes a matter of concern. They cannot benefit from public services such as schooling because they are unable to function in the official language (i.e. English). The critical theory approach will help focus this study on conditions that make it easy or difficult for Afghan immigrant students to learn the English language.

Literature Review

Language

The capacity for language determines the structure of our lives by challenging “the range and social power of existing discourses, our access to them and the political strength of the interests which they represent” (Weedon, 1997: 26). Language is valuable, it allows us to contest dominant meanings, and explore alternative interpretations (Weedon, 1997). Language helps shape how we lead our lives and how we attach meaning to subjective social relations.

In Cummins’ work (1981) we are introduced to the interdependence theory of language. This theory holds that one language can be used as a tool to learn another one. Bilingual children, for example, can employ their first language skills to acquire the second language. This theory maintains that children can learn the new language quickly and apply it to their everyday

conversation. Amir, however, argues that Afghan refugees often immigrate to Canada after having lived in several other countries including but not limited to, Pakistan, Iran, and Russia. English is hardly ever their second language; rather they may have learned three or four languages prior to learning the English language (Amir, 2009). It is, thus, unclear how Afghan youth, who have had to learn multiple other languages with different structures, scripts, and vocabularies, may be able to learn English under such circumstances.

Another common theory of language is that of subtractive experience. This theory holds that learners of new languages substitute the first language with a new, more ‘necessary’ language (Lambert, 1981). This form of language-learning is reinforced by educational policies, and social influences, where minority youth feel pressured to subtract their first language with one that is perceived to be more useful or more ‘prestigious’ (Lambert, 1981). The subtractive form of language acquisition means that immigrant youth are forced to choose between different languages – often the language of the new society or their primary language; they are caught between what Skutnegg-Kangas and Toukomaa call ‘semi-lingualism’ (cited in Lambert, 1981: 5). In other words, they may be at risk of forgetting their first language because they do not use it anymore when they move to Canada, and they are not yet fluent in the language they are trying to learn.

According to Chiswick and Miller (2005) learning a new language can be particularly problematic the more distant the mother tongue is from English (Chiswick and Miller, 2005). A study by the Canadian Census (1991), for example, distinguished Korean and Japanese as having the most linguistic distance to English, whereas, Swedish, and Norwegian languages having the least linguistic difference from the English language. The results showed that 25% of Korean and Japanese immigrants were unable to hold a conversation in English; whereas only 5% of

immigrants whose national language was close to English were unable to carry conversation in English (Chiswick and Miller, 2005). Farsi [Afghanistan's official language] is also very different to English. Farsi differs significantly from the English language in terms of the number of letters of the alphabets, sentence structure, punctuation, written script and sounds. It is therefore possible that Afghan youth require many years and specialized programs to be able to fully comprehend, and communicate in the English language.

A further complication is that some Afghan youth may also come to Canada unable to read and write in any language, whether it is their mother tongue or the language of the previous country of residence. They may have lived in refugee camps for many years without access to formal education or their schooling may have been interrupted many times as they moved from one country to another.

According to Boyd (1992), language is a form of economic capital, by which it directs the quality of one's occupation, productivity, and income. Boyd argues that the level of proficiency one has in the official language(s) of Canada [English and/or French] is a key factor in determining one's job stability, working hours, and the nature of the job. In this section I will explore a number of factors that help or impede recent immigrant youth's efforts to effectively acquire the English language, which will subsequently shape their opportunity into the labour market transition in the new country. The following factors will be discussed: (1) socio-economic conditions, (2) school cultures and structures (3) family involvement in schooling and; (4) government supports.

Socio-Economic Conditions

Canada accepts approximately 250,000 new immigrants on average per year (Traidafilopoulos, 2006); and Toronto receives the highest number of immigrants on an annual

basis than any other city in Canada (Traidafilopoulos, 2006). Following the 2001 American-led war in Afghanistan, the number of refugees seeking asylum in Canada rapidly increased. As a result, the Afghan community experienced rapid growth in population in this country. In the 2001 Census, for instance, the number of immigrants from Afghanistan was about 17, 155 in the province of Ontario (cited in Amir, 2009); that number nearly doubled to 31, 295 in the province, according to the 2006 Census (cited in Amir, 2009); and is expected to continue to grow with approximately 1,000 new arrivals each year (Statistics Canada, 2006). The vast majority of Afghan immigrants and refugees have picked Toronto as their home, and hence, over 50% of the Canadian-Afghan community currently resides in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) (Soroor and Popal, 2005).

Immigrant families, particularly those who arrive as refugees, often come with limited human and financial capital. As a result, both children and their parents are obliged to take up work to support the family. However, they are also more likely to be unemployed and have significantly low household income and by extension are likely to suffer from discriminatory institutional obstacles with respect to housing, education, career chances and civic engagement (Wortely, 2003). According to Soroor and Popal (2005), the settlement challenges faced by immigrant families included the following: financial burdens, issues with cultural adjustment, adjusting to the new school system, language acquisition, finding adequate housing, physical, and mental health problems, and above all, integration into the Canadian labour force (Soroor & Popal, 2005). The lack of adequate knowledge of the English language was consistently significant challenge for most immigrants coming to Canada. As a result of their inadequate knowledge of the English language, immigrants found themselves in low-wage positions, in jobs

that require longer than average hours, and physically challenging responsibilities (Soroor & Popal, 2005).

Research conducted within the human-capital framework claims that educated parents have the economic as well as social resources to devote to their children's development at an earlier stage, which place them in a position for better performance in high school. A better performance in school subsequently increases the likelihood for pursuing a university education (Abada, Hou & Ram, 2008). Afghanistan was already one of the poorest countries in the world, with low levels of education, particularly for women. Decades of war, imposed by the Soviet Union and then the American led coalition decimated the limited resources available to its population. Thus, most Afghans who come to Canada have arrived here as refugees with little to no disposable income. They have had to flee their country in order to escape the war, and nearly all of them lack the financial capital, the social resources, and the educational background needed in order to help their children make a smooth transition into a new society and a new education system.

Having access to appropriate resources in the new country can also have a positive impact on labour market opportunities for immigrant groups, including youth. However, opportunities for entry into the labour market are very limited for immigrants who come to Canada. The result of a study by Statistics Canada (2003) confirms what many other scholars have claimed: that 70% of immigrants struggle to find employment. Immigrant families are thus placed in a position of socio-economic disadvantage compared to their Canadian-born counterpart. A study done by Kilbride and Anisef (2001) shows that the median family income for approximately 10 ethnic groups in Toronto was \$51,600; however, the average family income for the immigrants from Afghanistan was only \$19,600, the lowest amongst all the ethnic

groups. The authors claim that over three quarters (78%) of Afghan families live below the poverty line; thus, Afghan immigrants lack the resources necessary to have a positive impact on the education of the immigrant youth.

In a recent study, Jason Gilmore (2009) found that visible minorities, most of whom are immigrants, had hourly wage rates significantly below that of their Canadian-born counterparts. They were often likely to hold multiple jobs as well as temporary jobs, more likely to work part-time with limited access to flexible work arrangements. Afghan immigrants and refugees arriving as newcomers in Canada are likely to occupy these precarious employment positions. Because of the low wages of their parents, Afghan immigrant youth are pressured to seek employment, in order to financially support themselves as well as their families (Amir, 2009).

According to the *Ornstein Report* (Ornstein, 2000) poverty is particularly rampant in the Afghan community: this group is the second most economically disadvantaged ethnic minority group in the city of Toronto. According to Panter-Brick, Lipson, Omidian and Ornstein (2003), the absence of adequate economic stability can have a negative impact on the emotional and mental well-being of newcomer youth. Immigrants lack the economic resources to afford school trips, trendy clothing and adequate school materials – the lack of such resources often lead to negative experiences in school. Another study by Bedri (2009) and others demonstrate that high school can be a very judgmental place; it can cause immigrant youth to feel marginal, incompetent, and different from their peers. Such feelings of social displacement can potentially cause psychological harm to affected youth (Bedri, Chatterjee & Cortez, 2009). It is therefore possible that these negative influences of poverty can impact the language-learning process of Afghan students in high school.

Cultures and Structures of Schools

Immigrants arrive in societies that are new and foreign, that differ in culture and traditional values, that have new education system, and a wide-ranging 'rules of the game' that they don't know (Killbride & Anisef, 2001). Immigrants generally differ from the host population in language, culture, religion, and these differences create a space for discrimination against immigrant youth in schools. Discrimination, both in and out of school, leads to poor academic performance and impedes attempts at learning the English language (Soroor & Popal, 2005).

Crozier (2001), Aschaffendburg and Maas (1997), and Pinkus (2008) acknowledge that refugees and immigrant groups are perceived from a deficit model by school administration. According to Aschaffendburg and Maas (1997), cultural capital is "proficiency in familiarity with dominant cultural codes and practices" (573). The deficit model assumes that cultural difference between the dominant group and ethno-racial minority groups is considered a deficit in comparison to how the dominant group defines cultural capital. When the minority groups do not meet the dominant 'codes' and 'practices', the minority cultural capital is then viewed as a deficit that requires to be fixed (Bernard et al., 1998). It can be argued, thus, that school administrators enforce dominant cultural 'codes' and 'practices' in schools rather than create policies and programs that take into account the diverse cultural make-up of immigrant students.

Anthony Richmond suggests that as cultural diversity increases, dominant groups impose greater pressure on minorities to conform to its norms, which eventually results in a loss of global cultural knowledge (cited in Bedri, Chatterjee & Cortez, 2009). According to Cooper and Cooper (2008) the imposition of cultural dominance is evident in high schools. For example, avoiding eye contact with the teachers and school administrator is interpreted as a lack of

confidence and respect, whereas, in the Afghan culture making eye-contact with a person in authority is perceived to be rude. Such cultural differences can lead to sites of resentment, conflict, and struggle between the ethnic minority groups and those that hold the dominant culture and position (Cooper & Cooper, 2008). This in fact, can result in immigrant youths' displacement within the dominant culture adopted in the new school system and therefore can have negative impacts on their performance in school.

As students, the youth's interpretations with teachers may be inconsistent with the cultural norms of interactions with parents (Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez, 1992). Rajko Seat (2003) asserts that immigrant children often struggle with several psychological issues and challenges associated with the settling period over confusion related to foreign cultural codes and norms, parental expectations at home, and the absence of peer acceptance at school. These problems often cause negative personal and social experiences, hamper their attempt to associate with other groups, and interfere in their effort to focus in school.

The acculturation period, according to many studies, is the most difficult and confusing phase for immigrant youth: these youth have to learn to balance between traditional values and practices while being exposed to the many conflicting aspects of the dominant culture (Soroor and Popal, 2005). The stressors of the acculturation period are particularly challenging for Afghan immigrant parents and youth because the Afghan youth come to Canada with psychological issues arising from experiences in Afghanistan during the past two decades of war, displacement, and poverty (Azimi, 2004). It is not surprising, therefore, that Afghan immigrant students face extraordinary challenges as they often struggle try to learn a new language while attempting to cope with problems associated with the transition period in Canada.

Cooper and Cooper (2008) use the term bicultural competencies to refer to transition from the 'old' ethnic culture to the 'new majority' culture in creative and productive ways. However, the problem with the concept of bicultural competencies is that it fails to take into account the persistence of discrimination and prejudice that many immigrant youth face in school. Crozier (2001) argues that current educational policies established to engage immigrant youth and parents actually fail to acknowledge the diversity in the ethno-racial communities. Hence, over time newcomer youth continue to associate with other youth from their ethnic communities, and seldom with youth from the majority.

Although, there have been huge changes in the demographic composition of schools over many decades, the overall school arrangement and organization has remained the same since the 1950s (Velasco & Fix, 2000). Immigrant students perform poorly because they enter these schools. These educational institutions, for example, place immigrant students in classrooms where they are taught the same material at the same pace but in a new and different language as their classmates who have been learning the language since early childhood. These structures and teaching practices affect immigrant students' self-esteem, and cause frustration (Bedri, Chatterjee & Cortez, 2009). In turn, such frustration can lead to negative school performance.

Velasco and Fix (2000) argue that immigrant teens continue to experience astonishingly high drop-out rates and; this is linked to their difficulty in acquiring the English language (Velasco & Fix, 2000). Soroor and Popal (2005) similarly state that many community organizations also claim that the language barrier is a critical problem for many Afghan youth. As part of a study, Fix and Velasco looked into ten project high schools and middle schools in five school districts. The researchers, in addition interviewed over 60 teachers, school administrators, and other project leaders about immigrant education and the necessary changes

within the above schools. Fix and Velasco found three notable institutional challenges that many schools face in improving educational programs for immigrant students. The first problem facing schools is the capacity of its staff. The researchers found that the schools lack qualified teachers who specialize in tutoring Limited English Proficient (LEP) learners. These students are first-generation immigrant and refugee youth who learn to communicate well in English over several years, but perform poorer than their average grade-level in reading comprehension and writing proficiency. The core subjects teachers in the above schools felt that the language development of LEP students is “not my job” (Velasco & Fix, 2000). The researchers claimed that the most motivated immigrant students required more time to learn the language in order to engage in the regular curriculum. Many teachers however, felt that their effort was a “race against an unforgiving calendar” (Velasco & Fix, 2000). The shortage in the number of qualified instructors for LEP students, prolong the language learning period for these students and impede in their effort to do well in subjects such as math, science and social studies.

The second problem is caused by the organizational structure of secondary schools. For example, the organization of the daily schedule into 50-minute periods work counter to the required individualized instructions for special learning needs of immigrant and refugee youth. Similarly, the placement of students into grade-levels corresponding to age as opposed to the level of English language skills disadvantage students who are not proficient in English (Velasco & Fix, 2000). Such students are automatically streamed into workplace or college tracks, rather than university tracks, which subsequently limit their future options.

The third problem with respect to the school system is the absence of incentives for improving educational outcomes for immigrant students (Velasco & Fix, 2000). Immigrant students’ needs have been generally ignored because school officials are not investing effort in

improving beginners' programs. Taken together, these three institutional challenges impede immigrant youth's attempts at successfully acquiring the English language.

According to Wallace Lambert (1981), there are three groups of foreign language learners: (1) small group of students who absorb the training well, and make productive progress; (2) the majority group who perceive the learning experience to be merely another high school program, and make very little progress; and (3) additional small group of students who are simply not interested, bored, and feel that they are wasting time. Collecting such information on beginners' language learning approach can be useful to teachers responsible for teaching English to Afghan youth.

Bernhard, Freire, Torres and Nirdosh (1997), assert that immigrant children encounter three language issues: first, they fail to retain their mother tongue to the extent that is appropriate for their level of maturity; second, immigrant children are significantly behind their colleagues in English; and third, because they are in the initial process of learning the language they fall behind their classmates in the other subjects (Bernhard et., al, 1997). Fillmore's work (1991) helps us understand the severity of the first issue. According to Fillmore, once immigrant youth learn the second language, they lose their means of effective communication with their parents in their first language. It is, thus, believed that losing the means to communicate in the first language can "affect the social, emotional, cognitive, and educational development of language-minority children" (Pinkus, 2008; 20).

Research suggests that bilingual students developed advanced thought process, increased intelligence capacity, and cognitive problem solving skills (Labmber, 1981). The Afghan students who come to Canada, have either one language [Farsi] or multiple languages [Farsi,

Urdu, and/or Russian]. All of these language(s) are very different from English, and provides them little access to the spoken and written contents of their classes.

Family Involvement in Schooling

Family involvement in children's schooling is widely regarded as an important factor in their academic and social success in schools. Parental involvement is correlated to better grades, greater enrolment in advanced level programs and classes, reduced drop-out rates, and increased post-secondary school enrolment (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski & Aposoleris, 1997; Sheldon, 2002). Calabrese et. al (2004), define parental involvement as a 'dynamic, interactive process in which parents draw on multiple experiences and resources to define their interactions with schools among school actors" (Calabrese et. al 2004). A review of existing literature confirms that parental involvement is strongly required for immigrant youth whose first language is something other than English (Dyson, 2001).

Some scholars argue that it is crucial for immigrant parents to learn English because knowledge in the English language will allow them to closely monitor their children's activities in and out of school. Greater parental involvement has the consequence of strengthening their family ties, and enables them to overcome barriers to succeed in school despite economic disadvantage (Abada, Hou & Ram; 2008). Senechal's report (2006) in the *National Center for Family Literacy* (NCFL) indicates that parental participation in schooling alone can help students achieve positive outcomes (Senechal, 2006). These findings dispute the argument that greater socio-economic resources can enhance academic performance by attributing academic performance levels to family ties and not financial resources. However, it does not take into account the fact that for families to be involved in their children's schooling they must have certain economic privileges such as, secure work, reasonable hours, and sufficient time outside

of work. These are privileges that immigrant families do not have. Further, it is important to remember that Afghan refugees do not migrate to Canada together as a family because current immigration regulations keep them divided, thus making parental involvement difficult as families are divided (Kilbride & Anisef, 2001).

Freire (1970, 2000) argues that school curricula and policies must help immigrant parents enhance their children's learning processes. They should be encouraged to use their cultural, social, and economic capital to better assist their children (Pinkus, 2008). Some scholars (e.g. Bernhard and Friere, 1999), Shanahan, Mulhern and Rodriguez-Brown (1992) have found that Latin American parents placed great value on their children's education but school administrators and teachers, expressed little interest in supporting these parents. Velasco and Fix (2000) similarly claim that "teachers' expectations of immigrant parents' involvement do not take into consideration cultural differences, parents' schedules, and language barriers" (Velasco & Fix, 2000).

Zhou (cited in Abada, Hou & Ram, 2008) suggests that more involvement in one's community, strong ethnic ties, and conformity to one's group expectations can assist immigrant and newcomer youth to overcome structural disadvantages. Coleman (also cited in Abada, Hou & Ram, 2008) similarly notes the positive impact of intergenerational closeness in strongly knit families and communities. He argues that the results of strong community ties have a positive impact on immigrant youth and their educational experiences. For instance, parents and children from co-ethnic families can build networks and share the same responsibilities and social support that assist young immigrants to attain higher education. The arguments put forth by both Zhou and Coleman assumes, first, that all immigrant families arrive together as a whole, including both parents and children. Among Afghan immigrants it is often the case that the adult male of

the house first migrates by himself and then spends years in solitude while he continues to make efforts to reunite with his family in the host country. Furthermore, even when immigrant families do arrive intact, it is often the nuclear family which gets disconnected from extended family members and their cultural community. Given the importance and urgency to find employment and housing etc. they often lack the financial and social resources to connect with their ethnic community. Second, the above scholars make the assumption that families struggle because they have weak ties in their communities and ignore the realities of social, structural, economic, political, and systemic barriers.

Insufficient Government Support

Kilbride and Anisef (2001) argue that the successful integration of immigrant youth heavily relies on the personal, social, and economic resources accessible and/or available to newcomer individuals, families, and the community. They suggest that the federal, provincial, and municipal governments are all responsible for ensuring the welfare and interests of immigrant children and youth. The researchers argue that the responsibilities taken on by local community organizations in supporting immigrants and refugees have increased but fewer governmental resources are allocated for them in order to successfully take on their new responsibilities.

The contribution by government agencies in support of community organizations have often been ‘ambivalent and inconsistent’ (Brock et. al, 2008). For example, government institutions embrace community agencies they deem legitimate when the “organizations’ goals and objectives parallel those defined by the particular ministry or government” (Brock et., al, 2008). Therefore, immigrant-serving organizations must design their activities in order to receive adequate funding from government agencies such as Citizenship and Immigration

Canada (CIC). The Afghan Association of Ontario, a significant settlement organization for the Afghan community in Toronto, received major cuts to their budget by CIC (AAO, 2011). Such cuts will have severe affects on Afghan newcomers who rely on these organizations, who share the same cultural understandings, and language. Without resources, such agencies are unable to successfully support immigrant communities in need.

Summary of Literature

The purpose of this review was to understand the opportunities and or challenges that Afghan youth encounter in acquiring the English language. According to the literature, language is a valuable indicator of a smooth settlement process. It is a form of economic capital, which can determine educational achievement, and subsequently occupational status. The studies suggest that immigrant youth face a myriad of challenges in learning the English language during the settlement process. These challenges include: (1) poor socio-economic conditions; (2) the cultures and structures of schools; (3) family involvement in schooling, and (4) the lack of government support. These factors have negatively impacted newcomer youth's adequate use of educational opportunities and the subsequent integration process into the host society.

Methodology

In the following study a qualitative research approach was used. I chose a qualitative approach because it allows for inquiry into the socially constructed experiences of members of a group (Ospina, 2004). Qualitative research, according to Shank (2002) is “a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning” (5). By ‘systematic’ he refers to “planned, ordered and public” nature of research; and ‘empirical’ refers to sense-making from lived experiences. Qualitative research allows for contextual variables to be integrated into the structure of the study. This is a

useful way to construct an understanding about the social reality of Afghan immigrant students as they try to learn a new language in a new country.

Qualitative research interviews allow participants to communicate their experiences from their perspective and in their own terms (Kvale, 1996). Interviews allow the researcher to interpret the meanings participants attach to their everyday situations and conditions (Kvale, 1996). Interviews are a form of conversation with a deliberate structure focused on a particular topic (Kvale, 1996). I used semi-structured interview guidelines because it allows the researcher to focus on the topic of interest also be open to new ideas, concepts, and themes.

The data collection tool used in this research was one-on-one interviews with individual students. The interviews began with demographic questions, such as, “What is your name?” and “How old are you?” The questions then turned broader in scope, for example, “Tell me about your experiences of trying to learn English?” These questions enabled an open discussion about topics related to the participants’ motivation for learning English, their experiences in trying to do so in and out of school. The interview questions were useful because they helped uncover the levels of skills, knowledge and learning practices directly from each participant. The participants were able to identify what they valued and deemed meaningful, using their own narrative (Neuman, 2006).

The criteria for inclusion of participants in this study were the following: (1) Afghan origin students; (2) between the ages of 16-18; 3) studying in grades 10-12; and (4) living in Canada for up to 5 years.

In order to involve human subjects into this research, an ethical approval form was submitted to Ryerson University’s Research Ethics Board. The form included a number of important items: (1) methods of recruitment; (2) the selection and characteristics of participant;

(3) the setting where the interviews would be conducted; (4) the research design and scientific rationale; (5) the potential risks involved; and (6) how participants will be protected against those risks. The research ethics board also required a copy of: (1) research questions; (2) recruitment flyer; and (3) the consent form. The research proposal was approved by Ryerson's Ethics Committee on June 27, 2012.

The participants were recruited with the assistance of the staff of the Afghan Women's Organization (AWO) who provided me with the names and contact information. I contacted the students individually and informed them about the research. I introduced myself, and gave a detailed account of the purpose of the study, and the interview process. They were then provided with a detailed consent form that was to be signed by the students. In the consent form they were informed that they will be audio-taped, and their confidentiality would be maintained and they could stop the interview at any time.

The setting for interviews was the local library near the residences of the participants. The interviews were conducted in a separate room. This was an appropriate setting because it was confidential, safe, and quiet; it was an appropriate environment for students to feel comfortable and participate fully.

A standard structure for data file organization was created. I separated each data collected in an individual folder, ordered them by participant names and dates of the interviews. These folders also included consent forms for each participant and the transcription of interview questions with corresponding responses.

During the interview process I used an audio-tape to record the responses I was given by the participants. The audio recorder proved valuable because it captured everything that was said and how it was said by the interviewees. Immediately after every interview I began to transcribe

each recorded interview, in order to record the information accurately. In the transcription, I wrote down everything that was said in full detail and I placed numbers next to each question and the corresponding answer. To ensure that I did not miss anything, I listened to each interview again after transcribing it.

After completing the transcription, I read every transcript in full, and in the process made notes on the side, highlighted elements that I perceived to be important, placing symbols (i.e. a star) to identify recurring theme, and made connections in the patterns that I noticed. After reviewing each transcribes individually, I made detailed notes on separate papers for each participant, and recorded all of the information that I deemed valuable in relation to each theme.

The notes on each participant were separately ordered by their name. The data in each paper was then organized in the order of themes, concepts and specific categories (Dane, 1990). These elements were given a corresponding number. The use of numbers made the process of going back to the transcription and the collected notes more efficient and with less confusion. After creating individual notes for each participant, I combined the themes, concepts, and patterns, in order to develop a coherent understanding of the collected data.

Additional notes were made about each participant's characteristics. For example, these characteristics [variables] included: age, number of years living in Canada, grade-level in high school, and sex. These variables were then grouped together according to similarities, for instance, three of the seven participants have lived in Canada for five years. Recording these variables was helpful because it assisted me to make connection between the participants (i.e age, and grade-level), their levels of English language skills, and to draw patterns between the participants' experiences of learning the English language.

Based on my personal background and the experiences that I have endured by moving from one country to another and having to adjust to new forms of educational systems; the data collected in this research has been shaped and interpreted by the knowledge that has impacted my narrative.

Findings

Demographic Data

Presented in this section are the demographic data of the participants. A total of eight volunteers participated in this study. The participants included: seven high school students; five of the students were girls, two remaining students were boys. Participants' gender was not an essential characteristic for this study. Therefore, the number of females vs. males was chosen at random. One participant was a community leader, working for the organization called Afghan Women's Organization (AWO) who is also a student at a teachers college.

Six of the participants were born in Afghanistan; and one participant was born in Pakistan. Six participants had lived in Pakistan at some point in their lives; four participants had lived in Russia at some point in their lives; and four participants had lived in Iran at some point in their lives.

Table 1. Participant Information

| Student Name | Age | Grade | Years living in Canada | Languages Spoken | Employment Status |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Maryam | 17 years old | Grade 12 | 2 years | 5 languages | Not Working |
| Wahid | 16 years old | Grade 11 | 4 years & 6 months | 5 languages | Not Working |
| Morsal | 18 years old | Grade 12 | 5 years | 4 languages | Working Full-time |
| Fatima | 17 years old | Grade 11 | 5 years | 5 languages | Working Part- |

| | | | | | |
|---------------|--------------|----------|--------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| | | | | | time |
| Sahar | 18 years old | Grade 12 | 5 years | 3 languages | Working Full-time |
| Nagina | 17 years old | Grade 11 | 3 years & 6 months | 4 languages | Working Part-time |
| Hasib | 18 years old | Grade 12 | 4 years | 4 languages | Working Full-time |

Participants' names have been changed to protect their identity.

In the following section, I will present the findings generated through the interviews. The interviews enabled me to collect important data about the language acquisition practices of Afghan immigrant students during the first five years of their stay in Canada. The insight provided by the participants helped emerge the following themes: (1) learning opportunities; (2) levels of motivation; (3) challenges in school and out of school setting; and (4) satisfaction with progress. The information gathered is valuable, because some of the respondents varied in the process of learning the English language, while others shared similarities.

Theme 1: Learning Opportunities

The participants identified two kinds of learning opportunities: (1) formal participation in school programs; and (2) out-of-school, informal means of learning English.

Formal Participation in School Programs

There were students who believed that formal programs in school, such as, lunch time tutorials, in-class discussions, after school homework clubs, and ESL programs were important opportunities that enhanced their language acquisition process.

Fatima: I had, when I came new, I had ESL classes for like one semester or one and half almost one year, I had that ESL classes and my teachers were very good to me, and they started from beginning to me and they help me so much.

Sahar: I had a ESL classes, like ESL A to E I finish all of them so that helped a lot.

Morsal: There was tutorials um after school, during lunch times, so every day during lunch time I go to tutorial and I get help from students and there was teachers who helped me and after school.

The students said that formal classes prompted discussions between students, and teachers with students in English and they enjoyed these conversations. These discussions enabled the students to engage in a formal environment where they gained the attention of their peers as well as their teachers. This seemed to be important for them because outside of formal class settings this type of attention that they needed was not available.

Maryam: I like formal program in school like in classes with other students they have a same classes with me, I don't want to be like alone or something like that, so I want to study with them.

Fatima: My teachers, they used to help me after school, they used to give me homework, books to learn English or to memorize words, yea.

Informal Means of Learning English

Most respondents, however, felt that their English-learning process was enhanced by way of participation in informal settings, for instance, friends, movies, and sports clubs; other students, seemed to have benefited from formal programs at school and outside of school.

Wahid: I had friends in my class, their language was good too, so they help to go through this and that's how I learned and I used to watch a lot of T.V., that's how that help me too.

Fatima: I start talking to white people, I made white friends, Spanish friends, so I start talking in English. It was really hard, really really hard for me.

Similarly, many students claimed that they received a lot of help in improving their language by watching English television, for example:

Morsal: So the only thing help me I guess was T.V. I used to watch a lot of like dramas, series, T.V. shows and yea.

Sahar: Most of the time I watch movies, English movies to improve my English more, listen to the songs, and yea go to shopping with my friends, and yea.

The students believed participating in sports clubs and organizations had improved their communication in English. Participating in extracurricular activities exposed the students to new settings and new people, where they could communicate with other students without the pressures otherwise imposed in a classroom environment. When asked if they were helpful, they stated:

Wahid: Im active in sports... It actually did, that helped me.

Fatima: Whenever we are out of free time, there's schools coming there introducing themselves, so I start meeting new people right, and um, in team, or even, yea it is helpful, cuz people come they talk to you, they ask you for your name, your address, for your school, for your information.

Surprisingly, the use of the internet was the most popular means of spending their leisure time. Although there were a variety of informal sources such as television, movies and sports activities; all of the participants, however consistently expressed the importance of the internet in their effort to learn new words.

Wahid: I usually read yea or do some research in the internet about my future careers or something once I graduate high school.

Morsal: I tried to listen to people what they were saying, and when it was new word for me, I would write it down, and then coming home I would write it on the internet, and I found the translation.

Maryam: Yea I use more research too, and I use internet because some of the work they taught to me when I came new, its hard to me knew they had the big letters or something, so I search them in my own language and I try to understand that word better and also its in visual stuff too when I see something I learn better than I hear and then I write it.

Students also stated that they had benefited from summer learning camps, and community volunteering. This gave them the opportunity to meet new people and become familiar with the community.

Wahid: I had the opportunity to join uh, newcomer program in summer which was really helpful for me, and they took us to several trips where we had to do a lot of presentations

about English, what we been through and how to learn English and how to improve it, and we used to read a lot of books with it in the library with teacher and yea.

Maryam: I had volunteers most places, and not must but little, but I had a little volunteer too to work with them and to know them better as my community so.

Theme 2: Levels of Motivation

The participants expressed strong motivation in their effort to learn the English language.

The youth identified two motivating factors, they include: (1) personal motivation; and (2) parental encouragement.

Personal Motivation

All of the participants in this research demonstrated their motivation and felt encouraged to learn the English language. When the participants were asked: Have your experiences in learning the English language discouraged you from pursuing or has it motivated you to continue? The responses were as follows:

Maryam: I want to continue more, better, better English, I want to continue, I want to learn more and more always, it can be any language I want to learn more.

Wahid: It [experience in learning English] actually encouraged, motivated me to keep on studying more and more, because once you study more you get to know more stuff, and you become more knowledgeable, and yea that actually encouraged me.

Morsal: I think its [experience in learning English] motivated me more, because English is like the very like famous language spoke around the world, its very interesting if you know English you will go everywhere and you have no problems, so that's the only thing encourage you to learn it more better.

When the participants were asked why they were motivated; the response was: to continue their education at some point after graduating high school.

Maryam: I want to continue with education in College as a dentist.

Fatima: I want to go to College and then University, I wanna be immigration officer.

In an interview with Ghazala Ahmadzai, an Afghan community worker, she similarly described that Afghan students were very motivated and worked hard to learn English; she acknowledged however, that many of them do in fact face challenges in the process.

Ghazala: Surprisingly, the Afghan youth are very eager; they're very, um, what's the word I'm looking for? Determined, determined, um, they're, I mean you can obviously find the Afghan youth to struggle.

Parents were also a source of motivation for these students, due to absence of proficiency in the English language. Many of the participants expressed that their parents relied on them for help with filling forms, speaking to apartment managers, and going to the doctor's appointments. In turn, this motivated the students to further learn the English language.

Morsal: I wanted to help my family, translate for them, and then there was some paper work I could help with my family, and school works, and because there was nobody to help us.

Nagina: Yes, it was important to learn to speak English because there wasn't anyone to help my mother and father... If I had to visit the doctor I would have to answer his questions by speaking. [Translated]

Despite coming to Canada without any English-language training, the students were very driven to acquire the language and make productive use of their opportunities. Their desire to continue their education was evident in their aspiration to learn both written and oral English. All of the respondents, with the exception of one participant, expressed the desire to learn both written and oral English. The participants found it difficult to choose between written or oral English; they acknowledged that both elements of the language were critical.

One student claimed that the written part of the English-learning process was not the main priority; she was mostly focused in learning how to communicate orally, because her priority was to translate English for her family members.

Nagina: I had to learn how to learn how to write well because I am in this country, but I found it to be more important to learn how to speak English because my mother and

father had difficulty learning how to speak it, writing wasn't my main concern.
[Translated]

The majority of other students, however, claimed that they require both written and oral English; having knowledge of both aspects of the language enabled the students to engage better in their everyday activities both within and outside of the school, for example:

Sahar: Because this is [oral and written English] very important in our live, in each country that we live, we have to speak, read and write like its very important, so um, for me it was, its my big wish to read and write and understand.

Maryam: I want both [oral and written English], because both is important so that's why I want to learn both of them written and oral language... To live in Canada it has to be know to, to get education and stuff like that so we have to know the direction and stuff and oral is good too because I want to speak English to and to other people and have a good conversation with them.

Parental Encouragement

The participants expressed that their parents' support positively impacted their motivation levels to learn the English language and succeed in school, for example:

Maryam: Even my parents always tells like try very hard you will get it soon try it... they do so much.

Fatima: Yea at home my dad, my mom, my sisters they used to help me, they used to buy my books, they bought so many books for me.

Theme 3: Challenges in School and out of School Setting

Like other minority language groups, the variety of challenges that the Afghan immigrant students faced were great. Nevertheless, there were patterns of recurring challenges that almost every participant indentified. For example, they include: (1) challenges with school programs (2) embarrassed to speak in class; (3) insufficient time; (4) no practice in English; and (5) speaking multiple languages.

Challenges with School Programs

Some students indicated that in-school programs were problematic in three ways: first, the ESL classes were not very useful for some students, for example:

Wahid: We didn't learn as much, our teacher wasn't nice and she used to give us everything to do it ourselves. She never like helped us to do it and she never took it up, it always used to, we had to do it by ourselves.

Second, some schools simply lacked the necessary programs for beginners, for example, the programs offered in some schools were not uniformly available in other schools. Some students stated:

Morsal: I would recommend them to make some more like programs for students who are newcomers like for example in high school they should make some ESL classes to help the students, because there are a lot of people who are ignorant, so they have to make like a class for them after school or between in lunch.

The third problem indicated is that the duration of ESL programs was simply not enough to assist them in the long-term, for example, when they enter higher grade-levels.

Fatima: They have to stay in ESL, they have to improve their English before they come to high school.

Embarrassed to Speak in Class

The notion of shyness and embarrassment in class was a significantly difficult factor every student in this study identified with. All of the students were laughed at for their accent, grammar, and pronunciation of words. Being embarrassed to speak in class prevented the students to participate all together, for example, if the students knew the answer to a certain question, they would refrain from raising their hands and providing an answer to the question being addressed. The students also feared to ask questions during class discussion when they did not understand certain topics and or issues.

Fatima: It was hard and I was ashamed of myself right cuz I used to go outside I couldn't talk to people, so they're like can you speak English? And I was like no I cant, cuz I

couldn't understand a single word what they were saying right, so I didn't wanna be shy cuz I'm a shy person and I didn't want to go to any programs after school or outside of school.

Wahid: Shy like, like if your teacher ask you a question, if you know the word, and you don't know how to pronounce it, and if you say something wrong, the whole class gonna make fun of you and laugh at you right, and that puts you down, and the next time you want to say something you cant say it, so yea.

Nagina: In class it was hard for me because when I asked questions they were not answered properly when the teacher tried to help me. My classmates would laugh, and I would get embarrassed, especially when I wasn't in my ESL class, they would make more fun of me, so I wouldn't even talk, and I would be even more shy. [Translated]

Morsal: For example you are going to class and you don't know anything, they try to make fun of you, and you feel like, and if you ask questions they were laughing and stuff, so that would make like more difficult, you feel kinda depressed, a little bit shy.

Insufficient Time

With the exception of two participants, all of the other students stated that they began working soon after they had arrived to Canada and continued to work during the school year.

Morsal: because every day after high school I have to come home and help my mom, and there was no like chance for us, because every day, we have a big family so we have to help my mom and my dad, so yea.

Sahar: Yea the factors that wasn't easy for us like because we didn't have time, like we went to work, like we couldn't do the homeworks that much, and then um, like yea that's why... Because after school I used to work like 10 hours so that's why. And then after work I was so tired that I couldn't study, so that's why.

Nagina: It was very hard for me to work, um, I would go to work at 5 pm, then it would be closed at 11pm, then we would be at work until 1 am. By the time I got home, I didn't have any energy to study, and I would go to class in the morning and I would be behind in school work. [Translated]

No Practice in English

One student stated that she had some background knowledge in English, whereas, the majority of the students had no English training prior to migration. This challenge was further exacerbated because every student noted that they must speak in Farsi at home. They noted that

it was important for their parents as well as their own future to preserve their home language. The parents could not speak English well, therefore, they encouraged to maintaining Farsi in order to have a way to communicate with and understand their children.

Sahar: My parents, they don't like we speak English at home, they're saying you can speak English outside, but not inside the home, because they don't understand English, so that's why its hard for them.

Maryam: Yea they like me to have my own like first 2 languages actually, Farsi and Pashto because the first language after they say that you want to learn other languages do it because its better to know other languages but don't forget your own.

Morsal: At home we used to speak in Russian and our Farsi, because my dad and my mom did not like to speak in English, they all like you will forget your own language and that's why we talk in Farsi.

Speaking Multiple Languages

When asked about their migration pattern, all of the students stated that they had lived in three (3) or more countries prior to settling in Canada. The patterns of movement often included: Pakistan, Iran, and Russia. The pattern of movements offered the challenge of having to settle and adjust in new places, learn new language(s), and discontinue studies, resulting in disrupted learning.

Morsal: The only thing that made it difficult was, I think, I knew a lot of languages so I mix everything together, for example, if I tried to speak in English I would say some word in Russian between them, sometimes when I had a presentation I say something funny that nobody would understand, and then I remembered oh Gosh it was Russian it wasn't English.

Wahid: I think it actually made it harder, its cuz other languages are so complicated in pronunciation, like English language pronunciation is very soft and general right, but in Russian languages is very hard because you have to say it, you have to pronounce it very hard and loud but English is not like that.

Hasib: No, I don't think knowing other languages has helped me. Because you have to learn so many other languages, then when you come here you have to learn a completely new language that is so different from the others. [Translated]

Nagina: when I was working, I spoke mostly Farsi with my co-workers because I worked at an Afghan restaurant. I worked at an Afghan restaurant because it was hard to find a job at an English restaurant because I didn't speak English fluently; the interview at my work place wasn't like the ones in the other restaurants. [Translated]

Theme 4: Satisfaction with Progress

The Afghan students in this research came to Canada at varying time periods, between two and five years. Although most of them did not have training in the English language, they seemed very satisfied with their English skills and training after spending a number of years in Canada. For example, the participant stated:

Fatima: In high school now I could speak perfectly, not perfectly but I could speak, at least I could speak, I could communicate with people. [4.5 years in Canada]

Wahid: It wasn't a good experience, but I had to go through it, so first I didn't know how to say hi or bye, so eventually I learned from my friends, teachers, movie, family and everything. And I used to read a lot of books when I came here, that's how I got used to English language, and day by day I kept improving, till now im really happy with my language. [5 years in Canada]

While another student spent almost three and half (3.5) years in Canada, said:

Nagina: I am happy, because I can speak, if someone tells me something I know what they are saying, sometimes they can use big words, and i cant understand. [3.5 years in Canada] [Translated]

Although the participants responded that they were happy with where they were, they all admitted that they require 1 to 2 years more in order to fully understand and speak English; despite living in the country for a number of years and attending schools.

Discussion

The data gathered for this study provides insights about the ways in which Afghan students acquire the English language in the first five years of their arrival in Canada. The information provided by the students helped uncover a variety of factors that were identified useful by some, and challenging by others. The students also identified factors that motivated

them to learn the English language. Although there was some diversity in the needs and interests of students, there was however, an overall pattern of consistency in the opportunities and challenges in learning the English language.

In terms of the learning opportunities available to immigrants, the literature interestingly, does not provide information about language-learning practices in informal settings. In an exchange with the students, I found that the majority of students indicated that learning English by informal means was more helpful than programs available in schools. For example, by conversing with friends, watching television, and participating in sports activities.

Contrary to the study by Lambert (1981), where he states that the majority of students are simply uninterested and feel that they are wasting their time in learning a new language, all of the participants in this study, seemed driven in their effort to learn English, perform well in school, and continue their education. Despite not having any training in the English language prior to migration, the students seemed very eager and goal oriented. There were a number of factors that contributed to their motivation; the students were strongly encouraged by their parents to advance their education, they wanted to be able to communicate during class discussions and speak with friends, and they understood the implication of higher education in the labour market.

The students were motivated by their parents as well as by their personal goals. The parents seemed to strongly encourage their children to learn English in order to do well in school, pursue higher education, and subsequently enter a good career. Parental encouragement is important because it seems to have helped the students understand that the key to secure jobs in the competitive labour market depended on higher education. In this research, however, all of the students stated that their parents were very supportive and encouraged them to continue their

studies further. This finding is important, because it suggests that parents do, in fact, take part in their children's school matters; despite unfamiliarity with the school system and limited language proficiency (Amir, 2009). When trying to understand why and/or how parents can become involved in their children's education, it is important to remember that there are many ways in which immigrant parents can participate in their children's education, such as encouraging them to work hard and keep in view their goal of going for higher education and well-regarded, secure jobs (see Bernhard & Freire, 1999; De Gaetano, 2007; Dyson, 2001).

The majority of the students had determined what they wanted to study after graduating from high school. Despite having limited skills in the English language, the students displayed strong desire to overcome some of the challenges because they were eager to continue to improve and make use of their opportunities.

The students were also eager to learn English for personal reasons. One of their reasons for learning English is to help translate both oral and written English for their parents. Every participant indicated the importance of being able to understand, speak, read and write English to assist their parents when they needed them to visit the doctor and/or to fill from. This finding is important because the existing literature does not highlight the fact that immigrant youth come to this country with personal goals and objective to learn English and assist their family members.

The students also displayed enthusiasm for learning English in order to better communicate with classmates, friends, and teachers. They were eager to listen, speak, and learn in the comfort of their circle of friends. Many of the students stated that when they heard a new 'big' word from their friends, they would search that word and try to learn it. Practicing English at home however, was discouraged by their families.

All of the students in this study mentioned that at the beginning they faced difficulties in trying to learn the English language. Only one student stated that the beginning was not a difficult phase, due to the fact that she had some training in English prior to immigration.

Using English in the classroom continues to be a huge challenge for many of them. Although the students were receiving assistance from friends and teachers, the problems, however, were exacerbated in the classroom. Every participant in this research said that the most difficult aspect of learning the English language was that they were constantly being laughed at, made fun-of, and disrespected by their classmates. As a result, the majority of the students often refrained to participate in class, answer questions, and/or ask for help. This finding confirms the data provided by Soroor and Popal (2005), where they state that bullying was a major issue for Afghan immigrant students in schools. Barry McLaughlin (1992) has similarly confirmed in his research that youth from other cultural backgrounds can experience major feelings of embarrassment and anxiety amongst their peers.

Three participants in this study discussed the implications of their family's cultural expectations. The female students indicated that immediately after school they had to return home to help cook, clean, and take on other responsibilities. An exchange with Morsal, Sahar, and Nagina helps illustrate this finding. Other students said that their parents discouraged them from speaking English at home because they feared they would lose their heritage language if they did not use them regularly at home. It is important, thus, to consider the pressures exerted by cultural expectations and responsibilities on the learning processes of Afghan students. This finding challenges the bicultural competencies model suggested by Cooper and Cooper (2008), where they argue that immigrant youth can use their ethnic and cultural knowledge to easily adapt and integrate into the dominant forms of cultural norms.

Furthermore, from the perspective of Afghan immigrants in Canada it is important to make a distinction between a 'successful Canadian' and a 'successful Afghan'. There is great difference between the two cultures in the level of personal independence individuals are expected to exercise. For example, the general perception of a 'successful' Canadian male is one, who completes his education, finds a job, and establishes a nuclear family. The mark of a 'good successful' Afghan male is to be able to provide for his extended family, including parents and younger siblings; and continue to reside with them even after marriage and children. Similarly, while Canadian male and female students are expected to have similar roles and responsibilities, Afghan boys and girls have very different roles and responsibilities at home. In Afghan culture young people derive their identity and structural support from their families. This also makes it difficult for them to explore other options, create networks, and discover opportunities for informally learning English outside of one's family structure.

The second barrier for Afghan refugee students is the school structure and culture. Teachers in high schools teach the content of the school subject as if all students in their classes were fluent in English. This is not true for Afghan refugee students. Because they cannot understand what is going on in the classroom, they fail their tests and exams, disengage and eventually drop out of school. The help provided in schools in the form of ESL classes was only partially helpful to the students. In fact, many of the Afghan students stated that formal programs like ESL were challenging because the homework was too difficult or the ESL programs did not last long period, for example the ESL classes would run for only a year; and therefore, it was not sufficient.

Other studies have also shown the inadequacy of school programs [ESL], class content, and inefficient instructing practices by teachers (Velasco and Fix, 2000). This study confirms

those findings. For example, all participants except one said that programs like ESL, and after school homework-help had assisted them very little. Although, it is important to note that schools did in fact offer newcomer immigrants some beginners programs. These programs however, were not offered consistently across the various schools where the participants studied. For instance, one student stated that her school only offered an ESL program. Other students, however, complained that their after school programs were facilitated by other students who simply did not know the material well, and were there only to complete their designated volunteer requirements. These were some of the reasons that the students felt that formal programs did not help serve their language-learning needs.

In this study I was also able to gather data that confirms existing literature about the implication of socio-economic conditions on newcomer students (Abada, Hou & Ram, 2008; Soroor & Popal, 2005; Amir, 2009; Ornstein, 2000; and Killbride & Anisef, 2001). In this study two participants indicated that they did not have a job. These students were aged sixteen and seventeen, and they were the youngest participants in this study. The rest of the participants, however, all indicated that they were employed, either on the part-time basis or full-time. Students who were employed said they had to financially help their family. They began working soon after their arrival in Canada and continue to work throughout their schooling. The lack of time they had prevented them from making full use of opportunities to learn English. As a result, many of them were not fluent in English despite living in the country for as long as three to five years.

Brown (2009) discusses about Dari speaking students being one of three other ethnic groups with the lowest post-secondary school application rates. The data I collected for this study shows that every students wanted to continue his/her education in post-secondary

institutions. However, their lack of fluency in English, and consequently their low overall grades, combined with their needs to contribute to family income most likely influenced their ability to continue their education beyond high school.

It is also important to consider the migration pattern of the Afghan participants in this study. Five of them had lived in four countries and two had lived in three countries before arriving in Canada. Like the studies by Amir (2009), Soroor and Popal (2005), I found that the multiple times these students had to move meant that they had to learn multiple language, and to figure out how to function in multiple school systems.

The students stated that because they had moved from one country to another, they were required to start school again in the respective countries, for instance, in Pakistan, Iran, and Russia. The students' language learning process was met with the demands of a new education system and new language(s). The students stated that the obligation to learn new languages during migration period in the countries indicated above, have made learning the English language in Canada more difficult. Having knowledge of various language(s) was also an obstacle in learning English because the students were surrounded by others who spoke the same language(s). Many of the participants expressed that with Pakistani friends they spoke Urdu; with Russian friends they spoke Russian. Contrary to Cummins' (1981) interdependence theory of bilingualism, speaking various languages seems to make the process of learning the English language for immigrant youth prolonged and complicated.

Finally, a particular finding I thought was important is the level of satisfaction with progress. The period of residence in Canada varied from two to five years. The participants in this study stated that they were all 'happy' with their level of English skills. The student who has been here for only two years felt that she had made great improvement in speaking, reading, and

understanding English. Other students who have been living in Canada between three and half to five years similarly expressed satisfaction with their skills in the English language. Although most of the participants could hold basic conversation in English; their language skills, however, appeared to be weak. During the interview process, for example, the participants were having difficulty understanding certain questions. As a result, I was often prompted to rephrase and repeat the questions; other participants were giving responses to certain questions that did not follow through with what was being asked.

Limitations

In this study there are two notable limitations. First, due to the sample size of the participants, it cannot be known to what degree the findings of this research can be generalized to other immigrant youth's experiences in learning the English language; and because the study included seven participants, it cannot be known if the data is representative of the general population of the Afghan immigrant youth. The second limitation is that only two interviews were conducted in Farsi, and the rest were conducted in English. The participants who were interviewed in Farsi tended to provide more insight and in-depth description about their experiences in learning the English language. However, the participants who were interviewed in English were only able to partially provide sufficient information; the reason being for this was that they were not able to elaborate fully on their experiences and provide detail which would have strengthened this research further.

Conclusion

The period in which Afghan newcomer youth learn the English language and the experiences of learning the language is not without difficulty. The topic of language-acquisition is important because it limits opportunities for further education and subsequently occupational

outcomes. Language is fundamentally the foundation for a smooth transition to a new country and a building block for a successful future. The findings in this study suggest that despite the obstacles, the students in this study expressed strong desire to make full use of their opportunities in learning the language both within schools and in many cases outside of the formal school environment, for instance, with their social network, co-workers, and the media.

In order to support the learning goals of Afghan youth, it is important for all of the stakeholders, such as school administrators, public services, and non-profit agencies to take serious steps to effectively integrate Afghan youth in the education system.

The participants in this research provided valuable insight into their experiences in trying to learn the English language. There are however, additional areas of research that would be interesting to look into. A related area that would be interesting to explore is the differences in the level of learning skills between Afghan youth who emigrate from Pakistan vs. Afghanistan, and or Pakistan vs. Russia. It would be important to examine these differences because the Afghan youth may have experienced different educational systems in the countries noted above. For example, the learning opportunities for Afghan immigrant youth in such schools may vary as they move from one country to another.

Additionally, the majority of the students in this study expressed that they would enrol into college and then they would pursue their education in university. Their enrollment into colleges and subsequently into universities would be a determining factor in their successful integration into the labour market. It would be essential, thus, to explore how many of the participants actually enrolled into college, and how many continued their education in university. This area of research is important because it would enable an opportunity to study Afghan

students in the long term; and their successful or unsuccessful integration into the labour market and the society at large.

Policy Recommendations

1. Immigrant students, such as the Afghan youth in this study, often fall behind their Canadian-born counterparts in high-school academic performance. This is a result of a curriculum that does not adequately integrate those students whose first language is something other than English. Immigrant students should be provided with additional resources in order to enhance their academic performance to meet the expectations and standards of the curriculum. To do this, school boards must ensure that all high schools are providing these students learning opportunities during lunch hour and/or after school hours. Students who are falling behind can use extra time at lunch or after school in order to catch up on English learning and/or learning the subject at hand. These programs should be staffed by well-trained and appropriately compensated teachers, not just volunteer students.
2. Many students in this research have indicated that ESL programs are [often] not helping them to successfully acquire the English language. They believe it is a result of the limited time span/length of ESL programs. ESL programs are crucial for immigrant youth's integration into a new education system; it is also a significant tool in their academic success. Therefore, longer and more comprehensive English Second Language programs are essential in overcoming the barriers immigrant youth face in acquiring the English language.
3. Immigrant youth are often stigmatized in the classroom. Students who do not speak English as well as their Canadian-born counterparts are often laughed at, teased and/or

bullied as a result. This leads to disengagement from school and they often end up avoiding class to avoid the embarrassment they face. Students also reported that they are often hesitant to ask questions because they fear that their classmates will laugh and/or make fun of them for it. Therefore, school boards must ensure that immigrant students are protected in schools. Teachers, principals and school administrators must enforce a zero tolerance policy when it comes to laughing at or making fun of students who are struggling in the process of acquiring the English language. This can reduce immigrant dropout rates in the long run as well as keep students in the classroom in the short run.

4. Parental support and encouragement that the students in this study received was an important topic. However, because they lack knowledge in the English language, and do not have extra time due to the demanding nature of their jobs, parental involvement in their children's school matters is limited. Nevertheless, parents' encouragement of their children's learning is an important factor in the children's level of motivation. Therefore, administrators, teachers and principals should explicitly value this form of immigrant parents' contribution to their children's education. For example, immigrant parents often feel disconnected to teachers and principals who speak formal English and often undermine their knowledge of the education system. Such barriers should be removed and an equitable, diverse and accessible means of communication between parent-teachers should be encouraged and ensured by school staff.
5. Immigrant youth are often at an economic disadvantage in relation to their Canadian-born counterpart. As a result, immigrant students work part-time and/or full-time jobs to make up for the lack of discretionary income in the household or to contribute to the families' basic needs. The fact that these students must compromise their academic success to meet

financial needs is a significant issue for immigrant youth. Students with part-time and/or full-time jobs are not able to finish homework, study for tests and/or participate in extra-curricular activities, all of which contributes to a better academic performance. School boards must take this into account and provide programs and services that would help these students balance their economic demands at home and their academic goals at school in a way that none of these factors compromise one another.

Challenges and Opportunities: Afghan Youth

Learning English

Immigration and Settlement Studies

Ryerson University
Yeates School of Graduate Studies

Purpose of study: It is a research project aimed to study Afghan Students' English-language acquisition processes. Studies show that newcomer immigrant youth face many challenges in integrating in schools. This study will look specifically into the Afghan immigrant students.

Who is eligible: There is a set of criteria that must be met by volunteers; they include:

- 7 participants.
- Age (16-18).
- Grades 10-12.
- Must be living in Canada for no more than 5 years.
- The first 7 people to return the consent form.

What you will be asked to do:

- A private room in a library or Ryerson University
- Spend 1 hour in an interview.
- You will be asked a number of questions about English-learning processes.

Compensation: You will receive 2 tokens for transportation to the interview location.
If you will be driving, then parking costs will be provided.

If you have any questions or are interested in participating, feel free to contact:

Khesraw Nazar: Khesraw.emamnazar@ryerson.ca

**Ryerson University
Consent Agreement Form**

Title: Challenges and Opportunities: Afghan Youth Learning English

You are invited to participate in a research study that will examine Afghan Student's English Language acquisition processes. This research study is being done in partial fulfillment of requirements for my Master's degree in Immigration and Settlement. Before you agree to volunteer for this study, please read the entire document and ask any questions you may have about the study.

Investigators: Khesraw E. Nazar, B.A Hons., York University; Master's Candidate in Immigration and Settlement, Ryerson University. Supervisor: Mehrunnisa Ahmad Ali, Ph.D., Professor.

Purpose of the Study: Studies show that newcomer immigrant youth face many challenges in integrating in schools. This study will focus on the English language-learning processes. This study will look specifically into the Afghan immigrant students.

Description of the Study: The interview will take place in a private room in a public library or Ryerson University. You will meet only once for the interview; the interview will take approximately 1 hour. The interview will consist of a number of questions. These questions will specifically relate to issues about school matters. For example, the questions will include: Do you want to learn oral or written English, or both? For what purpose?

Risks or Discomforts: The risk or discomforts involved in the study may include questions types that are personal in nature and/or question types that may elicit unwanted past memories. In an event where these types of questions do appear, you will be informed that you can choose not to answer such questions and move on to the next question as you wish. I will also offer to refer anyone who feels uncomfortable to a counsellor at AWO, who is familiar with the youth and their cultural background.

Benefits of the Study: The major benefits of this study will be the gaining of new knowledge that may be used in the development of improved English language programs. This may benefit the Afghan community, and future newcomers. You may not receive any direct personal benefit from participating in this study.

Confidentiality: Data collected will be kept confidential. The data will be stored in an encrypted file on a password protected laptop and on an encrypted and password protected USB key. The only individuals with access to the data will be the researcher and faculty supervisor. Your name and other personal identifiers will not be used in the analysis or final report for this project. The data will be destroyed immediately after transcription.

Incentives to Participate: You will not be paid to participate in this study.

Costs and/or Compensation for Participation: There will be costs associated with participation in this study, such as travel costs. The costs for a round trip to the interview location and return home is approximately \$6. You will be provided with these cover charges. If you are driving the cost for parking will also be covered

Voluntary Nature of Participation: Participation in this research is voluntary. If you choose not to participate in the project, it will not affect your future relations with Ryerson University. If you choose to participate, you are able to withdraw your consent and stop participation without penalty. If you choose to stop participation, you will be asked if the partially collected data can be used, if not then it will be disposed. You can also choose to stop audio recording at any point during the interview process. Should you choose to stop the interview, your travel costs or parking costs will be compensated.

Questions about the Study: If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact.

PI: Khesraw E. Nazar
Khesraw.emamnazar@ryerson.ca

If you have questions regarding your rights as a human subject and participant in this study, you may contact the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board for information.

Research Ethics Board
c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation
Ryerson University
350 Victoria Street
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3
416-979-5042

Agreement:

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this agreement.

You have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Consent for Audio Recording

Interview Questions for Students:

- 1) What is your name? What school do you go to? Age? Grade in school?
- 2) How long have you been living in Canada? Where else have you lived? What language/s did you already know when you arrived in Canada? How much English did you know when you arrived here?
- 3) Tell me about your experiences of trying to learn English.
 - a) Did you want to learn oral or written English, or both? For what purposes?
 - b) What opportunities did you have to learn English in your school, your community, and in your home?
 - c) Did you try to join formal programs or learn English informally, or both? What / who was most / least helpful? Why?
 - d) What human and material resources have you used? Which ones were more / less effective? Why? *What types of resources have you used mainly? In terms of material resources, books, articles, homework or human resources like friends, teachers, co-workers?*
 - a. What type of classmates, friends, and people do you surround yourself with at school? Or outside of school?
 - e) Which internal (e.g. too little time) and/or external factors (e.g. programs available in the evenings) helped or hindered your learning? *What were the factors that made it easier or more difficult to learning English*
 - a. What were or are your learning experiences in a classroom?
 - f) What do you do in your leisure time? Do you work?
 - g) What is your plan in the future in terms of continuing education?

- h) Have your experiences in learning the English language discouraged you from pursuing higher education or has it motivated you to continue? Why?

Interview Questions for Community Leader:

- 1) AWO staff: What types of services and or programs does the AWO provide for youth to help them with learning English?
 - a. How do the services provided by your organization help Afghan youth learn English?
 - b. What makes these services more effective than other opportunities they may have in learning the language? What makes these services less effective?
 - c. What are some challenges you face in offering this program?
 - d. Do you feel that the Afghan youth themselves struggle to learn the English language?
 - i. If so, what would you consider these challenges to be?
 - ii. How do you think that these challenges and problems can be fixed or overcome?

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