Imagined selves and L2 learning motivation among middle-aged women: The experiences of Middle Eastern women

Haifa Al-Nofaie

Abstract
This case study aims to understand what motivates mid-aged women from the Middle East to learn English. The study builds on Norton’s (2000) concepts of investment. The study included three female participants in their 40s and 50s who had different life experiences and motives for learning English. Participants’ narratives and researchers’ observations were used for data collection. It was found that these women learn English during their middle-age years in order to empower themselves. In addition, participants’ efforts for learning English were highlighted in relation to their future identities. It is hoped that this study will encourage linguists to investigate the issue of Middle Eastern females’ identities and language learning motivation to widen the scope of motivation theories.

Keywords: L2 motivation, poststructuralism, investment, imagined self, imagined community

Affiliation
Taif University, Saudi Arabia
email: haifa.alnofaie@gmail.com
1 Introduction

Being a researcher in the field of foreign language learning, I have always wondered why and how people from different age groups learn an additional language L2. I have a particular interest in understanding learners’ desires to study a new language, their imagined future selves, and the role of their interactions with the outside world in constructing identities. My thinking is inspired by Norton’s (2000) concepts of investment, imagined identity, and imagined community. Norton (2000) examines motivation from a sociological perspective and explains how the interaction between L2 learners and their communities constructs their identities. Norton’s concepts are shaped by the views of the poststructuralist theorists Bourdieu (1977), Bakhtin and Holquist (1981), and Wee (1997). These theorists provide a clear link between social power and identity construction. Norton (2000) has adapted these views into the field of foreign language learning. Her research focus is understanding how L2 learners relate their learning of the new language to their future identities and what they do in order to achieve their goals. Based on Norton’s view of motivation, this paper investigates the motivation of three middle-aged women, from Middle Eastern countries, who chose to learn English as an L2 at a particular age. The paper discusses how these learners interact within their social contexts and how this interaction can empower them to reach their imagined selves, as presented in poststructuralist theory. The analysis of learners’ narratives provides a deeper account of language learning motivation and demonstrates how this new language will help learners identify themselves in the global community of English speakers to place themselves in a more powerful position than before.

Available literature on L2 learning motivation mainly targets school children or youth. Some of these studies focus on investigating motivation in relation to the individual’s ideal self from a psychological perspective (e.g. Dörnyei, Csizér, and Németh, 2006; Al-Shehri, 2009). Other studies emphasise the role of contexts in developing learners’ motivation, following social or sociocultural theories (e.g. Kim, 2009; Ushioda, 2009). There are studies that approach motivation from a poststructuralist stand, and view motivation as a construct determined by the level of the learner’s social interaction with the outside context, which constructs his/her imagined self and therefore, his/her imagined community. These types of studies mainly focus on immigrants or learners of English studying in English-speaking countries (e.g. Gao, 2008; Early and Norton, 2012). There are other studies that examined investment in non-European contexts, such as in China (Gu, 2008) and Africa (Norton and Williams, 2012). I could not locate studies that apply investment into L2 learning in the Middle East, so one might wonder how learners from the Middle East interpret their motivation and invest in L2 learning.
Another limitation with existing literature is that research into the motivation of learning L2 by middle-aged learners is scarce. Available studies of middle-aged people learning L2 focus on adults in their 30s and 40s and reveal that a positive learning experience is an important factor for successful L2 learning (Chłopek, 2009; Marques, 2012). A study that narrates the experiences of Middle Eastern females with learning English is needed. The availability of such studies will allow for including a wider range of age groups, understanding the motivation of learners from different contexts, and more insight into motivation theories.

The above-described scarcity of L2 motivation literature encouraged me to examine the motivation of female adults in their 40s and 50s (two women from Saudi Arabia and a woman from Iran). The research focus was as follows:

1. identify what motivates middle-aged women to learn English as an L2;
2. highlight their learning experiences and efforts; and
3. demonstrate how these experiences relate to their imagined and empowered selves.

The study addressed the following questions:

1. What motivates the three middle-aged women to learn English?
2. To what extent do these participants invest in learning English in order to reach their imagined selves?

The next section will discuss the literature on L2 motivation, followed by the Methodology, Results, Discussion, and finally Conclusion and Implications.

2 Literature review

2.1 L2 motivation: Psychological and poststructuralist paradigms

The field of L2 motivation has been dominated by the theories of two prominent figures: Dörnyei’s (2005) L2 motivational self-system theory and Norton’s (2000) investment theory. The following paragraphs demonstrate the difference between these concepts. Dörnyei’s (2005) theory of L2 Motivational Self-System is drawn on the theory of possible selves. It refers to the individual’s thoughts of ‘what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming’ (Markus and Nurius, 1986). This theory looks at the individual from a psychological perspective. At the heart of Dörnyei’s (2005) motivation theory is the notion of the ideal self, ‘the representation of the attributes that someone would ideally like to possess’ (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009:3–4). A second construct of motivation is the ‘ought-to’ self, which refers to ‘attributes that one believes one ought to possess’ (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009:3–4). It is a less-internalised desire, when the learner has to show a commitment to learning a language as a way to meet the expectations of others, such as teachers and parents.
The third construct included in Dörnyei’s interpretation of motivation is the learner’s experience, which refers to ‘situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience’ (Dörnyei, 2005:106) It demonstrates the learner’s efforts to learn a language and reflects the learner’s transfer towards the ideal self. Dörnyei referred to this psychological interpretation of motivation as L2 Motivational Self-System theory. One characteristic of motivation Dörnyei (2005) highlighted is that learners’ motivation is not fixed; it changes according to experiences in learners’ lives.

In her earlier works on motivation, Norton criticised studies in the field for limiting the interpretation of motivation to the individual’s level (Norton and Toohey, 2011). To complement the notion of motivation that is mainly viewed as a psychological concept, Norton (2000, 2013) suggests and develops the concept of investment. This concept takes into account learners’ commitments to building their relationships with the world around them while they learn L2.

If learners ‘invest’ in the target language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic resources (language, education, friendship) and material resources (capital goods, real estate, money) which will increase the value of their cultural capital and social power. (Norton, 2013:6)

According to Norton, having the desire to learn a language is not sufficient for acquiring it. Learners can be highly motivated towards learning L2, but some social and historical constraints might negatively affect their motivation. This indicates that learners’ desires to learn an L2 do not necessarily lead to successful learning (Norton and Toohey, 2011). The way L2 learners are connected and positioned in their societies would help researchers understand learners’ motivation and their imagined selves as a component of motivation. Norton develops her concept of investment further by proposing an investment framework that includes three constructs: ideology which refers to the individual’s self positioning in the age of globalisation, identity which refers to the individual’s self-empowerment, and finally capital which refers to economic and cultural forms that are available to the individual such as linguistic skills and social networks (Darvin and Norton, 2015). Each construct has its influence on motivation. Ideologies shape people’s positioning which in turn determines the individual’s actions for empowerment and transformation. This complex view of investment leads to the following question: How do L2 learners invest in their learning nowadays?

The fact that the world has become a global village seems to provide L2 learners with easy access to L2 communities and create more opportunities for mutual understanding. The availability of digital learning resources easily connects English learners with the outsider world, facilitates learning English in
informal settings, and enhances learners’ autonomy (Sundqvist, 2009). Also, digital resources have helped people learn new languages that are rarely spoken in their communities (Al-Nofaie, 2018). Another advantage of gaining access to a wide range of resources is helping learners to understand their relationship to the world and frame their future self-images (Norton and Williams, 2012). In order to explain the learners’ investment in the new language, Norton (2013) introduces the concept of ‘imagined community’, which refers to what the learners imagine their communities might be. According to Norton (2013), an imagined community entails an imagined identity, which is defined as ‘the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future’ (Norton, 2013:4).

Norton’s proposition of investment takes motivation beyond the psychological domain and puts more emphasis on the role of power relations in successful learning. Norton’s notion is inspired by poststructuralist theorists Bourdieu (1977), Bakhtin and Holquist (1981), and Weedon (1997). Bourdieu (1977) and Bakhtin and Holquist (1981) focus on the individual’s self-expression in discourse and emphasise the role of power in structuring discourse, while Weedon (1997) is concerned with the feminist poststructuralist domain. Weedon introduces the term ‘subjectivity’ to refer to the relationship between identity construction and social power position. She defines subjectivity as ‘the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself, and her ways of understanding her relation to the world’ (Weedon, 1997:28).

What distinguishes Norton’s approach to motivation from the aforementioned poststructuralist theorists is that she puts more emphasis on researching the identities of L2 learners in educational settings, taking into consideration power relations (Pennycook, 2001). The issue of inequality and learners’ empowerment in the classroom has been raised by other educationalists (e.g., Benesch, 1999; Pennycook, 2001). These educationalists adapted the critical pedagogy, a notion proposed by Freire (1974). According to Freire, oppressed learners have the right to speak and for this reason they need to be placed in a powerful position. It is through conscientisation (i.e. learners’ consciousness) that learners feel empowered. In accordance with Freire’s notion, Norton has realised that learners’ powerful identities are constructed through social practices. Norton (2016) states:

What I have learnt from language learners is that language is not only a linguistic system of words and sentences, but also a social practice in which identities and desires are negotiated in the context of complex and often unequal social relationships (…) Particularly important with regard to access to
The next section will discuss some studies that have been carried out in order to investigate identity and L2 learning.

2.2 Researching L2 motivation among adult learners

Some studies that focus on language learning motivation among children and youth have been carried out, relying on surveys that measure motivation from a psychological standpoint (e.g., Al-Shehri, 2009; Dörnyei, Csizér, and Németh, 2006). There are qualitative investigations that examine motivation from a sociocultural perspective, drawing on the sociocultural theory which focuses on the role of context and culture in language learning (e.g., Kim, 2009; Ushioda, 2009). For more details on sociocultural theory and language learning, see Lantolf (2000). Some qualitative studies examine youth and adult learners’ changing motivation over time to identify motivational influences and support the claim that motivation is not a fixed attribute (e.g., Shoaib and Dörnyei, 2005). Another approach for investigating motivation is the poststructuralist approach that places the issue of learners’ power as its core issue. Studies that follow this approach highlight the relationship between learners’ identities and social power among immigrants, learners of L2 studying in L2 countries, or people living in multilingual contexts (e.g., Early and Norton, 2012; Gao, 2008; Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004).

Speaking of subjects’ age range, there are a few studies that focus on a wider age range of L2 learners, including adult learners. For instance, Chlopek’s (2009) study looked at the motivation of Polish people between 17 and 37 towards learning more than two languages. The study suggested that there was a possible relationship between successful learning experience and high motivation. Also, the study found that the learner’s self-concept can predict the level of his motivation. The study relied on surveys and gave no further details about why participants wanted to continue learning languages. A similar finding was reached by Marques (2012), who studied the motivation of Chinese adults (between 20 and 40) towards learning English. The motivation of these learners was related to their social context and learning experience.

The above review reveals that there is a lack of studies that examine females’ motivation in relation to future identities and L2 learning. Another limitation is the scarcity of studies that address the motivation of Middle Eastern females within the scope of investment theory. It is the purpose of this study to highlight the identities of Middle Eastern females in relation to language learning motivation.
from a poststructuralist perspective. Another purpose of this study is to widen the scope of motivation and poststructuralist theories by including older learners. Examining women’s motivation towards learning L2 will provide a clear understanding of their journey of empowerment and transformation. The next section describes the methodology of this study.

3 Methodology

3.1 Narrative inquiry approach
Narrative inquiry is an approach used to capture a personal experience at a particular time of the narrator’s life. It seeks to understand the relationship between individual experiences and cultural contexts (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). It examines underlying insights and assumptions implied in the stories. The analysis of narratives should consider four levels for an in-depth understanding of human experiences: the inward direction, which refers to the narrator’s internal conditions such as emotions, the outward direction, which refers to external conditions such as social context, and the backward and forward directions, which refer to the narrator’s past, present, and future life (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000:50).

Studies on motivation have used quantitative measures, in the forms of surveys, for examining learners’ motivation (e.g., Dörnyei, Csizér and Németh, 2006; Al-Shehri, 2009). A few studies have adapted qualitative approaches for investigating motivation, such as semi-structured interviews, observations, and learners’ autobiographies (e.g., Shoaib and Dörnyei, 2005; Kim, 2009; Marques, 2012). Other studies applied the narrative inquiry approach for understanding the effects of migration on the future identities of language learners (e.g., Early and Norton, 2012). Since narratives could reveal how power relations are experienced and expressed by language learners (Early and Norton, 2012), this study relied on the participants’ narratives to uncover their motivation for learning L2. Some information about the participants is presented in the next section.

3.2 Participants
The participants were three Middle Eastern women: Aysha (53 years) and Maryam (55 years), Saudis who live in Saudi Arabia, and Laila (40 years), an Iranian immigrant living in the United Kingdom for 10 years at the time of data collection. All three names are pseudonyms. Saudi Arabia and Iran share certain similarities, such as religion and culture.

Aysha was a family friend. I was curious to discover why she decided to learn English at this age. She introduced me to her friend, Maryam, who was also interested in learning English. They have known each other for a long time. I met the third participant, Laila, when I was a postgraduate student in the UK. It is
worth noting that sampling in qualitative studies does not depend on numbers, but rather on the adequacy of sampling in addressing the study aim and questions. It is recommended to focus on a small number of participants in narrative studies for in-depth understanding of participants’ stories (Kim, 2016).

3.3 Methods

In a narrative study, a combination of data collection methods is preferred for gaining a clear understanding of the study and minimising the risk of the researcher’s bias. Methods could include journals, observations, and formal and informal interviews (Maxwell, 2013). In order to enhance the trustworthiness of this study, I used narrative, semi-structured interviews and field notes to record my observations. The main interview questions were prepared in advance; however, many questions have naturally emerged throughout the conversations and this was due to the participants’ different backgrounds and social experiences.

3.4 Procedures

Data were mainly collected by recording the participants’ narratives during semi-structured interviews. The participants’ approval was gained in advance. Each participant attended one main semi-structured interview (around 50 minutes in duration), followed by short informal conversations to allow for more details and observations. The interviews took place in cafes, for a more relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Because analysis of narratives should occur throughout the research process (Gerhart, Tarragona, and Bava, 2007), I noted my observations and checked them regularly against the narratives. Interviews with Aysha and Maryam were carried out in Saudi Arabia in 2016, while Laila’s interviews were conducted earlier in 2013 in the United Kingdom.

Aysha’s and Maryam’s interviews and conversations were conducted in Arabic, and then translated into English. Laila’s interview was in English because she does not speak Arabic. The Arabic translation was checked by a colleague for consistency. Learners’ stories were coded into main themes and then sub-themes. The main themes were learners’ motivational influences for learning English, social interaction and learning opportunities, and learners’ imagined selves. I used the member check technique to check the accuracy of my findings. The participants were asked to check the results to make sure that the researcher conveyed the intended meaning. Results are presented in the following section.
4 Results

4.1 Site 1: Saudi Arabia

4.1.1 Case 1: Aysha

Aysha is a delightful 53-year-old Saudi lady. She is full of life and has a great sense of humour. She is the mother of two young men who are studying in the United States. Her husband owns a shop and works hard to support his children as they pursue their educations. Aysha got married after finishing high school and preferred not to work because the family was her priority. However, she was an active volunteer who participated in many social and charity events in her city.

Excerpt 1

A: I was not that good at English when I was at school. I was not aware that I will need this language for the future. My two children started their postgraduate studies in the United States in 2012. I visited them in June 2014 and it was my first visit to an English-speaking country. All what I knew at that time were a few words that I remember from my school time. I stayed there for a month and I couldn’t communicate with people there, so I used to go out with my children to help me buying things. Sometimes I used sign language to tell people what I want, but I felt embarrassed that I can’t rely on myself at this age, but Americans are very friendly and like to help visitors. When I came back to Saudi I decided to learn English. I felt that English is needed everywhere these days. It is a global language. Even in Saudi Arabia, there are non-Arabic speaking nationals who work in different fields and we need to communicate with them. (Main interview)

This part of Aysha’s narrative shows her past experience with learning English and reveals the change in her motivation towards learning English. Travelling to an English-speaking country was a motivational influence. She described Americans as friendly, which might have encouraged her to move on with learning English as explained in the following excerpt from her interview.

Excerpt 2

A: I started with some books which come with audio CDs. My children got them for me from the States. The books were for beginners. I found them very helpful. I used to spend a couple of hours daily learning from these books at home, but I could easily get disturbed with my family commitments. So, in order to organise my time and to make sure that I get the best out of my learning experience, I decided to join a language institute to commit to learning English...Learning at the institute is much better than studying by myself. Before joining the course, I relied only on the books I got from the States. They were the only resources for understanding grammar, practicing listening, and learning new vocabulary. I
used to watch TV shows in English, like Dr Phil. I was able to improve my listening, but did not have an opportunity to speak the language. It was a great decision to continue learning at the language institute. I started in August 2015 and this is my sixth month at the institute. I can practice speaking with my teacher and classmates. The teacher can guide me to different learning resources like some web sites. I visited the States later in December 2015 to spend some time with my children during the Christmas holiday. We have been to different places and I was able to chat with native speakers, and my children were surprised that I can communicate with less of their help. I’m not fluent, but I know the basic phrases and sentences of daily conversations. This gave me much confidence. (Main interview)

In this excerpt, Aysha describes her learning journey. She explains how she combines formal learning at the institute with out-of-class learning in order to learn English. She uses various resources like web sites and TV shows. It seems that the availability of digital media can provide easy access to English outside the classroom. Also, she tries to communicate with native speakers whenever possible. One day, Aysha showed me some photos of her with some Americans during her visits to the States. The photos were taken in her children’s flat during a dinner gathering with her children’s friends and neighbours. She had invited them to introduce them to Saudi culture and to try Saudi cuisine. She told me the names of some American events and their histories like Halloween and the Oscar Awards. This shows how much Aysha was interested in learning about American culture and in introducing herself and her culture to others.

Excerpt 3

A: English will help me wherever I go, whether in travelling or here in my country, for talking to native speakers or non-native speakers who do not understand Arabic. I would love to continue learning English ‘til I become fluent. I know it will take some time, but it will help me a lot in communicating with people from different nationalities who do not speak Arabic and discover more about their cultures. (Main interview)

Aysha sees her future self as a confident woman who can depend on herself when communicating with non-Arabic speakers through English, whether inside or outside her country. She wants to become a more powerful woman who uses English to break barriers between herself and others.

4.1.2 Case 2: Maryam

Maryam is a 55-year-old Saudi lady. She got married when she was 20 years old. She has five children. Two of her oldest daughters are married, and she lives with her other three children, who are in college. She worked as a math teacher and
retired when she was 53. After working as a teacher for many years, Maryam decided to retire and enjoy her time with her husband and her children. Unfortunately, her husband passed away at the age of 60 after one year of her retirement. It was a shock for Maryam.

Excerpt 4

10 **M:** I was a hard-working teacher. I received many awards for my teaching achievements. I loved my students and my job, but I felt it was the time for me to relax and enjoy the rest of my life with my husband. My husband encouraged me to take this step because he was thinking about retirement as well. He worked for 37 years and thought that it was the time now to focus more on ourselves and do the things that we could not do in the past due to life commitments. We retired in the same year, but unfortunately my husband got lung cancer in that year and passed away in a few months. After my husband’s death, I felt so depressed and could not talk to or see any one for a couple of months. My children were around and tried to get me back to my normal life, but I felt that I’m not like before. I keep missing my husband (sighs). My friend Aysha provided me with her care. She tried to take me out to some social and charity events that she participates in. One day, Aysha told me that she wanted to do an English course in a language institute and encouraged me to join her. At first, I was not in the mood of doing any courses, although I like English language since my school years.

11 **R:** How was your level of English when you were a school student?

12 **M:** I was very good in English during my school years and used to achieve high marks. I loved English because my Iraqi teacher was an excellent teacher. She used to encourage us to bring new words and sentences every day to the class and explain their meaning to our peers. Each student had her notebook dictionary where they used to write the new language items they learned from one another.

13 **R:** Have you continued learning English after leaving school?

14 **M:** No I joined the college and got a diploma in math and you know we did not have as much resources to English language as now. Now you can easily learn English from the internet, TV channels. After my graduation, I got totally busy with my career as a math teacher and with my family and never thought of improving my language. I was not bothered to continue learning English in the past because I thought I didn’t need to. (Main interview)

The above lines explain that Maryam was motivated to learn English in the past, but challenges have stopped her from learning more English: the lack of learning resources, family commitments, and being unaware of the importance of English for her future. In the excerpt below, Maryam explains why she thought again about learning English.
Excerpt 5

When Aysha started her course, she was so excited and used to talk to me about her experience. Sometimes Aysha drops by after finishing her evening classes and has dinner with me. She used to come holding her books and told me about her classes and her new friends. Aysha looks very happy and so ambitious about studying English. Her experience has triggered my motivation to do a language course. This took me back to classroom memories of English subject. I remembered how much I used to love English, and I felt a pity for not having a chance to continue learning English. Also, the loss of my husband was very painful, and I felt that I needed to do something to give me more strength to move on with my life. I decided to go to the language institute and register for a language course. I’m doing the course now, and this is my second month.

(Main interview)

These lines demonstrate a turning point in Maryam’s life: her decision to take an English course. It seems that her friend, Aysha, influenced her decision. Also, Maryam’s positive attitude towards English and her positive learning experience in the past (Excerpt 4) seem to be other influencing factors for making this decision. Her use of the word ‘strength’ seems to confirm that learning a new language can provide women with power. She describes below how her interaction with her community creates learning opportunities.

Excerpt 6

How do you find the course?

I like it. I feel I’m doing something interesting. I have a chance now to improve my English. I start to watch TV shows and read electronic magazines in English. I can understand a little bit because I already know some words and sentences. I feel the new generation are away much luckier than us. They have all different learning resources.

You mentioned that the course helped you become social. Can you explain more?

Yes, I mean going out and meeting new people in the language institute. There are some ladies learning English and others doing a computer course in this institute. I chat with them during the break. They are much younger than me, but I can get along with them.

The other ladies are younger than you. How would age limit people’s opportunities for learning new languages?

I think a person can learn a new language at any age. There are no limits or restrictions. There are non-Arab people who come to Saudi Arabia for work without any idea about Arabic language and they start to learn it gradually.

Maryam talks about the types of digital resources she is using to support her out-of-class learning. Limited language learning resources in the past might have decreased her motivation. She does not think age affects language learning, a finding that has been approved by some researchers (e.g., Shoaib and Dörnyei, 2005; Marques, 2012). The next excerpt is an account of her imagined self.
Maryam’s reasons for learning English were to overcome the depression she experienced after her husband’s death and to gain a feeling of accomplishment, the accomplishment of learning a language she had a passion for in the past. Her imagined identity is that of a strong woman who can accept the fact of losing her partner and can make a life change and become social through learning English.

4.2 Site 2: UK
4.2.1 Case 3: Laila

Laila is a 40-year-old Iranian lady who migrated to the UK in 2005. I met Laila in 2012 in a Persian restaurant, where she worked as a waitress. We became close friends, and we used to hang out on her day off with my other multinational friends. Laila has a very friendly attitude toward the people around her. She is delightful and jokes with everyone in the restaurant. She hides pain behind her friendliness. Laila migrated to the UK in search of a better life. She migrated with her younger brother. Her motivational influences for learning English are explained in Excerpt 8 below.

Excerpt 8

L: We were looking for better life and better jobs. First when we came to the UK, I was 30 and my brother was 28. We never thought of any difficulties here. We think things will go well when we put our feet there. In Iran, I finished high school level, but we couldn’t go to college because we had to find a job to help my old father. He was a small farmer responsible for feeding six people. I was older and must help myself. My English was not so good. We studied English at school, but not enough. When I came here, I was crying a lot because I couldn’t understand people. People couldn’t understand me as well. I didn’t like English at school...was difficult for me. I did language courses in Glasgow first. It was difficult to learn it, but no other choice. I did different jobs...in fish and chips shop, supermarket, and restaurant. I washed a lot of dishes. Look at my hands. They are ugly. I don’t have nice long nails. These 10 years I don’t have time to go out with friends or meet new people. I was working, working, working to save money...never have time to go out with friends. I always feel sorry for myself, but always say to myself it’s okay; one day I will be happy.
R: You need to take it easy and find some time for yourself.
L: Yes, but life is hard and nobody helps me. I need to pay my bills and rent. I was staying with my brother in one house, but he is married now. He asked me to find place for myself. My father was angry because I’m not staying with my brother. He did not talk to my brother for long time... This is his life. He wants to live with his wife only. My friends in the restaurant helped me to find place quickly. I share the house with seven people. My room is very small. If I want to iron my clothes, I put the ironing thing on my bed (laughs). I have small shelves for my books. I love reading. (Main interview)

These lines demonstrate the difficulties Laila has faced as an immigrant. She had to learn English in order to integrate with her new community. Excerpt 9 below describes her learning journey.

Excerpt 9
R: How is your relationship with your housemates?
L: My housemates are friendly. We don’t talk much because everyone is busy, but sometimes we have small conversations. They work hard like me because they all asylum seekers. Life is double hard for us.
R: You mentioned that you like reading. What kinds of books do you read?
L: I read anything - magazines, newspaper, short stories. This help me to learn more words. I read every night before going to bed. Sometimes I borrow books from my friends. (Main interview)

Because Laila knows I am in the field of teaching English, she asked me to recommend a good book for learning English that comes with audio CDs. She wanted to improve her English. She complained that her long work hours do not allow her to join an English course. She was not happy with her pronunciation, and she wanted to achieve a native-like accent. She explained that her internet usage was limited to the few gigabytes that she used to get when topping up her mobile, so it was hard for her to learn from the internet. Her future view of herself as a speaker of English is revealed in Excerpt 10.

Excerpt 10
L: I want to have better life, good job, house, not a big one, a small one, even a house with one room (laughs). I want to travel a lot to different countries to see different people. If I make good money in the future, I will send some to my family to make them happy. (A friendly meeting)

As appears in the lines above, Laila views herself as an independent woman who has her own life, her own house, and someone whom her family can rely on. Laila and I used to go out for tea, and she told me a lot of stories about her family back home and how lonely she felt in the United Kingdom. I remember one day she
showed me some photos of her little nieces. She told me that she wants them to learn English at an early age, and she tries to have conversations with them in English whenever she visits them in Iran. Laila’s use of English with her nieces reflects the change from the old self into the new self. As she mentioned in Excerpt 8 above, she did not like English when she lived in Iran, and she was not motivated to learn it. However, things changed when she migrated to the UK because she realised the importance of English for her as an immigrant and for living in the global community of English speakers.

5 Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the motivation of middle-aged Middle Eastern females towards learning English. I examined their motives to learn English and the extent to which they invested in the new language in order to reframe their imagined selves and imagined communities. The investigation was guided by Norton’s (2000, 2013) notion of investment, a notion that is drawn on poststructuralist theories.

Although the number of participants was three, the study led to a thorough understanding of the learners’ motivation by employing informal interviews and observations. The three participants had different life stories and different types of social challenges. The common finding among these learners was that all of them chose to learn English in order to put themselves in more powerful positions through social changes. As reflected in the data analysis, the participants shared a similar imagined identity: a powerful and independent woman who can face life challenges. Aysha wanted to learn English in order to communicate with non-Arabic speakers in her country and with Americans when she visits the States to see her children. Maryam wanted to learn English to overcome her sorrow after her husband’s death. Laila faced harder challenges than the two other participants. She was learning English to integrate with her new community and break any barriers that might keep her in a marginalised position as an immigrant.

Another point that this paper highlights is the change of learners’ attitudes towards learning English. The three participants had not realised that they might need English in the future. Aysha never thought she might need English for her future. Maryam loved English, but did not have time or sufficient resources to learn it. Laila, who had a negative attitude towards learning English, did not like English during her school years. The participants realised the importance of English for their social change and this influenced their attitudes and triggered their motivation to learn it. This point confirms Shoaib and Dörnyei’s (2005)
claim that motivation is not a fixed construct. Participants’ realisation of their needs for social change helped them to reframe their relationship with others and thus increase the value of their social power, a finding that is confirmed by Norton (2016). In addition, this finding supports Freire’s (1974) notion of conscientisation which claims that learners feel empowered when they learn consciously.

Participants’ transformation was reflected in their learning investments. Their efforts in using available learning resources and expanding their social interaction were the evidence of their social change. The participants’ interactions with English and its community of speakers had been limited in the past due to the lack of learning resources and interaction with English speakers. It seems that the availability of digital learning resources nowadays plays a significant role in the participants’ learning outside the class context (Sundqvist, 2009). As is apparent from the data, the participants used a variety of resources like TV shows, audio materials, and websites to improve their English. They tried to exploit opportunities for interacting with others in English whenever they could. The role of digital resources in increasing learners’ investment has been confirmed by studies carried out in different contexts (see Darvin and Norton, 2015). However, it should be noted that learners’ investment varied. For instance, Laila was investing less than others because of some social constraints such as the lack of time and money that limited her investment opportunities. On the other hand, Aysha and Maryam were living in a more supportive environment. They joined the language institute and had more time for interaction and unlimited access to learning resources. The participants’ varied levels of investment strengthen the point that learning context is a determining success factor for language learners (Chłopek, 2009; Marques, 2012).

To sum up, Norton’s (2000) notion of investment is not context specific and can be used for examining the motivation and identity of older L2 learners from different social backgrounds. Applying the concept of investment in this study has led to a thorough understanding of learners’ motivation at the social level and the transformation processes from the old self to the new self. This shows that the individual’s desire is inseparable from his interaction with the outer context and that his desire and interaction play a role in shaping his imagined identity. The findings of this study confirm the findings of some other studies that highlighted the need for social interaction in order to enhance the level of the learner’s motivation (Kim, 2009; Ushioda, 2009; Early and Norton, 2012). The narrative inquiry approach seems to be an effective research approach for studying the link between females’ identities and L2 learning (Early and Norton, 2012). It provides linguists with in-depth understanding of females’ experiences with learning L2 which might be difficult to understand via other research approaches.
6 Conclusions and implications

This small-scale case study applied poststructuralist theory to contribute to research on L2 motivation, concerning L2 adult female learners. It looked at the motivation of three middle-aged women from the Middle East to learn English. Interviews and observations were used to collect data that was analysed qualitatively, based on narrative inquiry methodology. It was found that these women chose to learn English to overcome life challenges and thus reach their imagined selves of being empowered and independent women. Although these females’ lives and learning experiences differed greatly, depending on social factors, the study demonstrated how these women identified their imagined future identities and how they worked towards reframing their future selves and communities through their interaction with the outside world.

Results of this study might encourage teachers of foreign languages to understand their learners’ motivation, which will help turn their learning journey into a journey of empowerment. In addition, it is hoped that the findings of this study will encourage researchers to undertake more investigations with adult female learners of L2 from different age groups. Such investigations will deepen researchers’ understanding of how language learning motivation is defined and experienced by women, and thus contribute to existing motivation theories.

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About the author

Dr Haifa Al-Nofaie is an associate professor of applied linguistics at Taif University, Saudi Arabia, and a fellow of the Higher Education Academy, United Kingdom. Her research interests include bilingualism, language learning motivation, and teaching English through critical thinking pedagogies. She has presented research papers and workshops at international conferences in Europe and the Middle East and has published some research studies.

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