



University of Strathclyde

Institute of Education

**TESOL & Identity: A Narrative Approach to Explore the
Socio-ecological Impact on Female English as a Foreign
Language Learners in Kuwait**

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degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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Dedication

To my mother Khadija,

I dedicate this success to you, for it is the fruit of your prayers. I ask Allah to reward you, as no mother has ever been rewarded, for every moment of patience, every step you took for my sake, and for your constant presence by my side.

إهداء

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أهدي هذا النجاح لك، فهو ثمرة دعائك. أسأل الله أن يجزيك كما لم تُجزَّ أم من قبل، على كل لحظة صبر، وكل خطوة خطوتها من أجلي، وعلى وجودك الدائم بجاني.

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أولاً وقبل كل شيء، الحمد والشكر لله سبحانه وتعالى، الذي منحني القوة والصبر و مهّد الطريق لإتمام رحلة الدكتوراه. فلولا توفيقه ونعمه، لما كان أي من هذا ممكناً.

أهدي هذا العمل إلى والدي، الذي رحل عن الدنيا في عام 2010، لكن أحلامه لي لم ترحل. كان يتمنى ان احمل لقب "دكتورة"، وأصبح ذلك الحلم نوراً لطريقي. وعلى الرغم من أنه لا يستطيع أن يشهد هذه اللحظة، إلا أنني أشعر بفخره في كل صفحة كتبتها. والدي الغالي، هذا الإنجاز هو عربون وفاء لك، وتحقيق للمستقبل الذي كنت تراه لي دائماً.

وإلى والدتي، التي لا تُقاس محبتها وتضحياتها بأي مقياس. لم تتركني لحظة خلال هذه الرحلة، وتحملت مشقة الغربة لتكون بجانبني. كان حضورها ودعمها الثابتان هما مصدر قوتي، حتى في أصعب الأيام. وأنا أدين بهذا الإنجاز لمحبتها اللامحدودة، وصبرها، وإيمانها بأحلامي. وإلى إخواني وأخواتي الغاليين، تعجز الكلمات ان تعبر عن امتناني لدعمكم وصبركم وتشجيعكم المتواصل. لقد منحتمني محبتكم غير المشروطة القوة على الاستمرار، وسأبقى ممتنة لوجودكم بجانبني إلى الأبد.

وأخص بالشكر صديقتي المقربة حنان، التي كانت تتصل بي يومياً لتطمئن على انجازي. كنت بجانبني في لحظات الشك والانهيار، وكان إيمانك المستمر بي مصدر قوتي حين كدت أن أستسلم. أشعر بأني محظوظة حقاً بوجودك في حياتي.

إلى رفيقاتي في رحلة الغربة، الأرواح الرائعة التي التقيت بها وكانت لي بمثابة العائلة طوال هذه الرحلة. وقفنا جنباً إلى جنب في لحظات التشوّش المعرفي، والدموع المنهمرة، والضحكات الصادقة الكثيرة، ولحظات الفرح الصغيرة التي منحتنا دفعة للاستمرار والمضي قدماً. لقد كنتم ملاذي الآمن وراحتي في أصعب الأوقات. هذه الرحلة ما كانت لتكون كما كانت لولا قربكم، ولا أظن أنني كنت سأجتازها مع غيركم. وإلى كل صديقاتي العزيزات اللواتي لم ينسوني من دعائهم، وكانوا دائماً يسألون عني ويفتخرون بإصراري على تحقيق حلمي، شكراً لكم جميعاً، فقد كانت محبتكم وتشجيعكم سنداً حقيقياً لي في هذه الرحلة.

إلى الدكتور إنغبورغ بيرني والدكتور ستافروس نيكو، فريق الإشراف الرائع، أشكركما على دعمكما وإرشادكما الذي لا يُقدّر بثمن طوال هذه الرحلة. وأخص بالشكر الدكتورة إنغبورغ على كلماتها المطمئنة التي كانت تتردد في ذهني خلال أصعب اللحظات. لقد كانت عبارتها الشهيرة: "الأطروحة الجيدة هي المنجزة، والعظيمة هي المنشورة، والمثالية لا وجود لها" تذكيراً مريحاً بأن النّقد أهم من الكمال. ما كنت لأصل إلى هذه المرحلة بدون إيمانها الراسخ بي.

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Abstract

This study explores the socio-ecological factors influencing Kuwaiti female learners' experiences with English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Kuwait University. While existing research on English language acquisition and TESOL in Kuwait primarily focuses on pedagogical practices and linguistic varieties, this study addresses a significant gap by examining broader sociocultural, socioeconomic, and technological influences shaping language learning through an ecological lens.

The research is theoretically anchored in Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model developed from the Ecological Systems Theory (EST). It adopts narrative inquiry as its methodological approach to investigate the complex interplay between, English language learning, individuals, and their multilayered environmental contexts. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and reflective diaries from female students at Kuwait University (KU), offering in-depth insight into their lived experiences. The findings highlight key socio-ecological variables shaping learners' identities including the household environment, learner incentives, technological integration, and socio-ecological expectations within TESOL classroom dynamics.

Using Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA) and Short Story Analysis (SSA), three central themes along with their key insights were identified. In Theme 1 (Household Environment: Socio-ecological Influences on Language Learning), parental influence and cultural ideologies across social groups significantly shaped identity and investment in English learning. *Badu* and *Hadhar* students reported distinct experiences, with family beliefs, religion, and societal perceptions influencing attitudes toward English. The presence of Filipino domestic workers also emerged as a significant yet underexplored factor in early language exposure.

Theme 2 (learners' incentives for English Language Learning) included the use of English for social status, intercultural communication, and autonomous learning through technology. Theme 3 (Socio-ecological Variables in TESOL Settings) highlighted the teacher-student interaction, the role of L1 and L2 in TESOL settings, peer judgement and Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) , and contrasting views on teamwork within individualist and collectivist learning

orientations. This research enhances understanding of identity, investment, and power structures in second language acquisition (SLA) in Kuwait from a socio-ecological lens. It offers pedagogical and policy recommendations to support a more inclusive and effective TESOL environment.

Abbreviations

AUK	The American University of Kuwait
CALL	Computer-Assisted Language Learning
CBC	Competency-Based Curriculum
CRP	Culturally Relevant Pedagogy
CRT	Culturally Relevant Teaching
DELL	Department of English Language and Literature
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELT	English Language Teaching
ELU	The English Language Unit
EMI	English as a Medium of Instruction
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
EST	Ecological Systems Theory
FDW	Filipino Foreign Domestic Workers
FLA	Foreign Language Anxiety
FLCA	Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety
FLCAS	Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale
FLE	Foreign Language Enjoyment
FLT	Foreign Language Teaching
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IC	Intercultural Communication
KA	Kuwaiti Arabic
KU	Kuwait University
MALL	Mobile-Assisted Language Learning
MKO	More Knowledgeable Other
NI	Narrative Inquiry
NNS	Non-Native Speakers

NS	Native Speakers
PAAET	The Public Authority of Applied Education and Training
PIS	Participant Information Sheet
PPCT	Process-Person-Context-Time
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SCT	Sociocultural Theory
SDM	Schneider's Dynamic Model
SES	Socio-Economic Status
SILL	Study Inventory of Language Learning
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SSA	Short Story Analysis
TA	Thematic Analysis
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

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1. Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Overview

This introductory chapter provides an overview of the current research, beginning with the background of the study (1.2). It then highlights the driving factors behind the research (1.3), exploring both personal and professional motivations that influenced its development. Following this, the chapter outlines the study's aims and presents the research questions (1.4), which guide this investigation into the identities, perspectives and experiences of female language learners at Kuwait University and beyond the TESOL setting.

1.2. Background of the Study

The evolution of English language education in Kuwait has been significant throughout its history, particularly within higher education institutions like Kuwait University (KU). However, Al-Nouri (2019) argued that although English is widely integrated into Kuwait's commercial and educational landscape, there remains a notable gap between institutional expectations and student performance in English language acquisition. Al-Nouri (2019) also found that only 30% of students believed English proficiency would help their future careers. Students also felt unprepared due to a weak foundation in English from earlier education. Similarly, Al Darwish and Sadeqi argued that insufficient preparation at the secondary school level will leave students in higher education struggling with English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in subjects such as physics and mathematics, where they did not perceive English as particularly useful (2016).

These findings highlight a broader systemic issue in English language education in Kuwait. This issue becomes even more complex when viewed through the lens of female learners' experiences within Kuwaiti society. Their language learning journey is shaped not only by educational gaps but also by broader social and cultural factors, including family influence, peer dynamics, religious beliefs, and sociocultural norms, all of which shape their experiences in English language learning (see [Section 3.2.2.](#)).

The existing research in Kuwait's educational context has primarily focused on pedagogical approaches and classroom-based interventions (e.g., Alazemi et al., 2020; Alshuraiaan et al., 2023), with limited attention to the broader socio-ecological factors that shape language learning experiences, where the focus is beyond the educational environment. In the current study, the term socio-ecological refers to the way individual experiences, behaviours, and opportunities are shaped by interactions between personal, social, cultural, and environmental factors. The term 'socio-ecological' is expanded to capture the interrelated nature of influences on learners in their academic pathway. It adds the prefix socio for the society with ecological as a metaphor for environment, or "*borrowed by researchers to refer to the environment where learning takes place*" (Chong et.al., 2023, p.334) where beliefs, religion, values and socioeconomic factors are included being part of larger society. This term will be used throughout the thesis and discussed in more detail in the Theoretical Framework chapter ([Chapter 4](#)). While some studies (Al-Yaseen, 2019; El-Dib, 2004) have highlighted various challenges in English language teaching and learning in Kuwait, and a few have addressed aspects related to parental influence (Al-Fadley et al., 2018) or technological tools (Al Shuraiaan et al., 2024), the intersection between educational practices and the deeply rooted social and cultural dynamics shaping female learners' engagement with learning English in Kuwait remains largely overlooked.

This study investigates the intricate relationship between socio-ecological factors (see [Chapter 4](#)) and language learning in shaping the identities, perspectives, and experiences of female language learners at Kuwait University. Given Kuwait's evolving educational environment, the study also considers technological integration, not as an isolated factor, but as part of the broader socio-ecological environment that influences Kuwaiti female language learners' engagement with English. The research focuses on the identities of female language learners, making them the centre of the study and recognising the unique status of women in the Kuwaiti society, their individual educational experiences and challenges, and the role of investment in their educational journey (see [Section 3.2.](#)).

This study focuses on four key aspects. First, it explores the role of identity and investment in shaping Kuwaiti female learners' engagement with English. Secondly, it explores how household environments and family dynamics influence language learning, particularly in a

society where family plays a central role in educational decisions and outcomes (see [Section 3.3](#)). Thirdly, it investigates socio-ecological variables in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and the Kuwaiti Cultural norms, bridging the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application in Kuwait's higher education context (see [Section 3.4](#)). Finally, the study addresses socio-ecological perspectives on language learning (see [Section 3.5](#)), particularly how these perspectives relate to intercultural communication in the context of digital technologies and learners' individualist or collectivist orientations and preferences, and how these practices reflect and are shaped by the broader socio-ecological factors that influence language learning. The socio-ecological factors, informed by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems (see [Chapter 4](#)), consider the dynamic and interdependent relationships between individuals and their surrounding systems, illustrating how various layers of social and cultural contexts, from immediate influences like family and peers to broader societal factors such as cultural norms, religion, and educational policies, shape and influence language learners' experiences and development.

1.3. Research Motivations: Personal and Professional

1.3.1. Personal Motivation

My journey into this research has been shaped by my unique perspective as an individual who experienced Kuwait's educational system first as a student and later as an instructor. Both experiences, as a student in the public school system, followed by my role as a language instructor at Kuwait University, has afforded me profound insights into the obstacles and opportunities that might be encountered by female language learners in Kuwait. My professional path in language education has been extensive and varied. Since 2014, I have served as a language instructor in the English Language Unit (ELU) at Kuwait University (College of Education). Prior to this, from 2008 to 2012, I gained valuable experience as a part-time language instructor at several recognised institutions in Kuwait, including The American University of Kuwait (AUK) and the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET). During this period, I also worked as a full-time translator in the Department of English Language and Literature at Kuwait University, which enhanced my understanding of language acquisition and communication challenges with different language learners.

Throughout these years of teaching, my preference was to teach female learners at various proficiency levels, although Kuwait University offers both male and female classes, and despite most classes being segregated, the campus is not. I observed a persistent pattern in my classroom that warranted deeper investigation. For example, there was a notable disconnect between students' general academic capabilities and their ability to communicate effectively in English. Many female students, despite strong overall academic performance expressed that they have been struggling with English courses since the beginning of their university journey. This challenge extended beyond academic performance in the classroom to impact their engagement with language learning itself. For some students, the disinterest seemed to stem from an ongoing lack of understanding English since childhood, often expressed without providing specific reasons. Other students described English as a source of fear or anxiety, again without offering further justification. A good number of students considered the compulsory English courses from the English Language Unit (ELU) as a graduation obligation rather than a subject of true interest.

All students in the College of Education (CoE) are required to complete three English courses (ENG090 – ENG141 – ENG142) regardless of whether their major requires the application of the English language or not (e.g., Arabic Studies, Social Sciences, Islamic Studies). As a result, they often approached these classes as mere requirements rather than opportunities for meaningful learning and development. Additionally, upon teaching the three courses, I recognised that they were providing General English content instead of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which would be more aligned with the students' majors or relevant to their fields of study.

Moreover, my personal experience as a public-school student in Kuwait has facilitated my comprehension of these issues, or at the very least, enabled me to identify possible justifications for them. I vividly remember experiencing similar moments of confusion, distraction, and occasional disengagement in English classes, despite my genuine interest in learning the language. This firsthand experience helped me anticipate and understand my students' struggles, allowing me to try and develop more effective teaching strategies. These observations and experiences led me to implement specific instructional modifications in my TESOL classes at the College of Education.

Drawing from both my teaching expertise and personal educational journey, I created an environment that emphasised building fundamental English skills progressively while encouraging students to learn from their mistakes. These modifications yielded positive results, leading to increased student engagement within the classroom, and ultimately inspiring this research into the broader factors affecting female language learning in Kuwait.

These teaching experiences and observations finally encouraged me to explore this research as my area of interest. The recurring patterns I observed, the contrast between the overall academic achievements and language proficiency, the influence of the household environment on language acquisition, and the varying levels of student engagement indicated the existence of deeper underlying causes that goes beyond the TESOL setting, and that necessitated further investigation. Also, with the growing integration of technology in language learning, I realised the necessity to comprehend how female learners in Kuwait adapt to these changing educational environments. The combination of personal experience, professional observations, and emerging educational trends caused me to realise that an in-depth analysis into the socio-ecological factors (e.g., society, environment, culture and identity) affecting female language learners in Kuwait could provide significant insights for both local educational practices and the wider field of TESOL research.

1.3.2. Professional Motivation

While implementing various teaching strategies, I noticed that the challenges female students faced in English language acquisition seemed deeply rooted in factors beyond the classroom environment. This observation aligns with Al-Yaseen's (2019) recommendation that English teachers need to move beyond basic instruction to provide corrective feedback and identify individual student needs.

My professional experience revealed a complex dynamic. Being a member of the Kuwaiti society, and despite the fact that English is being widely used in Kuwait's commercial, financial, and educational sectors, many female students struggled to develop practical language competency in the TESOL setting. As El-Dib (2004) notes, Kuwait's "unique culture" stems from its multicultural population, with English serving as a shared language for communication in formal institutions, banking, street signs, and advertising. However, recent

research by Alenezi (2022) indicates that limited English exposure beyond the classroom, may constrain students' language proficiency.

This apparent contradiction between the clear presence of the English language in Kuwait and students' limited engagement encouraged me to look beyond traditional pedagogical approaches. Kuwait University, as a free public institution (see Section 2.4.1), offers higher education to Kuwaitis from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. This creates a space where students from varying income levels, cultural influences, and educational experiences meet and interact with each other. Engaging closely with female students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds underscored a significant factor, that is the differences in language acquisition experiences even across the same gender group. This observation is noteworthy in light of prior research highlighting the impact of gender on language learning practices in Kuwait, specifically on the varied educational approaches for men and women and their cultural implications (e.g., El-Dib, 2004).

My work experience indicated the necessity to consider factors of female language learners to analyse the differences within the sociocultural backgrounds of female learners and the impact of their environmental background since childhood. Exploring additional elements that may affect female language learners, such as familial ideology and societal norms, would be beneficial. For instance, familial ideologies or cultural norms might impact a learner's perspectives or attitudes toward language learning or their confidence in using a second language. For example, societal norms such as the ones between *Hadhar* /'hað.ar/, and *Badu* /'ba.du/ groups in Kuwait (see [Section 2.2.1.](#)) can differ, especially regarding female access to learning opportunities. Analysing how these elements influence learners' perspectives, and incentives for acquiring the English language can offer profound understandings into their language learning experiences. It can provide an indication of the value they place on learning English and their incentives for doing so.

Investigating the influence of the above factors on present engagement and experiences in TESOL setting can provide deeper insights into the sociocultural dimensions encompassing learners' society, culture, beliefs, and values, as well as their effects on language acquisition. We can therefore understand how both internal and external factors might influence and

intersect to shape their language learning journey. Therefore, in the theoretical framework of this study, the term socio-ecological will be introduced and used consistently throughout the research. This term uses the concept of ecology as a metaphor (Chong et al., 2023) to capture how society, culture, beliefs, and values interact and shape human development (see [Chapter 4](#)). It reflects the dynamic connections between individuals and their surrounding environments, highlighting how these factors influence personal development and language learning.

Lastly, the growing integration of technology in language learning, especially in recent years, and more specifically after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, has introduced more complexity to these observations. As a language instructor, I observed significant variations in learners' access to and interaction with technology, frequently mirroring wider social trends. This dimension gained additional importance as digital tools became increasingly essential to language learning practices. In this study, technology will be examined through a socio-ecological lens to explore when and why female language learners engage with it, and how their usage reflects and is shaped by their socio-ecological backgrounds.

The professional experiences and observations mentioned in the previous section prompted me to acknowledge the necessity for a more thorough comprehension of the impact of socio-ecological influences on female language learners in Kuwait. I recognised the necessity of comprehending the complex relationship of social, cultural, and even technological aspects that influence students' language learning experiences, rather than solely concentrating on the development of new teaching strategies within the classroom. This insight directed my research, concentrating on the exploration of these key aspects through a structured theoretical approach that considers individual variations and wider social circumstances.

1.4. Aims and Research Questions

This thesis will focus on the English language learning experiences of female students at Kuwait University, with the female language learner being its main focus. It will also provide a unique perspective on the dynamic interaction between socio-ecological influences and personal language learning experiences, not limited to the educational setting but extending beyond it. The study seeks to unravel the multifaceted identities that underlie female learners'

language learning journeys. To achieve this, a qualitative approach was employed, using Narrative Inquiry (NI) through interviews and complemented with reflective diaries as the analytical tools for data collection, aimed at capturing participants' experiences and insights. In the context of Kuwait, there has not been much research that directly target the combination of identity and investment in language learning, and within the socio-ecological perspective. The current study fills the gap by presenting a comprehensive analysis to the role of the sociocultural factors in the English language acquisition.

Using the *analysis of the narratives* approach (see [Section 5.3.1.](#)), the primary aim of this study is to bridge the understanding of female students' perceptions beyond the TESOL setting, and the impact of these perceptions on the learning experiences in the context of a university level (Kuwait University) towards English language learning. Through the application of the semi-structured interviews and reflective diaries, the aim is to highlight the complex narratives that constitute the foundation of their language acquisition journeys. Rather than imposing predefined justifications as a researcher, this approach allows female language learners to trace their experiences back to childhood and articulating what they consider significant in their own learning trajectories.

My own positionality is an important element in this research. As an instructor within the English Language Unit (ELU) at Kuwait University (KU), I am not only familiar with the academic environment and the English language curriculum but also deeply embedded in the daily experiences and challenges faced by students. My role as both a researcher and interviewer position me as a central figure in this study. This topic has not only aroused my personal curiosity but also represents the exploration of firsthand experiences I have encountered in my professional practice, necessitating the acquisition of crucial information and solutions to enhance and support the learning experiences of these students. Furthermore, my position as a language instructor and my previous familiarity with the educational system allows me to offer an experienced perspective, enhancing the study with both academic insight and practical application. To bridge this practical and academic foundation, this thesis aims to answer the following research questions.

Research Questions:

1. How do past language learning experiences from the household influence Kuwaiti female language learners' perspectives and in constructing their identities within TESOL setting?
2. What socio-ecological factors influence female language learners' investment in acquiring English beyond the classroom?
3. What is the impact of socio-ecological variables on the experiences of female learners in Kuwaiti TESOL settings at Kuwait University?

This research holds profound significance within the broader discourse on language education. Exploring the perspectives of female students in a unique context like Kuwait University, hoping to answer and contribute to the evolving understanding of how socio-ecological factors and dynamics intersect in the language learning journey by looking through the lens of the Bio-ecological Model to investigate the socio-ecological impact on Kuwaiti female language learners. To provide a clearer understanding of the study's theoretical foundation, the following section outlines the structure of the thesis, guiding the reader towards a deeper grasp of the socioecological perspective in language learning.

1.5. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into seven interconnected chapters, each contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. [Chapter 1](#) (Introduction) details the study's motivation, aims, and guiding research questions. [Chapter 2](#) (Contextual Background) provides a comprehensive brief overview of Kuwait as the context of the current investigation, the role of English language in Kuwait, and the TESOL setting at Kuwait University. [Chapter 3](#) (Literature Review) provides a comprehensive literature review that supports the study. [Chapter 4](#) (Theoretical Framework) positions the existing research within the Bio-ecological Model, explaining each layer as a framework for the study. [Chapter 5](#) (Methodology) outlines the research methodology, encompassing the narrative research design, the role of the researcher, data collection, the analysis of the data, and the ethical considerations. [Chapter 6](#) (Findings and Discussion) presents the study's findings, addressing the main themes and key insights that emerged from the data with the participants' narratives, then discusses the detailed analysis of the key findings, connecting them to theoretical frameworks and existing literature while examining the emerged themes. The thesis concludes

by combining limitations, reflections, and directions for future studies from this research and presenting novel contributions to knowledge ([Chapter 7](#)), along with implications for future TESOL practices in Kuwait, specifically for female learners at Kuwait University and possibilities for further research.

1.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter has introduced the foundation of the study, outlining its background, the driving factors behind its development, and the research questions that shape its direction. By situating the study within its broader context, it has established the aims for investigating the identities, perspectives, and experiences of female language learners at Kuwait University. The following chapter builds upon this framework by engaging with existing literature, critically examining key theoretical perspectives and empirical studies that inform and contextualise this research.

2. Chapter 2: Contextual Background

2.1. Overview

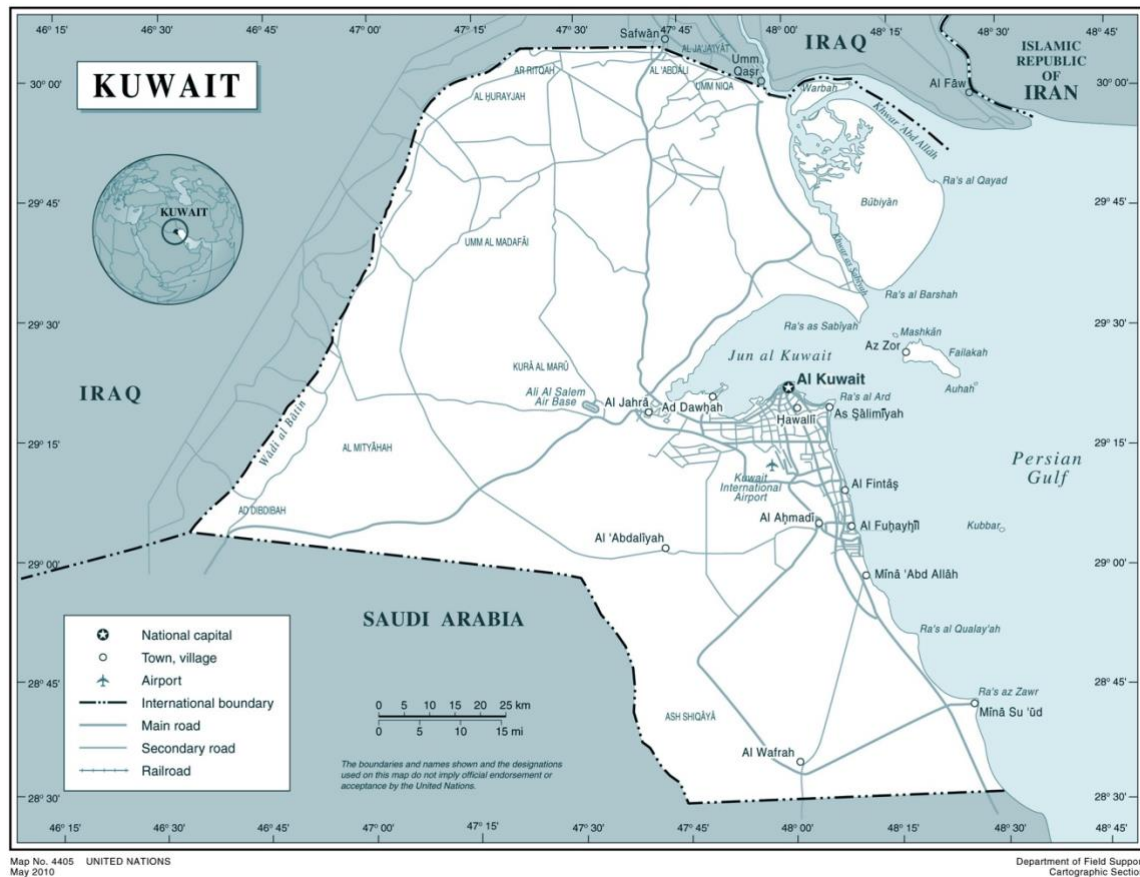
This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the role of the English language within the Kuwaiti context, situating the research within relevant historical, sociocultural, and educational frameworks. The chapter begins by presenting general overview about Kuwait, including its demographic, historical, and political background, to establish the national context (see [Section 2.2](#)). It then delves into the sociocultural distinctions between the two of various social groups in Kuwait, the *Hadhar* and *Badu* communities, which are among the most common, to explore how these identities construct and influence various aspects of life, including education and language learning. The chapter also considers the impact of Kuwait's oil industry and its contribution to shaping the linguistic landscape and sociocultural dynamics of the region. Additionally, the role of domestic workers in shaping English language acquisition in Kuwaiti households is discussed, and the influence of globalisation on its use as a lingua franca. highlighting a widespread phenomenon present in nearly every home in Kuwait, regardless of social group, yet largely overlooked in second language acquisition

literature. Following this, the chapter explores the role of the English language within Kuwaiti society, highlighting its historical evolution, socio-political significance (see [Section 2.3](#)).

The educational system in Kuwait is then reviewed, highlighting its historical development, current structure, and the integration of English across different educational levels, from primary to higher education (see [Section 2.4](#)). Lastly, the chapter explains the central role of English in Kuwait's higher education system, with a particular focus on Kuwait University and the English Language Unit (ELU), which serves as a key component of English instruction for students across disciplines. Through this comprehensive contextual framework, this chapter lays the groundwork for comprehending the sociocultural and educational factors that affect English language acquisition in Kuwait, especially among female learners, which will be explored and analysed in later chapters.

2.2. Kuwait: General Overview

Kuwait is a Muslim Middle Eastern nation that uses Arabic as its official language (Figure 1). It is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The GCC is a regional alliance composed of six state members on the Arabian side of the Persian Gulf, namely, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the State of Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Qatar. It was founded as a result of months of consultations between foreign ministers on 25 May 1981 and aims to promote regional cooperation (Rizvi, 1997). Kuwait itself is a small country which is rich in history and has some unique features. It had a population of 4,464,521 in 2020, 3,099,350 of which are non-Kuwaiti residents (Central Statistical Bureau, 2020). It is one of the smallest countries in the world, covering 17.818 km², and includes nine islands in addition to the mainland (Alajlan, 2019). It lies in the northwestern part of the Persian Gulf, bounded by Iraq in the north and the Kingdom of Saudi in the South.



(Figure 1) Map of Kuwait (Source: www.mapsland.com)

Kuwait was under a British protectorate from 1899 to 1961, which resulted in the use of English administratively and internationally. Kuwait is a royal emirate that operates under an overall democratic structure, with laws established by a 50-member parliament elected by the citizens every four years (Constitution of Kuwait 1962). Therefore, Kuwait has a political system that can be described as quasi-democratic, with an elected parliament (National Assembly) and a constitution. However, the ruling family holds power over decision-making by appointing the government (Selvik, 2011). This gives them significant control and influence in shaping policies and decisions within the country (Davidson, 2011). For example, in May 2024, the Emir of Kuwait suspended the National Assembly and temporarily set aside certain constitutional articles for a period not exceeding four years, during which all aspects of the democratic process are to be reviewed (Reuters, 2024). This move reflects the extent of executive authority within Kuwait's political structure and underscores the limitations of its democratic institutions.

At an educational level, public schooling in Kuwait, including higher education, is provided free of charge across all stages. The educational system is categorised into kindergarten, primary, intermediate, and secondary levels, with primary and intermediate levels being mandatory. Tryzna and Al Sharoufi note that Kuwait possesses one of the highest literacy rates in the GCC area, with 94% literacy among both males and females with Arabic serving as the official language, dictated by Article 3 of the Kuwaiti Constitution (2017). Overall, Alhajeri have identified the lack of local and foreign sources to track the emergence of Kuwait as an independent nation, with most of the information having been passed from one individual to another orally (2017). Nevertheless, Kuwait holds strategic importance because of its oil reserves (Naqi et al., 2023), diverse population and historical significance ([See Section 2.2.2.](#)).

2.2.1. The Kuwaiti Society: Hadhar and Badu

Before oil transformed Kuwait's economy, Kuwait was structured around three main social groups: the ruling family, the merchants, and the labourers (Ghabra, 1997). The ruling family held political authority and protected the city from desert threats. The merchant class, dominated by a few influential families, formed the backbone of traditional Kuwaiti society. Labourers, including divers and sailors, worked on merchant-owned ships, fuelling the city's maritime trade and economic activity (Ghabra, 1997). Although Kuwait is a small country, its geographical location has made it a socially and culturally diverse community. Although these groupings show different characteristics, numerous individuals navigate multiple social categories, emphasising the intersections of their roles and identities (Ghabra, 1997). As a result, while the neighbouring regimes have close ties, Kuwait is more extensive due to its own identity that distinguishes it from the rest of the region. In societies such as Kuwait, where economic fluctuations occur rapidly, such as the discovery of oil, it is reasonable to say that socio-economic groups have considerable effect on the relationship between power and social identities.

Although the groups in Kuwait may differ, they can overlap, forming intricate relationships within Kuwaiti society (Ghabra, 1997). It is imperative to recognise two principal groups in Kuwait that are integral to its socioeconomic history, the *Hadhar* and the *Badu* groups. *Hadhar*, a term literally translated as “cities,” “towns,” or “villages” and the people residing in these settlements (Baalbaki, 2001), and the group of *Badu*, commonly referred to in English as Bedouins, who are traditionally recognised as Arab nomads or pastoralists who primarily resided in the Arabian Desert (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

Following the discovery of oil in the late 1930s and the subsequent modernisation of Kuwait, both *Hadhar* and *Badu* developed a distinct identity unique to the Kuwaiti context. Although the term is commonly used across GCC countries, the identities of these groups became particularly defined within Kuwait, especially after oil was discovered, setting them apart from those in surrounding regions (Longva, 2006). It became challenging to classify the *Hadhar* and *Badu* groups in literal terms. In the contemporary Kuwaiti discourse, the distinction between *Hadhar* and *Badu* has been made ineffective due to the country's rapid urbanisation and socioeconomic transformation since the days when settlers (*Hadhar*) and nomads (*Badu*) inhabited it (Longva, 2006).

Sociocultural values and ideologies linked to these identities persist. These ideas continue to influence individual perspectives and behaviours, ensuring that the names *Badu* and *Hadhar* have relevance in modern discourse, despite their original meanings and practices no longer being immediately applicable. In contemporary Kuwait, the term “*Badu*” continues to be widely used to describe a group that is viewed as culturally and socially distinct from the *Hadhar* (Longva, 2006). Currently, both groups reside together in Kuwait and have been offered equal access and possibilities. Nonetheless, their sociocultural attitudes and beliefs continue to impact numerous facets of life, including education, which will be discussed further in the current study. The term *Badu* is currently used sociologically to differentiate between the *Badu* and *Hadhar*, with the latter indicating the pre-oil urban inhabitants of Kuwait (Al-Nakib, 2014). The study by Al-Nakib (2014) explicitly cited villagers and their connection to the *Badu*, illustrated by the Alazmi family, which is prominently acknowledged in modern Kuwaiti culture as a Bedouin family; however, she acknowledges the persistent challenges in defining these groups. Al-Nakib (2014) posits that individuals presently identified

as *Badu* are predominantly descendants of villagers who established themselves in Kuwait, whilst those who did not settle were stateless or 'Bidoun,' or 'without nationality' (Al-Nakib, 2014).

Whilst the *Badu* are recognised for their conservative cultural approaches, some *Badu* women were also able to participate in the National Assembly elections in 2005 as candidates. In 2012, Thikra Al-Rashidi became the first Bedouin woman elected to the National Assembly, subsequently being appointed as the Minister of Social Affairs and Labour. This indicates that some Bedouin families do not hold fixed norms, despite their conservative values, may also embrace such opportunities, reflecting the intricate structure of Kuwaiti society. Thus, although the term '*Badu*' persists in Kuwaiti society, the traditional notion of Bedouins inhabiting the desert is no longer relevant in contemporary Kuwait, where 99% of the population has settled in cities, marking a significant milestone in Kuwait's history.

The connection and social closeness among *Hadhar* and *Badu* have blurred the boundaries between these groups, confusing their definitions enhanced by Kuwait's comparatively small population. However, Al-Nakib (2014) suggested that despite the vagueness, there are still *Badu*'s beliefs that cannot be ignored existing within the Kuwaiti society. Prior research has explored these concepts through historical, political, socio-economical, and cultural lenses (e.g., Al-Haroun & Al-Ajmi, 2018; Al-Kandari et al., 2022; Selvik, 2011). However, there appears to be a relative lack of research exploring these concepts in relation to English language learning in Kuwait. Having said that, differences remain ambiguous about the *Hadhar* and *Badu* in all aspects of life in Kuwaiti society, and that also includes their attitude towards education, and more specifically, language learning, the focus of the current study. From a socio-ecological standpoint, significant gaps in the literature on female language learners at Kuwait University persist between the two groups in Kuwait, and the obstacles encountered by female learners from the Bedouin families are unexplored.

The oil wealth transformed Kuwait by expanding educational opportunities, creating employment for its citizens, and offering free healthcare and modern housing. Government funding facilitated the replacement of old buildings with new constructions, significantly altering the urban landscape (Ghabra, 1997). The country's oil revenues rapidly shifted Kuwait

from a subsistence economy rooted in hunting, pearl-diving, and small-scale trade to a modern state. This swift transition profoundly reshaped Kuwaiti society within a few years (Ghabra, 1997). For example, Al-Haroun and Al-Ajmi (2018) conducted a study examining the socio-cultural dynamics of *Hadhar* and *Badu* homes, asserting that the distinctions between these two groups stem from their historical settlements rather than ethnic classifications. The study emphasises differences in their lifestyles and cultural traditions, prompting significant enquiries over the impact of globalisation on the traits and behaviours of both groups. However, a significant portion of this debate in the study was related to architectural design and the progression of housing in Kuwait rather than their sociocultural beliefs or identities. Therefore, exploring *Badu* socio-ecological factors and the influence of globalisation on language acquisition, particularly in acquiring the English language, is an area that is yet to be explored.

Dashti (2018) examined the sociolinguistic aspects of language usage in Kuwaiti speech. The study aimed to examine the difference in the usage of two Arabic variables among the *Badu*/nomads and *Hadhar*/sedentary individuals, and the analysis included the social dimensions of gender, age, and education degree. The study found that the preference for English as a prestigious form is a key factor driving linguistic change, rather than the traditional Bedouin-Sedentary distinction. The analysis of the speech from 130 participants showed that age and education level significantly influenced this shift, while gender had little impact. The findings suggest that younger and more educated speakers are more likely to adopt these changes. Social media also plays a central role, reinforcing the influence of English and shaping speech patterns in Kuwait (Dashti, 2018).

These changes in social and linguistic practices reveal how societal norms have been formed by both the oil industry in Kuwait and the even distribution of resources amongst groups in Kuwaiti society. However, no fixed model is followed, and some families, especially those with Bedouin backgrounds, are often more likely to maintain traditional beliefs and values that can shape linguistic preferences and cultural perspectives. Therefore, variations in the way of using languages differ, so it is challenging to find concrete patterns of expression. This emphasises the need to explore individuals' experiences at a deeper level; not to establish and use a fixed model, but to better understand how different perspectives are shaped and

the socio-ecological reasons behind them. Through this study, narrowing down to female language learners provides opportunities to reflect upon something that has not been well explored the influence of the early exposure of English, prior to learning in academia, on their language acquisition and education in general.

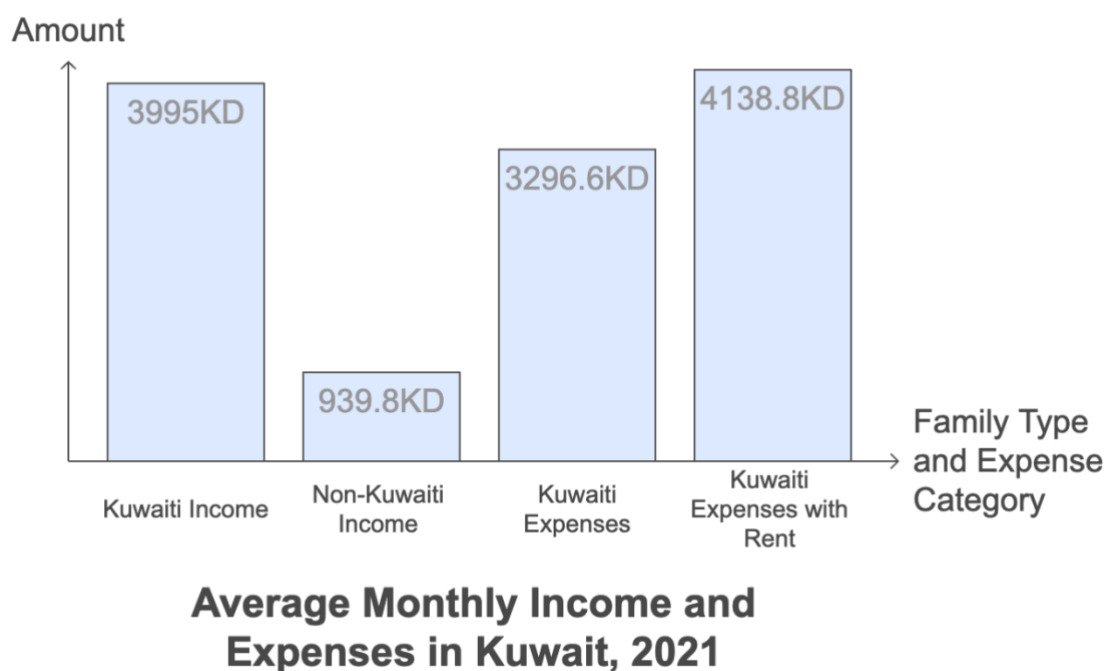
As previously mentioned, Al-Nakib (2014) claimed that there is an indication that the *Badu* still hold their beliefs which could have an impact towards different aspects in life, including education. Therefore, unexpected family dynamics within a Bedouin household may hinder or encourage female language acquisition. The current study collected data from participants who voluntarily chose to take part, resulting in a majority from Bedouin families. The inclusion of a minority of *Hadhar* participants facilitated the study to allow for a comprehensive assessment of the differences or similarities between the two groups. This area will be further examined in the discussion chapter.

2.2.2. The Kuwaiti Society After the Oil Industry

After gaining independence from the British Empire's protection treaty in the year 1961, Kuwait's previous oil discovery from the 1930's allowed the oil industry to experience a substantial economic expansion, resulting a greater reliance on the English language within the country, and making it a valuable strategic and commercial resource (Loewenstein, 2000). The presence of the oil industry in Kuwait has brought about significant transformations in various aspects of life, including lifestyle, family dynamics, residential patterns, and employment. These developments have had a direct influence on the linguistic landscape and the role of language in shaping the region's identity (Holes, 2011).

Moreover, Kuwait has a long history of immigration, driven by opportunities for employment in the oil and associated sectors (Alhajeri, 2017). In 2021, the average Kuwaiti family's monthly income was KD 3,995 (\$13,000), excluding rent, which is a modest increase from 2013. Non-Kuwaiti families, on the other hand, earned KD 939.8 (around \$3,000) a month, with a minor increase since 2013 as well. The average outgoings of Kuwaiti families were KD 3,296.6 (about \$10,800 per month) in 2021, which was higher than in 2013, excluding rent. With rent included, their monthly expenses climbed to KD 4,138.8 (around \$13,500) (Kuwait Times Newspaper) (Figure 2). This provides consistent increases in both income and expenses

through the years. This steady growth in income and spending reflects the financial capacity of Kuwaiti families to employ expatriates, including domestic workers, and maintain them within their households, highlighting the prominent role of migrant domestic workers in Kuwaiti society (see [Section 2.2.2.1](#)). Furthermore, the large number of expats has resulted in the widespread application of English as a medium of communication, both between Kuwaitis and expatriates, and sometimes, among Kuwaitis themselves.



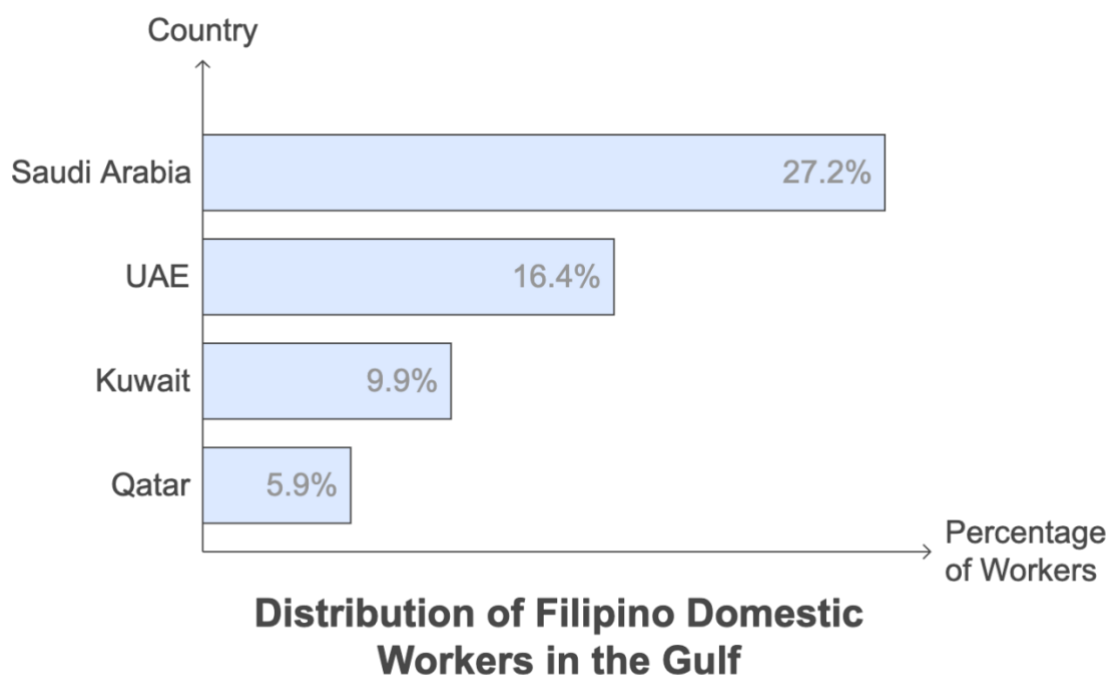
(Figure 2) Average Monthly Income and Expenses in Kuwait 2021 (Source: Kuwaittimes.com)

2.2.2.1. Domestic Workers in the Kuwaiti Society

Starting in the seventies, Middle Eastern countries, including Kuwait, depended on immigrant labour, including Filipino workers, due to high oil resources and limited domestic labour, which required the use of the English language as lingua franca, a common language that allows people from different language backgrounds to communicate effectively when they do not share a mother tongue (Loor et al., 2024). Many Filipino women migrated from the Philippines to these nations to engage in domestic labour. Considering the vast differences in the countries size, the GCC countries region now have the most significant percentage of Filipino

domestic workers, with over 65% employed there. Specifically, 27.2% worked in Saudi Arabia, 16.4% in the UAE, 9.9% in Kuwait, and 5.9% in Qatar (Kavurmacı, 2022) (See (Figure 3).

In 2016, Foreign Domestic Workers (FDWs) in the GCC countries totalled approximately 3.77 million, with 1.65 million being women employed primarily as live-in domestic workers, meaning they reside in their employers' homes and are available for duties throughout the day (Tayah & Assaf, 2018). The Arab states collectively hosted the largest proportion of FDWs globally, accounting for 27.4% of the total, compared to Southeast Asia at 19.4% and Europe at 19.2% (ILO, 2015). Many of these workers originate from Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Nepal, and Bangladesh (Tayah & Assaf, 2018) (Figure 3).



(Figure 3) Distribution of Filipino Domestic Workers in the Gulf (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2022).

Kuwait serves as an attraction for numerous expatriate workers of various countries to fulfil service and daily requirements, including domestic workers (Shah et al., 2002). Due to the country's strong oil-based economy, as well as the small population and its resultant

comfortable income for Kuwaiti families, Kuwaitis now rely heavily on this labour (Shah et al., 2002). There are many expatriate workers in the country, as well as many live-in domestic workers in Kuwaiti homes. This dense presence has led to the creation of a multilingual environment that has resulted, in one way or another, in learning the English language as an intermediary language, or lingua franca that is used for communication between Kuwaitis and expatriate workers. A study in Malaysia stated that Filipino workers often rely on English to communicate with colleagues from diverse backgrounds, including Indians, Malays, and Chinese, as it serves as a shared language (Dumanig et al., 2023). Domestic helpers, in particular, tend to switch between English, Filipino, and local Malaysian languages, adapting to the multilingual environment (Dumanig et al., 2023). This flexibility reflects the need to navigate different linguistic contexts effectively, and how it influences the society that hosts the domestic workers. Similar patterns are likely to be observed in Kuwait, where Filipino domestic workers use English as a practical means of communication with their employers and others in their daily interactions. This reinforces the role of English as a bridging language in multilingual settings, such as the Kuwaiti household. For example, English may be the language of daily communication between a Filipino housemaid and Kuwaiti household member, which could provide early exposure to the language and adjust them to it as a medium of communication from a young age.

In Kuwait, domestic workers, including housemaids, play a significant role in the daily life of many households. The presence of foreign domestic workers has become widespread in Kuwait, with at least one found in almost every household, and this number continues to rise (Shah et al., 2002). In other studies, domestic workers in different countries, are usually employed for daily tasks and childcare. Despite their primary role not being educational, Wolfaardt and Leung (2025) showed that some Filipino domestic workers took on the role of English language educators for the children in their care. Their findings revealed a positive impact on the children's English language learning, highlighting an unexpected dimension to the workers' roles within the household. Existing literature on second language acquisition often highlights the role of parental influence or peer interactions (Kos, 2023; Alias & Kamal, 2024). However, in the context of Kuwait, previous studies have not fully explored the informal and voluntary contribution of domestic workers, such as Filipino live-in housemaids, in English language instruction, where English is not the first language of the wider society.

2.2.1. The Educational System in Kuwait

Before the 1930s, formal education in Kuwait was virtually non-existent, with the exception of the few Quranic schools, known as '*Katatib*', by religious figures (*mutawwa'a*) in mosques, where children were taught basic skills, such as reading, writing, and mathematics (Al-Atiqi, 2015). This form of education, however, was limited and primarily focused on religious instruction (Al-Sharhan, 2018). Kuwait has historically prioritised education, especially within merchant families who initially advocated for educational efforts (Al Sharekh, 2017; Ghabra, 1997). Before formal education was introduced, Kuwait's historical significance in the region extended beyond its oil discovery. These merchants established the foundation for Kuwait's educational and cultural development by founding the first school in 1911, another in 1920, the first library in that same year, and initiating the first magazine in 1928 (Esmaeel, 2001). In fact, as early as 1911, Kuwait demonstrated its forward-thinking approach by establishing the first formal education system among neighbouring countries (Dashti & Dashti, 2017).

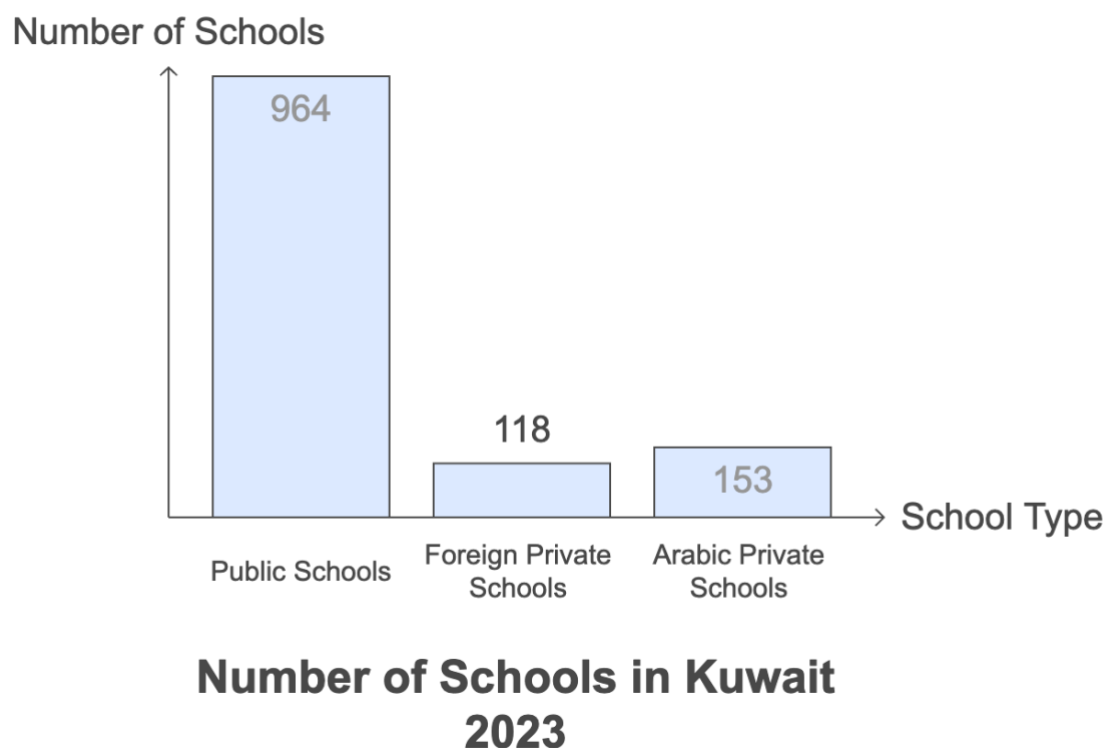
Almubarikiyah School was established in 1911, offering instruction in core subjects such as Arabic. A decade later, in 1921, another school (Al-Ahmadiya) was founded that introduced English into its curriculum (Alhajeri, 2017; Alyousifi, 2018). The economy of the country was significantly dependent on the pearl trade until 1931, when the creation of artificial pearls triggered a drop in the business, resulting in numerous merchants declaring bankruptcy (Carter, 2012). The discovery and development of substantial oil reserves highlighted the necessity of the government's comprehensive engagement in educational services.

In 1936, the Kuwaiti Council of Education was founded, signifying a crucial advancement in combining all educational initiatives under a public system. One of its initial accomplishments was the establishment of Al-Woustta, the inaugural girls' school, which provided a curriculum encompassing Arabic, Islamic studies, and home economics (Esmaeel, 2001), followed by a specialised institution for students with special needs in 1955 and a school dedicated to combat illiteracy established in 1975 (Ministry of Education website). The government promoted people's use of the free education system, motivated by an approach that focused on equal distribution of income and shared national prosperity. Following its independence on June 19, 1961, Kuwait prioritised education by establishing its first Ministry of Education, with Arabic language being the main language of instruction in public education system. According

to the constitution of Kuwait, education is seen as a fundamental right for all citizens, with the goal of nurturing individuals who are compassionate and selfless contributors to society (Kuwait Constitution, 1962). The government allocated substantial economic and human resources to enhance and sustain the nation's educational system, underscoring its significance in national development (Al-Nwaiem, 2012). Kuwait's membership in the United Nations in 1963 further reinforced the status of English as the language of international diplomacy and relations (Tryzna & Al Sharoufi, 2017).

Following the implementation of the Compulsory Education Act in 1965, education has been mandatory for everyone, regardless of gender or social standing, from the ages of six to fourteen. In 2023, the Kuwaiti Ministry of Education reported that the country had 964 public schools and 118 foreign private schools, and 153 for Arabic private schools (Figure 4). Parents who opt for private education often pay for schooling based on British, Indian, Pakistani, French, Canadian, or American curricula. Among these, there are 30 international schools, eight of which follow the American curriculum, while the remainder adopt Canadian, British, French, or Indian curricula, all offering English-language programmes. Two key reasons behind this decision are parents' desire to enhance their children's English language skills and provide them with better opportunities for a successful career (Alsafran et al., 2020).

Most Kuwaiti students enrol in government-funded schools that function on a gender-segregated system (Alsafran et al., 2020). According to Ministry of Education, there is 81.68% of students in public education and 18.32% of students in private Arabic schools (2023). In Kuwait, there is an ongoing debate with contrasting views both in favour of and against gender segregation in public schools, but gender segregation is not practiced in private schools (AlMatrouk, 2016). Kuwait follows the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in all its public schools, which aims to develop students' skills in communication, mathematics, and technology to prepare them for the demands of globalisation and the digital era (Alajmi, 2021). However, its success is limited by challenges such as teachers' lack of understanding and inadequate professional development, which impede effective classroom implementation (Alajmi, 2021).



(Figure 4) Number of Schools in Kuwait 2023 (Kuwait Ministry of Education website)

The commitment to free education highlights the Kuwaiti government's resolve to eliminate illiteracy and promote the comprehensive development physical, moral, and intellectual of its youth (Tryzna & Al Sharoufi, 2017). Furthermore, Kuwait's scholarship programmes were offered to position the country as a hub for information technology, finance, and medical sciences (Al Sharekh, 2017). To achieve this, most international scholarships focus on fields like engineering and business, aligning with efforts to modernise and expand Kuwait's labour market. These programmes aim to broaden the perspectives of young Kuwaitis by exposing them to different cultures and encouraging a deeper understanding of the global landscape.

As a result, scholarships offered to Kuwaitis to pursue studies in the United Kingdom resulted in widespread bilingualism (Alyousifi, 2018). This proactive step highlighted Kuwait's emphasis on education and its understanding of the value of providing structured learning opportunities to its population. Additionally, Kuwait and the rest of the GCC countries have required English proficiency to obtain a higher degree to encourage and ensure the

advancement of international sectors such as trade and technology (Troudi & Jendli, 2011). The main aim of education in Kuwait is to provide students with the knowledge and abilities needed to address real-life issues and adapt effectively on local, regional, and global scales (Alsaleh et al., 2022). The main question remains whether that has been accomplished to fulfil the Kuwaiti learner's needs.

2.3. The Role of English Language in the Kuwaiti Society

Kuwait's engagement with the English language can be traced back to its early time (Tryzna & Al Sharoufi, 2017), but remains underrepresented in the literature (Al-Ajlan & Al-Qenaie, 2023). English was first introduced in Kuwait back in 1921, and later with the British arrival in Kuwait during the oil discovery of the 1940's (Dashti, 2015), and played a unique role in Kuwait, especially within the oil production sector to such an extent that it was commonly referred to as "petroleum English" (Alzankawi, 2022). Therefore, English has been an important language in Kuwait since the late nineteenth century, with many expats also seeking employment opportunities in the oil industry (see [Section 2.2.2.](#)) (Alhajeri, 2017).

According to Tryzna and Al Sharoufi (2017), most Kuwaitis speak both Arabic and English. They tend to use Arabic when communicating with family, friends, and local business associates, while English is preferred for entertainment and interactions with expatriates. Kuwaitis also employ the English language not only for educational purposes but also as an essential mode of communication with the diverse workforce residing in Kuwait, the majority of whom lack proficiency in Arabic (Library of Congress Country Studies, 1993). However, the actual emergence of English in Kuwait began primarily in the 1990s, following the Iraqi invasion. It was a period characterised by significant adversity that impacted the general population. The liberation of Kuwait in 1991 (The Gulf War, or Operation Desert Storm) altered English language usage due to the increasing number of private schools where English serves as the medium of instruction (EMI), which resulted in an increase in the number of expatriates, with Kuwaitis now constituting only 30% of the entire population (Alenezi, 2022). Dashti asserted that the liberation of Kuwait by the allied forces significantly impacted the positive emotions Kuwaitis hold towards the British and Americans (2018). Today, Kuwait has English activities and workshops, newspapers, magazines, and even a radio station dedicated only to

the English audience. Looking through the history of Kuwait, it becomes evident that the English language has played a vital role, both politically, and socially, making it a period characterised by significant adversity that profoundly impacted the general population.

Although Arabic is the official language of Kuwait (Article 3 of the Kuwaiti Constitution) and the main medium for public services, a gradual transition is occurring with the incorporation of a new concept whereby personal information on documents, such as identity cards, is now presented in both Arabic and English (Tryzna & Al Sharoufi, 2017). In terms of educational institutions, Kuwait has a variety of English-language settings available to both citizens (individuals with Kuwaiti passport), and residents (immigrants/expats) alike. Learning English as a foreign language has always been essential yet controversial in different Kuwaiti educational institutes. English input is easily accessible in Kuwait for individuals who desire to acquire proficiency in the language. Arabic and English are used for street signs, shop names, and marketing for nationally recognised chain restaurants (U.S. Commercial Service, 2003 as cited in El-Dib, 2004).

More importantly, English is considered a prestigious language in Kuwait, widely used in cafés and even in businesses and media (Dashti, 2017). This phenomenon aligns with the concept of linguistic imperialism, which refers to the dominance of one language over others (Lukianenko, 2024). It often leads to the marginalisation of local languages and cultural practices (Lukianenko, 2024). This dynamic can have consequences, influencing power structures in global communication, shaping educational systems, and impacting how individuals and communities construct their identities (Lukianenko, 2024). While this does not necessarily imply that Kuwaitis are willing to abandon their first language (L1), Arabic, or replace it entirely with English (L2), it does highlight the growing dominance of English in certain contexts in the Kuwaiti society and thus warrants consideration.

Having established Kuwait's position within the GCC countries, its historical relationship with the English language, and acknowledging that while regional similarities exist, significant variations in cultural contexts prevail, it would be insightful to investigate the specific cultural norms within the TESOL setting in Kuwait. Such investigation would reveal the contextual

factors that might influence English language acquisition and teaching methodologies in this distinct educational environment.

2.3.1. Kuwaiti English

After reviewing the historical context of English in Kuwait, including the 1800s protection treaty with the British Empire, early educational milestones, and the influence of the Gulf War (the Iraqi invasion), the next focus is on the resultant linguistic evolution. *Kuwaiti English* embodies the distinct sociolinguistic reality of its speakers. It operates as a variety of English, comparable to established forms such as Nigerian and Indian English, efficiently addressing the requirements of its native population and context (Al-Ajlan & Al-Qenaie, 2023; Alenezi, 2022; Galloway & Rose, 2015). Al-Ajlan & Al-Qenaie gave an additional example using written narratives methodology with linguistic analysis in their study on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, identifying specific grammatical variations as unique linguistic features of *Kuwaiti English*. They highlighted the importance of exploring these relatively new features in contexts beyond ESP, proposing that their findings are not exclusive to ESP but are indicative of broader traits within *Kuwaiti English* as a whole. The study calls for further exploration to the *Kuwaiti English*, specifically in the Arabic GCC countries (Al-Ajlan & Al-Qenaie, 2023)

A similar transformation observed in Saudi Arabia, where cross-linguistic impacts from Arabic (L1) to English (L2) contributed to the development of new English varieties (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). The Mahboob & Elyas study aimed to investigate the socio-historical application of English in Saudi Arabian education and its influence on local cultures and values. The study revealed that Saudi English possesses distinctive grammatical characteristics, including variances in tense markers and article usage, possibly influenced by local culture. Their study also emphasised that certain viewpoints oppose the use of English, perceiving it as a colonising language that may damage local values and beliefs. These qualities are not conclusive and necessitate additional investigation to verify their position as characteristics of Saudi English (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Although Kuwait and Saudi Arabia share a border, Kuwait's distinct historical background suggests that the socio-historical role of English may have developed in response to unique cultural and societal influences, making it valuable to explore how these factors influenced individuals in Kuwait. Moreover, the focus of both

studies remained primarily on the structural and grammatical features of English as a social product shaped by its localised use. In contrast, the current study does not examine English through its syntactic or grammatical patterns, but rather as a lived experience, shaped by socio-ecological contexts, exploring the perspectives that influence female learners' decisions to learn or reject English, and how these choices are embedded within broader cultural, familial, and societal dynamics in Kuwait.

Among the first studies to adopt a socially and culturally oriented perspective on English in Kuwait, Alenezi (2022) conducted a comprehensive study on *Kuwaiti English* using Schneider's Dynamic Model (SDM), a model that outlines the development of new English varieties through five phases and four key factors: sociohistorical influences, identity constructions, sociolinguistic usage, and structural effects like vocabulary and grammar. The model frames language evolution as a shared process when English is adapted to new regions (Alenezi, 2022). According to the SDM, *Kuwaiti English* is classified in the "nativisation" stage, where it develops local traits, shaping a distinct variety that aligns with cultural and communicative needs, particularly in ESL contexts, reflecting the diverse linguistic practices within Kuwaiti society (Alenezi, 2022). Alenezi (2022) emphasised the influence of social and historical factors on the development of *Kuwaiti English* and observed its growing use among younger generations. The study highlighted the necessity for systematic corpus collection and additional investigation into the developing linguistic identities and ideologies within this underrepresented variation.

A different example of the English imprint in the Kuwaiti society was shown in a recent study conducted by Hayat and AlBader (2022) where it drew attention to a phenomenon observed among younger people in Kuwait named "McChicken". This phenomenon refers to the frequent code-switching between English and Kuwaiti Arabic in daily communication. Despite the name, it is unrelated to McDonald's but used by older Kuwaitis to describe youth whose English proficiency influences their local language (Hayat & AlBader, 2022; Vela, 2014). Hayat and AlBader also added the term "Chicken Nuggets" as the one used to describe bilingual individuals who have greater mastery of the English language but have a very limited skill in Kuwaiti Arabic. Alshammari (2019) also references the McChicken term, noting that the term gained recognition in the 2000s, stating that it specifically refers to teenagers studying in

private American or British schools in Kuwait since they primarily speak English (Alshammari, 2019).

Hayat and Albader (2022) also found that private school students in Kuwait are more comfortable using English daily but struggle with Arabic grammar and comprehension, feeling ashamed of their lack of fluency, especially in front of an older generation such as their grandparents. Conversely, public school students are more proficient in Arabic and Kuwaiti Arabic (KA) but are still significantly influenced by English through entertainment and social media. These contrasting findings in Hayat and Albader (2022) point to the need for more learner-centred research that examines not merely attitudes towards English learning but also explores the varied pathways through which students encounter English. The two studies reflect globalisation and social identity. Despite English not being an official language in Kuwait, it plays a crucial role in communication. Dashti & Dashti (2017) explored the morphological adaptation of English loanwords among young Kuwaitis on Twitter¹, analysing 400 tweets through qualitative methods. Their study highlighted the integration of English borrowings in digital platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, driven by English's dominance in technology, trade, and media. Frequent Twitter users not only used but modified these loanwords in daily speech. Interviews with 50 education students revealed that while Arabic is linked to tradition, household, religion, and culture, English is seen as a symbol of modernity, advanced education, and technological progress, even appearing in Kuwaiti television programs (Dashti & Dashti, 2017). The findings indicate that English continues to be the most used language on these platforms (Al-Ajlan & Al-Qenaie, 2023). It would therefore be beneficial to investigate whether language learners perceive these characteristics as facilitators or impediments to their language acquisition.

Another study in Kuwait focused on Arabizi, a constructed written language designed for online communication. It is the method of employing non-standard Roman characters to transcribe Arabic scripts (Akbar et al., 2020). It can also represent dialectal variations; for instance, in Kuwait, the phrase “How are you?” may be written in Arabizi as *Shlounik?* when addressing males, and *Shlounich?* when addressing females. Akbar et al. (2020) emphasised

¹ Twitter: a social media platform now rebranded as ‘X’

that Kuwait's socioeconomic status (SES) allows easy smartphone and social media access, leading to frequent use of platforms where Arabizi is common. It indicated that higher socioeconomic status promotes favourable perceptions, reinforcing Arabizi as a non-standard dialect in Kuwait (Akbar et al., 2020). Aligned with the finding of Mahboob and Elyas (2014) on English language use in Saudi Arabia, the study found that public school students view Arabizi users as neglecting national identity and link its use by males to declining masculinity. Critics argue that English language acquisition may result in Westernisation, adopting ideas and ways of life from Western countries, and might clash with cultural or religious beliefs (Haq & Smadi, 1996). This highlights how other concepts such as intercultural communication can be shaped by cultural perceptions and misunderstandings, leading to taboos related to language use and identity (see [Section 3.5.2.1](#)). However, Akbar et al. (2020) found that private school students in Kuwait see Arabizi as practical and innovative, not a threat to national identity or masculinity; instead, they correlate it with transparency and bilingualism. This finding contradicts with Al-Ajlan and Al-Qenaie's (2023) study, where it was noted that the Kuwaiti society continues to resist the English language usage, encompassing not only older generations but also individuals who take pride in the Arabic language and Arab identity.

Nevertheless, these viewpoints are widely debated, and the use of a second language does not necessarily undermine one's national identity or beliefs (Al-Ajlan & Al-Qenaie, 2023). This finding aligns with Akbar et al. (2020), that despite the Western influence, the participants of the study who encouraged Arabizi do not feel that its use means they are losing their national identity. They still feel connected to their culture and heritage. The studies highlight learners' perspectives that are almost contradictory despite sharing the same context (Kuwait), demonstrating that attitudes toward English stem from more than just cognitive abilities and that they are instead shaped by broader societal and cultural influences.

The previous examples, along with their contradictions, demonstrate the growing use of English into common discourse, media, and digital communication platforms among the younger generation in Kuwait. Such approaches, however, have failed to address the broader influences that resulted in such practices. With this in mind, it is important to investigate the reasons behind the growth of English usage and its intersection with, and relation to, wider

sociocultural patterns, and how this can impact language acquisition. Additionally, it is important to investigate the potential impact of this linguistic trend, that is the increase of using the English language, on the attitudes, views, and experiences, taking into consideration the learners' distinct sociocultural backgrounds while acknowledging the complex structure of Kuwaiti society. Considering the presence of both established perspectives on this issue, together with its recent acknowledgement in Kuwaiti research, a more thorough examination is necessary. It is important to investigate the perspectives of language learners towards English in Kuwait, understanding the interplay between language, identity, and cultural dynamics, thereby enhancing understanding of its implications for Kuwaiti society.

2.4. English in the Education of Kuwait

The role of English language in the education system of Kuwait is crucial (Alsafran et al., 2020). The English language policy in Kuwait is well-structured and appears coherent, although its implementation has been inadequate (Tryzna & Sharoufi, 2017). Following the establishment of the Kuwaiti Council of Education in 1936, English was introduced in the 1950's as a subject in Kuwaiti public schools primarily at the intermediate and secondary levels in preparation for higher education or employment in sectors that requires English proficiency. Kachru was the first to challenge the native speaker-centric view of English, arguing that the language belongs to all its global users (Alenezi, 2022). His Three Circles model categorises English use into three groups: the Inner Circle, comprising native-speaking countries like the USA and UK, the Outer Circle, where English is a second language with local adaptations, such as in India, and the Expanding Circle, where it is learned as a foreign language for global communication, as seen in China (Alenezi, 2022). Under this framework, Kuwait falls within the Expanding Circle, where English is primarily used in education, commerce, and international communication (Al-Ajlan & Al-Qenaie, 2023). Subsequently, the incorporation of English language instruction as a subject across each grade in public schools, regarded as a foreign language, became mandatory in primary education starting from the 1993/1994 academic year (Al-Yaseen, 2021).

In the public education system of Kuwait, English is often taught for several hours weekly across four years at the primary and intermediate levels, and for seven hours weekly in

secondary school (Dashti, 2015). It is the primary language of instruction in most university colleges, including engineering, medicine, science, business, and media. Arts and Humanities students must also complete at least three general English courses ([see Section 2.4.1.2.](#)). The rise of American, British, and bilingual schools has further increased English use in Kuwait (Dashti, 2015) ([see Section 2.4.](#)). Most private schools are mixed gender, but some are girls-only private schools such as The English School for Girls (British curriculum) and The American Academy for Girls (American curriculum).

Studies suggested that preferences for gender segregation in education in Kuwait are influenced by cultural and religious values within Kuwaiti society (e.g., AlMatrouk, 2016; Dinkha, 2018). While AlMatrouk (2016) noted an ongoing debate in Kuwait regarding gender segregation in education, Dinkha (2018) found that females were more flexible and desired more coeducational exposure in Kuwait, feeling that gender segregation did not align with their cultural values or religious beliefs. Conversely, males preferred traditional segregated classrooms, believing that coeducation was against Islamic beliefs and Kuwaiti moral values (Dinkha, 2018). However, direct evidence linking girls-only private schools to enhanced educational experiences while maintaining cultural or religious practices is scarce. The lack of clarity in the previous studies necessitates additional explanation: girls-only private schools can provide opportunities for families who prefer segregation for religious or cultural reasons while seeking an enhanced educational experience to enrol their children in a segregated private institution, which addresses the country's support of specific religious or cultural values through the provision of such an educational system.

2.4.1. Kuwait University

Kuwait University (KU) was established in 1966 and is the largest educational institution in the country. It is sponsored by the Kuwaiti government, and thus tuition is free. The establishment of Kuwait University in 1966, with an opening enrolment of 400 students, marked a significant milestone in the country's educational progress (Ghabra, 1997). Kuwait University includes 16 colleges (Figure 5), including the College of Education, the focus of this study. Other colleges, such as the colleges of science, engineering and petroleum, medicine, dentistry, and administrative science all use English as a medium of instruction. However, in the College of

Arts, it is exclusive to the Department of English Language and Literature (DELL), and The English Language Unit (ELU) across all colleges., only to use English as a medium of instruction. The English courses offered by the ELU in the College of Education (CoE) are designed as General English courses, which contrasts with the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses provided in other faculties, such as engineering. The absence of specialisation in language instruction within the ELU of the CoE underscores a potential gap in preparing students for varied professional environments, particularly given that the CoE comprises multiple departments, each focused on a specific discipline. (see (Table 1)



(Figure 5) The Hierarchy and Structure of Kuwait University. (Source: Kuwait University website.)

2.4.1.1. The College of Education (CoE)

The College of Education (CoE) was established in 1980 and includes different departments (Table 1). Initially part of the College of Arts, it became an independent institution in 1980 and was among the first to move to Sabah Al-Salem University City in 2019. The relatively new university city offers free Wi-Fi access across its campus, ensuring that all students have equitable opportunities to use digital resources and participate in online learning activities if

required. The university also provides international scholarships, which allow students to become more well-rounded global citizens through study abroad experiences (Kuwait University). The College of Education (CoE) is housed in an architecturally acclaimed building (Figure 6), designed with advanced educational technologies. Over time, it includes four academic departments along with an English Language Teaching Unit (Kuwait University).

(Table 1) Programs Offered by the College of Education (CoE)

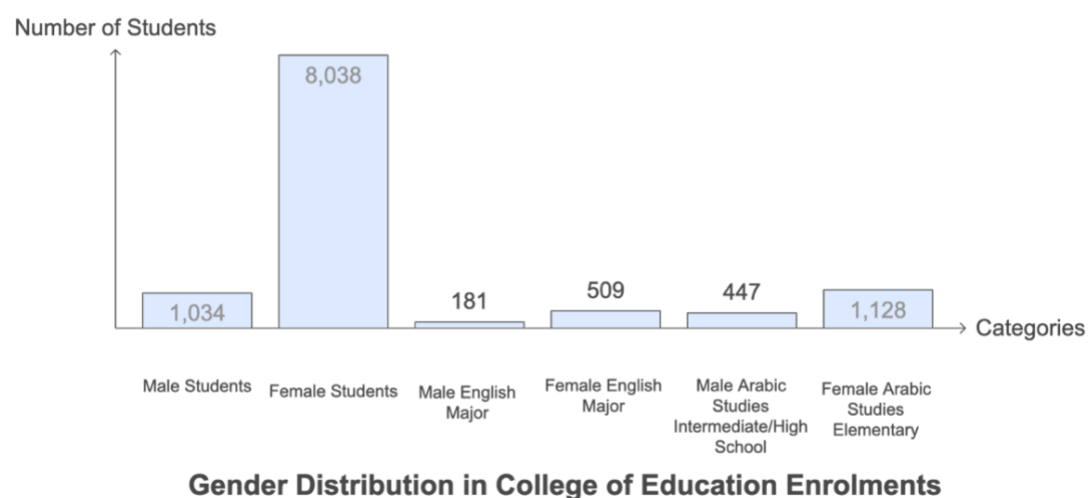
Category	Programs
Kindergarten	Kindergarten
Elementary Education	Arabic, English, Islamic, Social Science
Middle and Secondary School Education	Arabic, English, Islamic, Social Science, Geography, Philosophy, Psychology, Mathematics, Biology, Physics, Chemistry
Educational Studies	Educational Foundation, Educational Management, Curriculum and Instruction, Educational Psychology, Educational Foundation and Management



(Figure 6) The College of Education Building - Sabah Al-Salem University City (Kuwait University website)

These programs primarily emphasise education and training, aiming to offer students a valuable and successful learning experience that enables them to graduate with excellent academic achievements (Kuwait University). The CoE also offers three different levels of degrees; students who get an undergraduate degree can teach in kindergarten, primary, intermediate, and secondary school. The undergraduate degree also includes the qualifications for graduates to teach English as a second language. The second degree offered by CoE is for postgraduate students and offers a diploma in education and psychological counselling. The third degree offered by CoE is the master's degree in four different majors: curricula & teaching methods, educational foundation, educational administration, and counselling (Tryzna, & Sharoufi, 2017).

Based on the 2024/2025 statistics provided by the Dean's Office of the College of Education (CoE), the total student enrolment in the college comprises 1,034 males and 8,038 females, indicating that female students represent approximately 88.6% of the total student body of the CoE. Within the English major, male students account for 181 (26.2% of English major students), while female students total 509 (73.8% of English major students). Across all majors, the highest enrolment among male students is observed in the Arabic Studies for Intermediate and High School Level major, with 447 students, representing 43.2% of the total male enrolment. The highest enrolment among female students is in the Arabic Studies for Elementary Level major, with 1,128 students, comprising 14% of the total female student population in the CoE. These figures underscore a significant gender disparity in enrolment, both across the college and within specific academic disciplines. (Figure 7)



(Figure 7) Gender Distribution in College of Education Enrolments

2.4.1.2. *The English Language Unit (ELU)*

The English Language Unit (ELU) is situated in every college of Kuwait University and aims to equip students with essential English communication skills across various fields, focusing on listening, reading, speaking, and writing. In the College of Education, the focus of this study, The ELU delivers compulsory courses to students and graduates, including preliminary English Language (ENG090), English Language (ENG141), and English Language (ENG142). ENG090 is mandatory for students who do not pass the placement test, carry no credit, and use a Pass (> 60%) or Not Pass grading system, which is a prerequisite for ENG141. ENG141, required for all specialisations, carries three units and employs a standard letter grading system (A to F), with lectures held daily for one hour. It serves as a prerequisite for ENG142, which is also mandatory, carries three units, and targets advanced-level students. The ELU oversees the testing, and evaluation processes, frequently updates the curriculum, and adheres to university policies regarding attendance and discipline. Depending on the college, courses range from foundational language skills to English for Specific Purposes (ESP), such as in the College of Engineering. Collecting data from the ELU in the College of Education (CoE) will provide diverse insights, as students from various majors are required to take these courses. This diversity is likely to result in varying language learning outcomes and perspectives.

2.5. Chapter Summary

This chapter has established the contextual, historical, sociocultural, and educational context of English language use in Kuwait. It has examined key social distinctions, the impact of the oil industry, and the role of domestic workers in language acquisition. The broader sociopolitical role of English was explored, alongside the influence of globalisation and the status of English as a lingua franca. Additionally, it has outlined the evolution of English in Kuwaiti society, its integration into the education system, and its significance in higher education, including the integration of English across school stages and its critical role in higher education, especially within Kuwait University and the English Language Unit (ELU). This contextual foundation sets the stage for the next chapter, which reviews the relevant literature and theoretical perspectives that inform this study.

3. Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1. Overview

This literature review chapter critically examines key concepts that underpin this research and creates a foundation to the theoretical framework in Chapter 4. For this reason, the term ‘socio-ecological’ appears across various sections, helping to build coherence and support the reader’s understanding of how these concepts come together in the theoretical framework. The chapter begins with a conceptual overview to identity that is central to the study, reflecting its integral role in shaping the language learning journey (3.2.), and then moves to discuss the relationship between identity, society, and culture where the shift to investigating identities through society and culture is introduced. The third subsection of identity focuses on identity and investment in language learning. This section further contextualises identity within Kuwaiti context, offering insights into how cultural dynamics shape learning experiences. The chapter then investigates the household environment (3.3), focusing on parental influences and the role of domestic workers in Kuwaiti households in relation to second language (L2) learning.

Following this, the TESOL setting and cultural norms (3.4) are introduced, highlighting how Kuwaiti learners navigate TESOL settings, with particular attention to teacher-student interactions (students being the main focus), and the impact of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). The final section introduces socio-ecological perspectives on language learning (3.5), discussing culturally relevant pedagogies, the role of intercultural communication and technology, and the influence of individualism and collectivism in language learning contexts, all of which focus on challenges that frequently occur in the English language classroom, emphasising the language learner's perspective. Collectively, this chapter establishes a comprehensive foundation, identifying gaps and aligning existing literature with the focus of this research on Kuwaiti female learners at Kuwait University.

3.2. Identity: A Conceptual Overview

“Forming an identity depends on the norms a lot, by which it can be recognized and interpreted as a phenomenon.”

(Srbínovska, 2012, p. 2104)

Identity is a multifaceted and fluid term (Cummins, 2000; Pavlenko, 2004) that resists a singular, definitive definition, having developed and transformed across diverse disciplines such as sociology, psychology, politics, and linguistics. Different theories exist in the literature regarding identity, each focusing on a different discipline or concept, with a few being reviewed in the following sections. Due to identity being such an integral component of this study, it forms the focus of this literature review. Erikson (1959), the founder of the Theory of Psychosocial Development, defined identity as the progressive self-conception that evolves throughout time. It encompasses the comprehension of individual values, beliefs, objectives, and one's societal position. Erikson also believes that identity is not static but evolves during several life stages, with adolescence being a particularly critical period. During adolescence, individuals are more likely to confront enquiries about their sense of self and future aspirations, such as defining what constitutes their identity and determining the path they should follow in life. Effectively resolving these enquiries fosters a distinct self-awareness, whereas failure may result in confusion. Social interactions and feedback from important relationships are crucial in influencing this process. (e.g., Kramsch, 2013; Norton, 2013).

Other scholars have contributed diverse perspectives on identity from The Social Identity theory which refers to a person's awareness of belonging to a specific social group or category (Abrams & Hogg, 1988), to the Identity theory which explains how people understand themselves and others based on their roles in society along with their expectations that reflects on human behaviours and actions (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Both theories focused on how to enable the self to categorise, classify, or name itself in different manners, especially with diverse social categories or classifications. This process appears in both theories, which is referred to as *self-categorisation* in The Social Identity theory (Turner et al., 1987), while in Identity theory, it is termed *identification* (McCall & Simmons, 1978). Despite the use of two different terminologies in these frameworks, both concepts address the same fundamental

construct of identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). The concept of multiple identities has gained attention in recent years, with some scholars arguing that identity is not fixed but shifts across different contexts and interactions, challenging the idea of a singular, unchanging self (e.g., Gee, 2014; Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2003).

Among the various definitions of identity mentioned, many key authors discussed identity in relation to language learning (e.g., Kramsch, 2013; Norton, 2013; Pavlenko, 2004).

Researchers such as Firth and Wagner (1997) were among the first to critique what they perceive as a limited perspective on identity in second language acquisition (SLA) research. They argued that SLA research generally prioritises the differentiation between native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS), frequently neglecting the intricacies of individuals' wider social identities. They further claim that individuals maintain various social identities, such as parent, companion, educator, or associate, that can shift and coexist based on the environment. Nonetheless, despite this fluidity and complexity of the wider social identities, SLA research has regularly concentrated on the NS or NNS identity as the primary and static element in relationships, overlooking the wider and dynamic dimensions of identity (Firth & Wagner, 1997). Block (2007) asserted that the contribution of Firth and Wagner (1997) is one of the seminal works that highlighted the importance of identity in language learning (e.g., Lantolf, 1996; Peirce, 1995), with their concern regarding the limited epistemological scope within the field second language acquisition. These efforts together advanced second language acquisition (SLA) beyond its limited focus on linguistics and cognitive psychology (Block, 2007).

Lantolf (1994) applied Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT), to emphasise the role of social interaction and cultural tools in language development. Sociocultural Theory (SCT) explains how social interactions and cultural influences shape second language (L2) learning. Scholars have used the term in various ways, but it is primarily based on Vygotsky's ideas, which emphasised the role of social engagement, mediation, and cultural tools in language development (Lantolf, 2006). Western applied linguistics researchers saw a significant shift with the introduction of Vygotsky's (1978) theories, which underscored the role of social context in cognitive development (Kramsch, 2013). Lantolf et al., (2014) underscored the importance of sociocultural theory (SCT) in comprehending second language acquisition

(SLA), asserting that language learning transcends cognitive processes and is profoundly rooted in social and cultural contexts. SCT, developed by Vygotsky, explains how human mental behaviours develop through historical, cultural, and social influences, emphasising intentional human activity in creating conditions for learning and change (Poehner & Lantolf, 2024). Research expanded upon Vygotsky's concepts, demonstrating that identity is formed and facilitated through social interaction and cultural tools through the integration of SCT. Lantolf (2000) and Lantolf and Thorne (2024) broaden the discussion, demonstrating how language learners actively reshape their identities while engaging in new linguistic and cultural environments. Building on these ideas, Lantolf, alongside other researchers (e.g., Swain, Pavlenko, and Thorne), developed sociocultural theory in SLA, in which collaborative learning is central to language development (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

While Sociocultural Theory (SCT) might appear suitable for this study due to its emphasis on social and cultural influences in language learning (Lantolf, 2006), its focus remains too narrow for the broader aims of this research. For instance, Sociocultural Theory (SCT) offers insights into the mediation of language learning through interaction and cultural tools (Poehner & Lantolf, 2024), but it predominantly focuses on localised, immediate social interactions, such as those taking place in classrooms or collaborative settings. However, it is beyond the scope of the current investigation to focus primarily on SCT and its relation to the classroom and cognitive development, or the independent work of a child that encompasses the development process (Vygotsky, 1978). Norton and McKinney (2011) found that language acquisition is fundamentally a social practice rather than only a linguistic framework. This justifies the multiplicity of identities of language learners (Norton & McKinney, 2011), and the fact that different setting could create different identities. Also, diverse fields such as sociology, cultural anthropology, psychology, and education have each conceptualised identity from different perspectives (Shin, 2017). Therefore, identity is considered fluid, complex, and actively shaped through language interactions (Cummins, 2000).

Identity is neither fixed nor singular, but rather continuously evolving, shaped by vast social, cultural, and global factors. Since research has consistently demonstrated that identity is dynamic and fluid, its comprehension depends on the way the research is framed and the perspective adopted. Therefore, the current study examines the interplay between identity,

language, society, and culture, emphasising how these interrelated elements influence the female language learners at Kuwait University and reform identity.

3.2.1. Identity, Society, and Culture: Language Learning and the Construction of Identity

The work of the above-mentioned scholars contributed to what Block (2003) identified as '*the social turn in SLA*', where attention turned towards understanding how learners' social and cultural identities shape and are shaped by the language learning process (Kramsch, 2013). Poststructuralism has emerged as the dominant theoretical framework in identity research, dismissing fixed classifications and accepting contradictions, conceptualising identity as a social process rather than a static condition (Block, 2013; Duff, 2012). Within this broader shift, discussions on language and gender have also moved away from rigid explanations, acknowledging the complexity and intersectionality within the field. This aligns with the transition in SLA from positivist, essentialist perspectives to constructivist approaches that recognise the historical, political, social, and cultural dimensions of language learning (Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004). As Cameron (2005) notes, there is no single agreed-upon framework for conceptualising or exploring language and gender, instead, the field is shaped by multiple, sometimes contradictory perspectives that interact in diverse ways.

Therefore, researchers investigated various perspectives of identity such as identity and culture and identity and language learning. The connection between language and identity has been researched from different academic perspectives. Schechter (2014) outlines three approaches for investigating identity: social anthropology, sociocultural studies, and relational or participatory approaches. Sociolinguistic study additionally observes the influence of social norms on the formation of linguistic identity. In the field of second language (L2) learning, researchers studying identity focus on how learners interact with the social world, negotiate or resist assigned roles, and how power relations shape their learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom (Kalaja et al., 2016). Norton (2013) explored identity and language learning by drawing on a range of educational research perspectives. She built on cultural studies approaches from scholars such as Connell et al. (1982) incorporated insights from

feminist research, including the work of Briskin and Coulter (1992) and Luke and Gore (2014), and engaged with critical ethnography through the contributions of Anderson (1989), Britzman (1990), Brodkey (1987), and Simon and Dippo (1986).

Although these scholars asked different questions and worked from varied assumptions, Norton found their ideas valuable for analysing identity in language learning (Norton, 2013). According to Norton (2013a, p.4), identity is "*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*". Within the context of language learning, Norton (Peirce, 1995)) stands out as a key figure. Her work was selected for the current study because she critically engaged with previous theorists who examined identity from various angles incorporating their insights while developing a more inclusive framework, that most importantly, include the L2 learners' experiences outside the TESOL setting (Norton, 2013).

Norton, who was inspired by the work on Weedon (1996) on language and identity provided a more focused perspective on identity within the context of language acquisition, elaborating on its cultural components. Weedon (1996) views identity as a dynamic, multiple and shaped by social power relations, and highlights how power dynamics between individuals or communities can impact life opportunities in social and historical contexts (Norton, 2000; Peirce, 1995). Norton emphasised that identity is influenced by power dynamics and social relationships, underscoring its fluid and varied characteristics (Norton, 2005). Norton's research links identity to the experiences of language learners, incorporating a broader cultural and social aspects of identity and providing a foundation for understanding the complex interplay between identity and language acquisition, as well as self-awareness within a specific context and time, and the potential for future opportunities (Norton & McKinney, 2011). This concept corresponds with the focus of the current study, which looks at language acquisition outside the classroom by investigating female language learners' ecological systems (see [Chapter 4](#)) and their perceptions of language learning contexts. Norton's theory offers an appropriate perspective for comprehending identity in this research by emphasising how learners use the ecological systems (see [Chapter 4](#)) to shape their future possibilities.

This evolving perspective is further enriched by Norton's (1995) influential definition of identity, which emphasises the dynamic relationship between language learners and the social worlds they inhabit. Kramsch herself drew inspiration from Norton's work, recognising the importance of considering learners' multiple identities and the shifting nature of their investment in language learning (Kramsch, 2013). These theories and concepts, along with others, jointly illustrated and introduced the importance of identity in second language acquisition (SLA) and were crucial in expanding the concept of identity beyond just linguistic or psychological frameworks. By emphasising the social, cultural, and relational aspects of language acquisition, they broadened the scope of SLA research to include wider multidisciplinary viewpoints (Block, 2007).

Norton (2013) notes a paradigm change in the comprehension of identity, transitioning from a static and unitary notion to one that recognises its fluid, diverse, and dynamic characteristics, commonly referred to in the plural as "identities." These points of view highlight the intricacy of defining identity, as it is shaped by dynamic and interconnected aspects including society, community, culture, and environment. The intertwined nature of language, identity, and culture is intricate and multifaceted, shaped by prolonged immersion and infinite intercultural contexts (Peng, 2023). This point of view establishes the foundation for the theoretical framework of the current research, whereby the exploration of ecosystems (See [Chapter 4](#)) will uncover a comparable comprehension of identity as multifaceted, complex, and fluid within the Kuwaiti context, illustrating how female learners in Kuwait adjust and develop in reaction to their surrounding and dynamic ecological systems, including the TESOL setting (see [Chapter 4](#)).

Power and language learning has been a topic of interest to many scholars in the field of second language acquisition (Norton, 2000). Kramsch, a leading scholar in applied linguistics and inspired by the work of Bourdieu (1991), underscored the symbolic power of language in constructing identity in order to understand the complexity of the interactional process (Hansen-Pauly, 2022). Kramsch defines symbolic power as the ability to control meanings and make them acceptable by hiding the power dynamics that give them authority (2020). She argued that language is not simply a means of communication but a symbolic system that shapes and mirrors human self-perception and external perception, especially within cultural

settings (Kramsch, 2014b). Scholars who applied a critical perspective on second language education have pointed out that social structures reinforced inequality (Norton, 2000). Norton argues that learners from different racial, gender, class, and ethnic backgrounds often faced marginalisation, which shaped their experiences of acquiring a new language. Kramsch emphasises how globalisation has shifted traditional perspectives, challenging established notions of linguistic and cultural identity (Kramsch, 2014b).

As global interconnectedness increases, individuals are situating themselves in ways that are less dependent on particular locations or settings, thereby reinterpreting the meaning of cultural identity (Kramsch, 2014a). For example, the rapid innovations in digital technology and growing international connections have transformed our comprehension of time, space, and our position in the world (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Kramsch's views on identity highlight how recent research, influenced by sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and cognitive science, has enhanced our comprehension of the interplay between language, culture, and identity formation (Kramsch, 2014a). According to Block (2009), language identity, as a subset of identity, refers to the perceived or assigned relationship between an individual's sense of self and a particular mode of communication, such as a language, dialect, or sociolect (Block, 2009). The concept of language identity influences how individuals perceive other languages and evaluate the cultural groups associated with them (Jenkins, 2007; Norton, 2000). Block also stated that although others, such as Gass (1998), have questioned the relevance of connecting identity to language acquisition, the consistent increase in studies investigating this relationship indicates its escalating importance in the area (2007).

Given the intricate intersections between identity and the various facets of an individual, researching language learning requires a flexible approach to identity, one that transcends a single domain or discipline. It is preferably approached without being confined to a single domain or discipline. Shin (2017) argues that identities are not restricted to classifications such as race, ethnicity, nationality, or gender, but are instead debated and managed through social interactions. Therefore, various forms of identity will emerge throughout this study, depending on the specific focal point being discussed. For example, linguistic identity, language identity, religious identity, and cultural identity can coexist within a single language learner, each influencing the other. In this study, participants are female English language

learners with diverse linguistic identities. Their tribal/ social group backgrounds include both *Hadhar* and *Badu* ([see Section 2.2.1.](#)), while their national identity is Kuwaiti, and they identify ethnically as Arab and religiously as Muslim. However, these identities are fluid and not universally applicable to all participants. This approach avoids imposing an idealised image that may not align with the learners' realities. Furthermore, it acknowledges the specific socio-cultural context of Kuwait, recognising that identity construction in Kuwait may diverge from patterns observed in studies conducted in other regions.

After reviewing the literature, it is important to understand identity within its unique local setting, accounting for the intertwined influences of identity, society, and culture. Identities are continually reshaped by societal contexts, interpersonal interactions, and the languages used in these exchanges. This fluidity is influenced by factors such as time, space, and the power dynamics present within their social engagements which will be explained further in Chapter 4. Accordingly, this study adopts a framework that views identity as fluid, dynamic, and multifaceted, evolving with each individual. The concept of identity is further enhanced in the current study when associated with the Bio-ecological Model ([see Chapter 4](#)), as it facilitates a thorough comprehension of learners' perspectives and their self-perceptions during the language acquisition process, as well as their future self-perceptions and how these vary with other individuals.

Now that the importance of power and identity in EFL classroom dynamics has been established, Norton (2013) challenged the idea that motivation is simply an internal characteristic of the learner, unaffected by power imbalances between teachers and students in the TESOL setting. Rather than viewing motivation as an individual trait, she argued that classroom dynamics and pedagogical practices shape how learners perceive their ability to construct new identities, which may either grant them greater agency or reinforce subordinate positions (Norton, 2013b). Expanding upon this conceptualisation of identity as fluid and context-dependent, this study turns to Norton's (1995, 2000) definition of identity and her pivotal concept of investment, discussed in the section below, in language learning. This approach offers valuable insights into how learners' shifting identities are influenced by different social, cultural, and linguistic factors.

3.2.2. Identity. Investment, Language Learning

Language functions as a fundamental medium for expressing identities, allowing individuals to navigate across cultural and socioeconomic situations (Alshehri, 2023). While identity is regarded as dynamic and multifaceted rather than solitary or fixed (Darvin & Norton, 2017), understanding the relationship between language and identity provides essential insights into human interactions and behaviours (Alshehri, 2023). In other words, the choice of words and the way language is used not only conveys present realities but also allows individuals to envision their future selves. By aligning language with their aspirations, people navigate life choices and interactions, with language playing a pivotal role in shaping both personal identity and future trajectories.

Investment, as conceptualised by Norton (2013) and adapted in the current study, challenges the traditional notion that motivation is an inherent trait of the learner, independent of power dynamics within the learning environment. According to Norton (2013), investment explains the reasons for the differing levels of learner engagement in social interactions and community practices. Norton (2013) further argued that investing in a target language is simultaneously an investment in one's own identity, as language learning shapes how individuals position themselves within social and cultural contexts. While a learner may demonstrate high levels of motivation, this does not necessarily mean they are invested in the language-learning process (Bourdieu et al., 1977; Norton, 2013). The inclusion of learners' first (L1) languages in educational settings (see [Section 3.4.1.2.](#)), for instance, can enhance their sense of investment and reinforce their potential to develop multilingual identities (Cox & Phipps, 2022). By recognising the role of power in shaping language learning experiences, Norton's framework underscores the significance of fostering inclusive and equitable learning spaces where all learners can engage meaningfully with language. Moreover, Norton (1995) introduced the concept of investment, which will be presented in the subsequent section, offering a more comprehensive lens for understanding the incentives of language learners. Unlike traditional views of motivation, investment considers how learners' identities are shaped and reshaped by their social environments, power dynamics, and access to cultural capital. Therefore, the term investment is chosen for the current study. This aligns with the socio-ecological framework's (see [Chapter 4](#)) emphasis on the multiple, intersecting layers

that influence language acquisition, positioning identity as both dynamic and context-dependent, encompassing familial relationships, cultural norms, societal structures, learners' incentives for language learning, and global influences, all of which function across various interrelated strata which will be discussed in further detail in the subsequent section.

3.2.2.1. Understanding Investment and Motivation: An Introduction

Norton's (1995) concept of investment emphasises the influence of social and historical contexts on the relationship between language learners and the target language (Norton, 2013b). Investment also emphasises the concept of power inside and outside the classroom (Al-Hoorie & MacIntyre, 2019; Norton, 2013). It is inspired by Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu et al., 1977; Norton, 2013a), which refers to the knowledge, qualifications, and ways of thinking that are associated with different social classes, each holding varying levels of value depending on the specific social context (Norton, 2013b). The cultural capital consists of cultural norms that are complex and multifaceted, often transmitted from parents to children through processes of socialisation, and they play a dominant role in shaping society (Bourdieu et al., 1977). Norton (2013) introduced the sociological concept of investment to expand on the psychological understanding of motivation in second language acquisition. This concept highlights the complex connection between a learner's identity and their commitment to language learning (Norton, 2013a).

A key aspect of understanding investment in language learning is through the concept of imagined communities. Anderson (2020) described nations as imagined communities, as individuals may never meet most of their fellow members, yet they share a sense of belonging. In second language learning, this idea extends to imagined identities, where learners envision themselves as part of a desired linguistic or cultural community (Norton & Toohey, 2011). These imagined communities shape learners' aspirations, influencing their investment in the target language. Their engagement is not only linked to past experiences but also to future possibilities for identity and social mobility (Norton & Toohey, 2011), constructing their imagined identities.

A number of studies frequently address motivation in combination with investment (Al-Hoorie & MacIntyre, 2019; Ryan, 2019) which may contribute to ambiguity in distinguishing between the two concepts. The following section will briefly highlight motivation to compare it with the main concept of this study of investment, and to explore how investment builds upon the idea of motivation, with the aims to clarify the distinction between the two.

3.2.2.2. *Motivation*

Investment cannot be examined without first addressing motivation, which served as the foundation for Norton's pioneering work in this area (Peirce, 1995). While motivation is generally viewed as a psychological construct based on an individual's drive to learn, investment adopts a sociological lens, focusing on the learner's connection to the target language in relation to power, and the broader social frameworks that facilitate language learning (Al-Hoorie & MacIntyre, 2019). The concepts of investment and motivation are closely linked and frequently discussed together, as both offer distinct perspectives on understanding why learners choose to pursue the study of an additional language (L2) (Darvin & Norton, 2023).

The notion of motivation in second language acquisition (SLA) was characterised by Gardner (1985, 2010, 2010) as (integrative motivation) which indicates a learner's willingness to engage with the culture and speakers of the target language. Nonetheless, Dörnyei subsequently later criticised the concept, arguing that it was excessively broad and lacking in precision. Dörnyei proposed substituting it with the scale of the "ideal L2 self," a more concentrated construct that encapsulates the individual dimensions and internal desires of language learning motivation (Dörnyei, 2014). The concept was developed by Dörnyei to emphasise learner's motivation and represents a vision of the learner's future self (Dörnyei, 2014). However, recent studies continue to question the precision of these motivational constructs, including Dörnyei's scale. Al-Hoorie et al. (2024) provided compelling evidence from both quantitative and qualitative analyses, indicating that responses to Dörnyei's ideal L2 self-scale are influenced by learners' perceptions of their own beliefs about their current abilities. This finding undermines the validity of the widely used ideal L2 self-scale and suggests the need for a critical re-evaluation of its role (Al-Hoorie et al., 2024).

These insights underscore the persistent ambiguities surrounding motivation in SLA, highlighting ongoing misinterpretations and the necessity for refined theoretical approaches. Traditionally, discussions on language acquisition centred around questions concerning what motivates language learners and the factors that contribute to demotivation (e.g., Dewaele et al., 2022; Hennebry-Leung et al., 2023; Ushioda, 2016). Gardner's original definition of motivation, though fundamental, neglected the influence of power and cultural communities' elements that Norton explores through the notion of investment. Prior research has offered limited insights into how language learning intertwines with the social world, and it was usually introduced with the concept of motivation, emphasising both conscious and unconscious psychological aspects (Darvin & Norton, 2023).

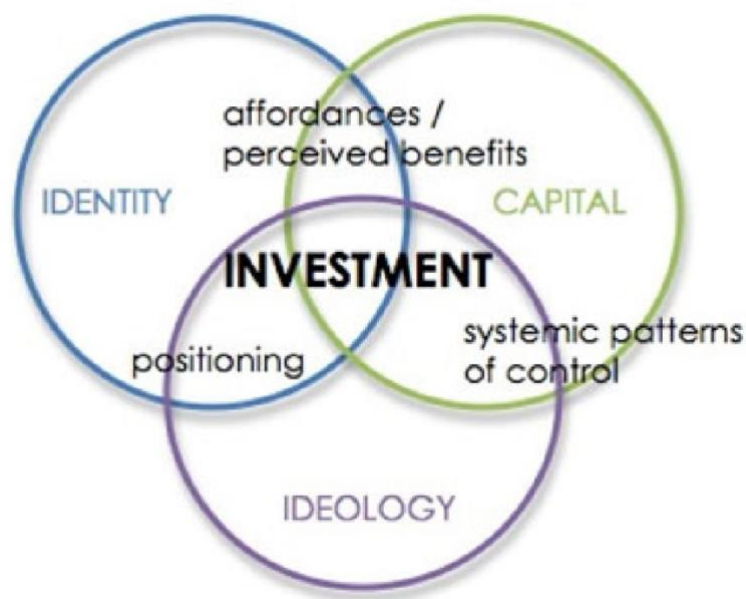
This gap in motivation prompted Norton's foundational research which explored the interplay between power and human agency and introduced the notion of investment in relation to social identity. Norton first introduced the concept of investment in the mid-nineties to represent the complex, socially and historically influenced relationship learners maintain with the target language. This concept also includes the learners' occasionally conflicting drive to acquire and utilise the language actively (Peirce, 1995). While motivation is examined extensively in the literature, it is not the primary focus of the current study. Instead, the primary contrast between motivation and investment is crucial, especially how investment reflects the intricate, socially and historically shaped relationship that learners possess with the target language. Norton (2013) argued that earlier theories of motivation often overlooked the impact of unequal power dynamics between language learners and those who speak the target language. Therefore, the concept of investment was introduced.

3.2.2.3. *Investment*

Investment emerged in the 1990s as a sociological equivalent to the psychological concept of motivation. Unlike motivation, which is largely viewed as a psychological concept (Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009), investment is framed within a sociological perspective. It explores the relationship between a learner's desire and commitment to language learning

and their shifting, complex identity (Norton, 2013). Investment has emerged as a crucial term in language acquisition theory research, especially in circumstances including identity and power dynamics. It refers to the process through which learners engage with language learning by managing their time, effort, and social connections while expressing who they are. As a result, investment reflects the tension between the choices learners make and the limits placed on them by society (Darvin & Norton, 2023). Rather than simply categorising learners through binary classifications such as motivated or unmotivated, investment highlights the complex interplay between identity and language learning (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Recently, there has been a focus on the L2 learners' trajectories, identities and power and their relationship to second language (e.g., Kanno, 2003; McKay & Wong, 1996; Toohey, 2000). Norton shifted the primary focus to students' investment in their language learning within the classroom, highlighting how personal experiences and societal influences, both inside and outside the classroom, shape language acquisition (Darvin & Norton, 2017), a notion that is essential in the current study.

To navigate the modern world and the rapid progression of technology, Darvin and Norton (2015) formulated the Identity and Investment model (See (Figure 8). This model integrates *identity*, *ideology*, and *capital* to show the evolving social and economic environment. It recognises that language acquisition and social engagement occur in dynamic and boundless environments, necessitating a novel perspective on identity (Darvin & Norton, 2015). The approach acknowledges the intricate nature of learners' identities in both 'online and offline spaces', emphasising the fluid interplay between agency and structure that can facilitate or constrain self-expression (Darvin & Norton, 2015). (Figure 8)



(Figure 8) Adapted from Darwin and Norton's (2015) model of identity and investment. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, Cambridge University Press.

Investment and identity are closely linked, as individuals rethink their self-concept when their cultural capital increases (Norton, 2013). Through investment in language and literacy, learners seek to acquire both symbolic and material resources that enhance their social power and cultural capital. Symbolic resources encompass language, education, and social connections, whereas material resources pertain to financial assets, real estate, and goods. As these resources grow, learners' identities are redefined in accordance with their changing social status (Norton, 2013). Norton and Morgan (2020) emphasised that investment and identity are intertwined, both shaped by the same epistemological foundations. Investment acknowledges that social inequalities shape learners' opportunities, requiring them to negotiate resources and assert identities within these constraints (Darvin & Norton, 2023). This highlights the tension between agency and structure, the freedom learners have to make choices and the limitations imposed by their social environments (Darvin & Norton, 2023). The current study deliberately integrates the concepts of identity and investment to clarify their complementary relationship. Identity and investment are intricately connected, each influencing the other in dynamic, context-dependent manners, a concept that is highly relevant to the context of the current study.

Despite extensive studies (see for example, Haneda, 2005; Potowski, 2004; Tajeddin et al., 2023) on investment across different global contexts, the literature on this subject remains regionally narrowed and requires further investigation. For instance, Skilton-Sylvester (2002) investigated the participation of Cambodian women in adult ESL classes and found that Cambodian women's participation in adult ESL programs is influenced by shifting cultural identities at home and in the workplace, which are closely tied to their investment in specific language learning contexts. Potowski (2004) studied the dynamic Spanish-English immersion programs and emphasised the role of identity in language acquisition and heritage language maintenance. The study argued that learners' identity investments significantly influence their language use and progress. The study also highlighted that when identity conflicts arise, particularly for heritage speakers in dual immersion programs, language development may be hindered, suggesting that successful language planning should foster positive identity associations with the target language (Potowski, 2004). Haneda (2005) examined Japanese literacy through writing among university students and highlighted the need for L2 educators to consider learners' identities, paths, goals, and aspirations in relation to target language use. Despite these contributions, research on investment in the GCC countries, especially for female language learners, remains unexplored.

Identity and investment have now emerged as fundamental concepts in language education (Kramsch, 2013a; The Douglas Fir Group, 2016). The differentiation between investment and motivation, although enhancing language acquisition theory, has also led to ongoing confusion between the two notions. In contrast to motivation, which emphasises psychological views, investment underscores the learner's active negotiation of power, identity, and learning within particular social and cultural contexts. Therefore, investment broadened the focus of language acquisition beyond individual psychological elements by incorporating socially and historically relevant aspects related to the learner, highlighting the overarching social factors that affect the learning process (Darvin & Norton, 2023).

Investment in language learning goes beyond individual motivation, as it is shaped by broader social and power dynamics. Learners do not only invest in acquiring a language but also in shaping their identities, which are influenced by their experiences and interactions in different

contexts. Power imbalances within educational settings can position learners unequally, leading to varied learning outcomes (Darvin & Norton, 2017). While a learner may appear highly motivated, external barriers such as racism, sexism, or homophobia can hinder their investment. Norton (2000) emphasised that identities are dynamic, evolving over time and across contexts, continuously negotiated through social interactions. This challenges conventional classifications of learners as simply motivated or unmotivated, or introverted or extroverted. Although such barriers may not be as prominent in the Kuwaiti context, other culturally specific factors, such as gender expectations, family influence, or societal norms, may either hinder or reinforce female learners' engagement with English, shaping their language learning experiences in distinct ways.

Norton (1995, 2013) asserted that investment, like identity, is a centre of debate, shaped by the dynamics of power negotiation across various fields. This makes investing fundamentally complex, paradoxical, and dynamic (Darvin & Norton, 2017). Darvin and Norton (2023) distinguish between motivation and investment in language learning by focusing on different aspects of the learner's experience. Motivation looks at cognition and emotions to explain learner differences, concentrating on the internal world of thoughts and feelings. In contrast, investment focuses on identity and power, viewing the learner as a social being who navigates relationships and structures in the wider world. Norton conceptualised investment as a response to gaps in motivation research, positioning it as a 'critical counterpoint' (Ushioda, 2020) to traditional models. Norton argued that seeing learners as fixed, coherent selves failed to capture the complexity of their identities and did not explain why highly motivated learners might withdraw from learning contexts where they felt marginalised.

The sociological concept of investment functions alongside the psychological construct of motivation within the framework of language learning and teaching (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Thus, the term investment will be used in this study as one of its aims is to examine how learners acquire the L2 and to analyse the reasons that underlie their language learning experiences and their rationale for language acquisition, specifically what they are 'investing' in their language learning. By reviewing motivation and investment, this research seeks to provide an expanded view of their interrelation, which is crucial for analysing student participation with language acquisition and the evolution of their identities throughout this

process. This overlap between motivation and investment could disguise the differentiation between the two notions, potentially leading to confusion regarding their distinct roles and contributions to comprehending language acquisition processes. Understanding this distinction between motivation and investment is essential for examining how learners in specific contexts, such as Kuwait, negotiate their identities through language learning.

3.2.3. Identity in the Kuwaiti Context

In Kuwait, government scholarships to countries like the UK, US, and Australia have encouraged students to pursue higher education abroad (see also [Chapter 2](#)). This exposure creates opportunities for learners to develop multiple identities and imagined identities (see [Section 3.2.1.](#)). For instance, Kuwaiti students may view education abroad as a gateway to broader social and professional opportunities. Just as it is challenging to assign a fixed definition to the concept of identity, the current study will underscore the complexity of how identity reflects and interacts with various aspects of a person's life, mainly, language learning.

One of the few studies in the GCC countries examines the concept of Khaleeji identity from an architectural perspective, which is often referred to as Gulf identity or the identity of the Eastern Gulf, a subject that remains relatively underexplored in the literature for this particular region. The emergence of the Khaleeji identity is closely tied to the establishment of the GCC in 1981 (see [Section 2.2.](#)) (Fabbri, 2020). Scholars described Khaleeji identity as a set of shared characteristics that can either emphasise the similarities among Gulf countries or, conversely, highlight their distinct differences, depending on the context. This duality becomes particularly evident during the split within the GCC countries, which underscores the existence of significant differences among member states, despite their shared regional identity (Fabbri, 2020)

It can be said that the principal objective of forming the GCC countries was to cultivate a cohesive regional identity, highlighted by the motto 'Khaleejuna Wahid' ("Our Gulf is one"); nevertheless, this aspiration remains unfulfilled due to ongoing inequality among member states. These inequalities undermine the concept of a unified, coherent identity. The intricacy of Khaleeji identity is shown in its definition, which includes both commonalities and distinctions within the region. This illustrates that although the phrase pertains to a specific

group, it should not be regarded as a fixed or unified construct, emphasising the intricate and evolving essence of identity.

Additionally, there has been increasing academic interest in the GCC region (both from GCC researchers and International research), and its complex interplay between language and identity (e.g., Gobert, 2015; Karolak & Allam, 2020), highlighting the dynamic and multidimensional aspects of identity in this setting. Research from the GCC countries highlights the influence of social and cultural factors on language acquisition and identity formation. However, assuming uniformity across the region overlooks the unique cultural beliefs, norms, and socio-ecological contexts of each country, which also reflects language learning perspectives. In the United Arab Emirates, English is widely used in education and public life due to governmental support. Nonetheless, numerous individuals continue to favour the usage of Arabic in their daily life (Hopkyns, 2022). Hopkyns argues that it has created a conflict and urges for a change from a fully monolingual educational policy (2022). Furthermore, as languages evolve within Arabic-speaking populations, this may influence the comprehension of cultural concepts that were previously regarded as universally evident.(Hopkyns, 2020). Bilingualism and cultural blending are also common in Qatar, but nonetheless, there is apprehension regarding the loss of Arabic in education due to the emphasis on English, which could have a noticeable impact on identity (Pessoa & Rajakumar, 2011). Oman faces obstacles as well related to language policy, the influence of English on cultural identity, and the dual effects of technology, which facilitates learning yet could conflict with traditional norms (Al-Issa, 2022; Vaishnav, 2024). This underscores the need for more focused research to uncover the complex socio-ecological differences and address the complexity of identity and English language learning among individuals in the region, which remains underrepresented in the existing literature.

In the case of Kuwaiti society, the link between identity, investment and its relation to language learning remains largely unexplored. El-Dib (2004) explored the impact of culture, gender, and language proficiency on language learning practices used by Kuwaiti students. The study concentrated on identifying patterns in strategy use, demonstrating that gender and language competency greatly influence learners' choices. The study aimed to offer pedagogical insights, concluding that cultural learning environments are likely the most crucial factor influencing

strategy selection. El-Dib (2004) called for a more contextualised approach in strategy research to more accurately represent these factors. Another study, conducted by Al-Qenaie and Al-Bader (2024), examined the cultural and religious influences on English language acquisition among those who identify as Muslim. The findings of this study revealed that some participants perceived the use of English outside educational settings as a threat to their Muslim identity. The study's findings can be better understood through the lens of identity and investment, as some learners, despite being motivated, may prioritise their religious identity, influencing their investment in using English beyond the classroom.

A study by Akbar and Taki (2020) on translanguaging demonstrated its effectiveness in bilingual classrooms for enhancing a thorough comprehension of the information explained during the lesson. Translanguaging refers to the fluid use of a bilingual person's full linguistic repertoire to make meaning, allowing learners to draw from both languages (L1 and L2) to enhance understanding and knowledge processing (García & Wei, 2014). While the study focused on the role of translanguaging in improving comprehension rather than identity, the study concluded by saying that translanguaging '*enhanced comfort zone*' of the learners, which suggests deeper links to identity, investment, and power, but it did not necessarily improve language proficiency. Instead of just focusing on translanguaging, considering the classroom setting, student backgrounds, and teacher dynamics can help in understanding how learners negotiate their identities and navigate power structures, reflecting broader socio-educational influences. Al-Ajlan and Al-Qenaie (2023) expanded upon the study by Akbar & Taki (2020) by employing written narratives to investigate learners' perspectives and to detect Kuwaiti linguistic characteristics in their English usage. Although their qualitative approach represented an advancement over the existing quantitative approaches, they determined that the narrative method was inadequate to comprehensively encapsulate learners' language activities. The study addressed the underlying reasons for the detected language traits; however, it overlooked the profound socio-ecological elements that influence the formation of these learners' perceptions. A separate study by Al-Ajlan about English as a lingua franca clearly stated that a limitation of the research was the absence of the language's impact on individual identity (AlAjlan, 2011).

Both studies, however, fall short in capturing the complexities of learners' language experiences due to methodological limitations. Akbar and Taki (2020) relied primarily on group discussions and questionnaires, approaches that, while useful for general perceptions, lack the depth required to explore the intricate interplay between language use, identity, and power. Similarly, Al-Ajlan and Al-Qenaie (2023) focused on students' written narratives in the English language to examine linguistic factors, yet this method proved insufficient for uncovering the broader socio-cultural and socio-ecological influences shaping learners' perceptions. By placing greater emphasis on linguistic features and overlooking the social and cultural contexts in which language learning takes place, both these studies could have missed valuable opportunities to explore learners' identities and investment in a more holistic manner, such as through interviews conducted in the learners' first language, to better understand how they navigate these processes within their environments.

These studies collectively contribute significantly by examining the social and cultural aspects of language acquisition in Kuwait. Although identity and investment were not clearly mentioned, they would appear to indicate a relationship between identity, investment and language learning behaviour in a particular context. None of this research clearly examines the interplay between identity and cultural as well as social variables in shaping language learning experiences. The current study aims to build on these foundations to more directly explore the cultural dimensions of identity and investment in language learning within the Kuwaiti context. A focused investigation into the role of identity in these settings is crucial for comprehending the underlying dynamics and providing deeper insights into the socio-ecological elements influencing language acquisition and identity development in Kuwait. The present study seeks to bridge this gap by highlighting the complex interplay between identity and language acquisition within Kuwait's distinctive socio-ecological context. Considering that language acquisition is profoundly connected to social and cultural contexts, the household environment is one of the factors that impacts learners' identities and their involvement in L2 learning, which will be covered in the subsequent section.

3.3. Household Involvement, identity and L2 Learning

Following the discussion on the relationship between identity, investment, language learning, and the broader perspective of identity and the social world, it is important to consider the role of the household environment since it is part of the L2 learner's Bio-ecological systems (see [Chapter 4](#)) and plays a critical role in shaping individual's language learning and identity formation. The dynamics of relationships between different groups and within one's own group are influenced and shaped by the "indirect" construction of identity (Berzonsky, 2011). This indirect process occurs through interactions with immediate family, friends, and peers (Berzonsky, 2011). Exploring the connection between the household environment and L2 acquisition is crucial for understanding how families can support or hinder the investment in language learning and help in creating different types of identities, making it a significant area of study in language education research (e.g., Al Mubarakah & Prasetya, 2020; Hajar, 2019). This perspective aligns with the socio-ecological framework (see [Chapter 4](#)), which focuses on the dynamic interplay between individuals and their environment.

3.3.1. Parents and L2 Learning

Parents play a pivotal role in shaping their children's language learning journey, which will be discussed further in the theoretical framework of the study (Chapter 4). Research highlights the significant role of parental involvement and household conditions in shaping second language (L2) acquisition. Factors such as socioeconomic status (SES) or education levels of parent play a significant role in L2 acquisition (see for example, Al-Kandari et al., 2022; Babikkoi, 2014; Laketa et al., 2023). A study by Abbasian et al. (2020) conducted on 300 Iranian students explored the relationship between SES of parents and the L2 learning outcomes of their children, specifically focusing on listening and reading comprehension. This study emphasised the importance of examining non-linguistic variables, such as the socioeconomic and the educational status of the parents, as significant factors to L2 development. Furthermore, it highlighted the need for future research to adopt longitudinal designs to better understand how household factors contribute to L2 learning over time and to address causal relationships more effectively. They also recommended expanding research to diverse populations beyond the specific context of Iranian students, as well as employing

specific tools to explore the complex relationships between household environments and L2 learning outcomes while minimising the errors of the analytical tools (Abbasian et al., 2020).

Longitudinal research can capture how changes in household conditions, such as shifting the socioeconomic status or parental education levels, impact L2 learning over time, a concept closely tied to the chronosystem in the Bio-ecological Model (see [Chapter 4](#)). In the ecological system, time plays a critical role in shaping interactions between individuals and their environments, including the household's influence on L2 learning (Chong et al., 2023).

Additionally, this temporal focus is crucial when analysing multiple identities, as identities are dynamic and evolve over time based on personal experiences and contextual changes (see [Section 3.2](#)). Investigating how household factors and socio-ecological contexts interact with these evolving identities can provide deeper insights into the long-term processes that impact L2 acquisition and learning trajectories. One way to incorporate a temporal focus in research is through methodological choices, such as interviewing older participants and eliciting reflections that trace back to their childhood. Li (2007) conducted an ethnographic study on Chinese immigrant families in Canada using a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative one that mostly generalise findings. This approach enables researchers to track developmental shifts and identify the household and socio-ecological factors that have shaped their trajectory as language learners. Li's study also offered a valuable insight into how socio-ecological dimensions shape language learning in the study's particular context. It found that parents' education, job opportunities, and how well they adapted to Canadian society greatly affected how they supported their children's second language learning. These factors influenced the efforts parents used to help their children succeed, thereby impacting their children's language learning (2007).

Similarly, a study by Wati (2016) contended that parents showed favourable views towards English and regarded their children's English as a Second Language (ESL) education with importance, regardless of their SES. Another study conducted in Malaysia by Ahmad & Sulaiman (2020) found that demographic and SES have a significant impact on children's academic achievement. Another study in India claimed that parental involvement can be seen as an investment that parents make in their children's education, significantly supporting their children's academic accomplishments (Gupta, 2023).

A study that used the Study Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire investigated the relationship between the language learning strategies used by 599 participants from a secondary school in Nigeria and their parents' SES (Babikkoi, 2014). The findings revealed that among the eight identified strategies (memory, cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive, affective, social, situational, and religious), the findings revealed that learners showed the strongest preference for the social strategy among the eight identified types.. The social strategy involves skills like communication, teamwork, management, and leadership which shows the learners' reliance on social interaction to learn English (Babikkoi, 2014). The study concluded that integrating the strategy use into the English language curriculum could help students with lower income or "less affluent" backgrounds in a way that the school could compensate for the lack of support in the household, especially the ones with the socio-economic challenges. On the other hand, a study in Taiwan indicated that with no consideration to the parents' educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, they consistently supported their children's English learning, either through homework support or by acting as overall learning assistants (Lee, 2010). The study also indicated that parents with high SES were more engaged in their children's activities and the parents with low SES depended on teachers and free resources from their relatives (e.g., books) (Lee, 2010). These contradicting findings suggest that SES by itself is not a sufficient determinant of parental support for language learning, rather, parental attitudes and beliefs towards language acquisition play a significant role in shaping children's linguistic development.

The results of the previous studies have shown that the impact of SES can vary significantly across different cultural and social settings, such as Kuwait, where similarities and differences in parental influences and household environments warrant further exploration. For example, in Nigeria, lower SES is linked to limited language learning resources (e.g., limited access to social media) (Babikkoi, 2014), indicating that parents' lower SES as a barrier to language learning. However, the context of Kuwait might present an interesting paradox. Kuwait's relatively high SES (see [Chapter 2](#)) and widespread access to technology such as mobile phones and laptops, do not necessarily contribute to a better language learning experience according to the literature (e.g., Al-Nouri, 2019; Dashti et al., 2021). This paradox suggests that access to resources that are financially provided by parents does not guarantee

effective language learning. Language learners in Kuwait continue to have difficulties in language acquisition (e.g., Al-Shammari, 2022; Dashti et al., 2021; Sahiouni, 2021), despite the widespread use of English and the necessity of a lingua franca (see [Section 2.3.](#)) for interactions with non-Arabic speaking employees (see [Chapter 2](#)). This underscores the importance of a comprehensive socio-ecological analysis (see [Chapter 4](#)) to comprehend the continuing presence of these issues as a result of the individual's involvement in the society, regardless of the availability of resources and parents' socioeconomic status (SES).

Al-Kandari et al. (2022), although not from a language learning perspective, observed that parental dialogues in Kuwait are shaped by various cultural and social factors. These influences, including religious practices and family living arrangements (e.g., owning or renting a home), are deeply embedded in societal norms but may vary among individuals. While significant, these factors were not explicitly classified as positive or negative due to their widespread acceptance within Kuwaiti society (Al-Kandari et al., 2022). The study, while was not specifically focussing on language learning, highlighted the importance of raising awareness about the broader concept of socialisation and dialogue within families (Al-Kandari et al., 2022). It also highlighted the need to expand upon such research and include how these cultural and social norms influence L2 learning outcomes (Al-Kandari et al., 2022)

Within the context of SES in Kuwait, the educational backgrounds of parents may create an indirect impact on their children during childhood (Demir et al., 2010). A study of 313 university students in Kuwait, including 219 females aged between 21 to 25 from both public and private universities, examined how socioeconomic factors, especially parental education, influence students' motivation and decisions to pursue higher education (Darwish, 2016). This study combined quantitative methods with structured interviews and found that while many students were motivated to pursue graduate studies out of their passion for learning, others were influenced by cultural and family expectations. It concluded that parental influence plays an indirect role by shaping students' self-perception and their belief in their abilities (Darwish, 2016). For example, parental expectations and fear of disappointing their parents often motivated students to achieve more academically (Darwish, 2016). It was also found that educated parents create a supportive environment that encourages learning and helps their children develop positive motivation for higher education. Darwish (2016) highlighted the

lasting impact of parents' educational and socioeconomic backgrounds on students' academic success. While offering valuable insights into household and cultural influences, the study did not specifically address language learning. Its structured interviews, though complementing quantitative data, limited students' ability to share nuanced perspectives, potentially overlooking variations shaped by socio-ecological backgrounds, identities and investment (see [Section 3.2.](#)). The dichotomy between passion for learning and cultural and familial expectations reflects the concept of investment (see [Section 3.2.2.](#)), showing its influence on students' academic choices. This highlights the need for further exploration of how investment shapes language learning and student engagement.

Building on the research by Darwish (2016), another study focused more on parents' opinions on the inclusion of international cultures in their children's EFL curriculum at the elementary level in Kuwait (Almutairi, 2020). Like Darwish (2016), Almutairi (2020) applied a mixed method approach with a questionnaire distributed to a hundred Kuwaiti parents and only five parents who participated in semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study were mixed with some parents viewing the inclusion of international cultures positively, while others felt it could negatively impact EFL learning. Most parents felt that teaching English without referencing its native culture does not negatively affect learning. However, a smaller group of parents believed that excluding native culture could hinder EFL learning. Overall, parents were open to introducing multicultural content in EFL textbooks as long as it respected national and moral values.

Almutairi (2020) believes that the findings might be related to religious or social preferences, asserting that this is based on the nature of Kuwait's conservative society. It is worth noting that Almutairi clarified that this is rather his personal perspective of the researcher's background, which may differ from others in the Kuwaiti context. For example, the researcher began the discussion with a definitive and rather harsh generalisation about Kuwaiti society. The researcher stated that in his own household, women are not allowed to talk to men in certain situations, and must wear all black, framing this as a societal norm. However, as both a researcher and a Kuwaiti, I would argue that while such practices exist within certain segments of Kuwaiti society, they are not reflective of the country as a whole. These behaviours are shaped by cultural preferences and specific social groups rather than being

enforced norms. It also highlights the different identities and cultural beliefs in one society. More importantly, no legal or societal mandate in Kuwait requires individuals to adhere to these practices, highlighting the diversity of cultural expressions within the country.

The above discussion has shown that there is a need for studies that reflect the diversity within Kuwaiti society, particularly in relation to the socio-ecological influences on education and language learning. Both the Almutairi (2020) and the Darwish (2016) studies represent aspects of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system (see [Chapter 4](#)), where the learner is indirectly influenced by external factors within their environment, even though they are not directly involved in the issues being studied. In Darwish (2016), parental education and SES influence students' self-perception and academic aspirations, demonstrating how elements of the exosystem (see [Chapter 4](#)) indirectly shape learners' outcomes and influence their imagined identities (see [Section 3.2.](#)). Similarly, Almutairi's (2020) study on parents' opinions about incorporating international cultures in EFL curricula highlights how the broader cultural and societal context, including parental beliefs and values, can indirectly impact language learning.

To better understand the long-term impact of parents' attitudes towards exposing their children to other cultures through learning English, it would be valuable to explore how these early experiences shape students' language learning later at the university level. Investigating current university students about their childhood experiences and how it influenced their approach to language learning could provide key insights into the factors and challenges they face or the successes they achieve today in their TESOL setting. By looking at how their early exposure has shaped their language learning journey, we can gain a deeper understanding of the role parental attitudes play in shaping not only language skills but also broader academic outcomes. Understanding the long-term influence of parental attitudes on language learning provides valuable insight into students' academic experiences. However, beyond parental influence, other figures within a Kuwaiti household, such as domestic workers, also play a significant role in shaping language acquisition.

3.3.2. Domestic workers in the Kuwaiti Household

As previously mentioned, (see [Chapter 2](#)), domestic workers represent a substantial proportion of Kuwait's population, especially within the Kuwaiti household as live-in domestic workers. In the GCC countries, reliance on maids for childcare is both affordable and accessible, making it a practical choice for many families. Over time, having a live-in housemaid has become widely adopted and is now considered a social norm within the region's childcare systems (Roumani, 2005).

Notably, research on this topic in relation to language learning is scarce in the GCC countries. One exception is Al-Jarf (2022), which examined the impact of domestic workers on children's Arabic acquisition in Saudi Arabia, a neighbouring country with the highest number of domestic workers in the region (Figure 3). The study found that children often imitate the speech of their live-in domestic workers, leading to pronunciation and grammatical errors in Arabic that later require correction in school or through interaction with native speakers (Al-Jarf, 2022). Al-Jarf (2017) is among the few that examined the issue of live-in domestic workers and language acquisition. This raises questions about whether a similar pattern exists in Kuwait, particularly if live-in domestic workers communicate primarily in English. Given that domestic workers in Kuwait often rely on English as a lingua franca (see [Chapter 2](#)), their interactions with children may influence early English language use and development.

Studies in Singapore and Hong Kong (Cheo & Quah, 2005; Tang & Yung, 2016) indicated that domestic workers, particularly Filipino housemaids, positively influenced children's academic outcomes. The live-in domestic workers' English skills and caregiving experience were crucial factors in enhancing children's performance in subjects taught in English. Highly educated Filipino and Thai helpers were frequently employed by families, using English as their primary language of communication (Aziz, 2018). This daily interaction provided children with consistent exposure, enhancing their English language skills (Frantz, 2008; Lan, 2003; Leung, 2012). While studies highlight the influence of domestic workers on children's academic outcomes, particularly their English language proficiency, it is essential to consider how these findings apply to the Kuwaiti context and how their influence extent beyond childhood. Like in Singapore and Hong Kong, the GCC countries, including Kuwait, rely heavily on foreign

domestic workers, many of whom communicate in English (see [Chapter 2](#)). It is possible that just like in Singapore and Hong Kong, the live-in domestic workers could similarly contribute to children's language acquisition, and later, their academic performance at an older age. The lack of research examining the academic and linguistic effects of live-in domestic workers in Kuwait underscores a critical gap in the literature. Additionally, investigating similar patterns or norms in the Kuwaiti household will provide valuable insights into how the presence of English-speaking live-in domestic workers affects children's educational experiences in a predominantly Arabic speaking environment, and whether it is similar to the other GCC countries.

Expanding upon the connection between language and identity (see [Section 3.2.](#)), it is crucial to examine how live-in domestic workers (housemaids, carers, nannies) affect children's linguistic identities and language practices. Children's linguistic development is influenced by the amount of interaction they experience with their caregivers (Dickinson & Tabors, 1991). The educational qualifications of live-in domestic workers show considerable diversity, with some possessing college degrees while others have no formal education (ILO, 2013). In Kuwait, Esim and Smith (2004) conducted a study revealing that 46% of Filipino domestic workers had completed high school, in contrast to only 13% of their Sri Lankan counterparts. Furthermore, the study highlighted that while 53% of the domestic workers reported satisfactory spoken Arabic skills, only a small proportion were able to read or write in the Arabic language (Esim & Smith, 2004).

A quantitative study conducted in Hong Kong found that children, especially those in primary school, were more likely to achieve English fluency when their households employed Filipino domestic workers who spoke English, compared to households with Indonesian domestic workers, who had minimal linguistic impact on the children's language development (Tang & Yung, 2016). The educational background and age of these domestic workers were significantly linked to improvements in children's English skills (Tang & Yung, 2016). While these findings highlight the role of domestic workers in language acquisition, and particularly Filipino live-in foreign domestic workers (FDW's), the transferability of these outcomes to Kuwait warrants investigation. Given that Filipino live-in domestic workers are very common in every Kuwait house (see [Chapter 2](#)), this presents a compelling opportunity to examine

whether their presence similarly influences English language development among Kuwaiti children. The prevalence of Filipino FDWs in Kuwait creates ideal conditions for evaluating this potential language acquisition pathway, which could reveal important insights about informal language learning environments in GCC countries' households that have not been previously documented. This comparison is relevant to the current study as it involves adult learners who can better recall and describe their language learning experiences, enhancing the analysis of Filipino FDWs' impact on English acquisition in Kuwait.

When live-in domestic workers primarily communicate in English, their influence on language development can become significant (Tang & Yung, 2016). In the Philippines, Filipino domestic workers undergo a four-day training before working abroad, which includes cultural orientation and a brief introduction to Arabic for those heading to Arab countries (Lorente, 2017). This training focuses on memorising essential phrases for daily tasks, such as household chores, but offers little opportunity to build conversational skills (Lorente, 2017). As a result, many arrive with minimal Arabic proficiency, making communication challenging. Even after years in Arab countries, their Arabic skills often remain insufficient for interacting with children. As a result, the communication of a child might be influenced by the live-in domestic worker's cultural backgrounds (Lorente, 2017). Children can gain cultural insight by acquiring the language of their live-in domestic workers, who originate from various backgrounds (Jabbar, 2014) where socio-ecological perspectives are also considered. In Jabbar (2014), it was suggested that employing a well-educated maid from the same cultural background helps reduce language and cultural differences, making communication easier.

In Dubai, United Arab Emirates, it was found that children who spend more time with their nannies than their parents often face language delays due to limited interactions (Dhal, 2011). It suggested this issue is common in many GCC countries households, highlighting how nannies can affect children's language development (Dhal, 2011). While exposure to English through live-in domestic workers may offer linguistic benefits, it is not always advantageous if it comes at the expense of the child's first language (L1). This shift can disrupt the development of thought patterns and cognitive processes rooted in the L1, ultimately influencing the child's identity formation and leading to long-term implications for their cultural and linguistic self-concept. Moreover, some parents raised concerns about the potential

cultural and religious influences of domestic workers on their children's language development, however, these differences were generally perceived as more beneficial than harmful (Dhal, 2011).

After reviewing the contextual background of Kuwait (see [Chapter 2.](#)), it is useful to consider and examine the vital factor of live-in domestic workers and their contribution in the household environment in Kuwait. Despite the relevance of this issue to English language learning, no studies, to the best of my knowledge, have explored this phenomenon in Kuwait. This gap in the literature highlights the need for further investigation, which this study aims to address. Although research on live-in domestic workers' influence on children's language development exists in broader contexts, studies within the GCC countries remain limited. Given that the presence of live-in domestic workers is embedded within Kuwaiti cultural life, it is essential to consider the broader cultural norms surrounding English language learning in Kuwait to better understand and investigate the context in which this study takes place.

3.4. TESOL and the Kuwaiti Cultural norms

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) is an academic discipline that centres on instructing individuals who do not speak English as L1 (first language) in the acquisition of English language proficiency. It covers several instructional environments, such as English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program, and English for Special Purposes (ESP) programs (Pavlenko, 2012). TESOL practitioners play a vital role in enabling learners to develop the English language skills needed for effective communication in a globalised world. TESOL teachers employ various methods and approaches, all aimed at developing learners' English language skills for effective communication in English-speaking environments. Their instruction typically covers the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) alongside grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Additionally, TESOL encompasses teaching cultural knowledge and customs (Alshuraiaan, 2023). While TESOL is often associated with English language instruction, its primary focus is on the learner. This is why it is presented throughout this thesis, not merely as a framework for teaching but as an approach that integrates culture and communication. Through their teaching, TESOL instructors can greatly impact students' engagement and

linguistic development (Alhajiri & Alshuraiaan, 2023). To foster engaging and meaningful learning experiences, educators must adopt a variety of innovative teaching methods and strategies (Al-Seghayer, 2017). The current study suggests that since multiple identities and the ways in which learners perceive language learning instruction have been considered (see [Section 3.2.2.](#)), it is equally important to acknowledge their investment in the learning process and the socio-cultural backgrounds that shape their identities and experiences. Each learner comes from a unique social and cultural context, which informs their perspectives, and engagement with language learning in distinct ways.

In Kuwait, English plays an essential role in the higher education system (see [Chapter 2.](#)) and a high level of English proficiency is important for achieving academic success and accessing future career prospects. Nevertheless, English language learners may encounter difficulties due to cultural and linguistic factors, including the dominant role of Arabic as the primary language and cultural standards (Alshuraiaan & Almfleh, 2023). Alshuraiaan and Almfleh advocated for the integration of authentic materials in English education. They found that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) encouraged learners to engage in real-life interactions, focusing on both fluency and accuracy through meaningful authentic materials in classroom communication. While this study promoted the development of student-centered classrooms, it did not explore students' perspectives on culturally relevant resources or the rationale behind their selections. Accordingly, the study called for future research to cultivate a more efficient and culturally relevant English language curriculum in Kuwait that accommodates the varied perceptions of its learners (Alshuraiaan & Almfleh, 2023).

When considering a TESOL setting, teachers must understand the social context of education and the learners to have a better teaching and learning experience (Shin, 2017). Ethnic identity for example, is defined as a concept that incorporates behaviours, beliefs, values, and norms that define an individual as part of a specific ethnic group (Shin, 2017). It would be useful to explore how these aspects of ethnic identity manifest among female learners within Kuwait's unique social structure and examining these dimensions within a different perspective beyond national or linguistic divides. As previously discussed, (see [Section 3.2.](#)), this study does not adhere to a single definition or fixed category of identity. Instead, it acknowledges identity as

multiple, dynamic, and context-dependent, emerging in different forms at different times and even simultaneously, depending on the situation and context.

In the distinct setting of Kuwait, English teaching by local language instructors and foreign instructors (whether Arabs or native speakers of English) provides a chance for a more detailed examination of this intricate interaction. Notably, the majority of English language instructors at Kuwait University are Kuwaitis, outnumbering their expatriate counterparts, which adds a unique dimension to the educational process. This raises important questions about how instructors' linguistic and cultural backgrounds influence their teaching approaches and, in turn, impact students' language learning experiences. In the case of Kuwaiti language instructors, both learners and instructors live in the same society, facilitating an examination of how, if any, local socio-ecological factors within the same society may influence learners' experiences and interactions with their language instructors.

According to Norton, a broad spectrum of identity can be beneficial to both the learner and the language instructor and is an area of focus that warrants attention from both (Al-Hoorie & MacIntyre, 2019). Moreover, Norton's concept of imagined identities ([see Section 3.2.](#)), which reflects the hopes and dreams of a learner's future, is thought to impact the learner's involvement in language acquisition (Al-Hoorie & MacIntyre, 2019). This study, therefore, aims to explore the impact of language instructors, whether Kuwaiti or non-Kuwaiti, from the learners' perspective rather than the instructors', with a particular focus on how these experiences shape language learning within the learners' socio-ecological contexts.

In the context of the current study, Kuwaiti female learners hold a unique position in the TESOL setting. Female learners at Kuwait University (College of Education), like other undergraduate students, have a range of experiences shaped by a complex interplay of cultural norms, family expectations, and institutional regulations. Being part of Kuwaiti society, these learners' academic performance in a TESOL setting (e.g., classroom) is influenced by wider societal perspectives, which further shape their language learning outcomes. At Kuwait University, particularly within the College of Education, most students, including those majoring in English, are preparing for careers in teaching. Examining their perceptions and attitudes toward language learning is critical, as their beliefs and practices will shape the

language learning experiences of future generations. From a socio-ecological perspective (see [Chapter 4](#)), understanding how these students' cultural, societal, and educational contexts influence their approaches to language learning can offer valuable insights into the interconnected factors that affect teaching and learning outcomes.

In the field of TESOL education, cultural and linguistic factors significantly impact language learning experiences and classroom dynamics, particularly within the Kuwaiti context (Alshuraiaan et al., 2023). A study by R'boul (2020) emphasised the influence of cultural norms and values on individuals' beliefs and behaviours, which, in turn, affect their experiences in learning a language. This could contribute to our understanding by providing theoretical frameworks or empirical evidence that support or explain how cultural norms, values, and communication styles affect language learning experiences within a TESOL context at higher education institutions such as Kuwait University.

Moreover, the cultural expectations, backgrounds, and values in Kuwait have a notable impact on the learning of English. For example, traditional gender roles and social norms, as discussed by Troudi et al. (2009), can affect language practice and interaction between male and female students. Expectations regarding gender segregation and modesty may limit opportunities for students to engage with each other linguistically. These cultural factors proved to shape classroom dynamics and influence student participation in producing language. Troudi et al. (2009) also highlighted the importance of considering cultural differences when interpreting findings and suggested further research to explore these influences in greater depth. However, the study focused on language instructors rather than students, indicating the significance of the current study, which prioritises students' perspectives. A comprehensive exploration of the language learning experience from students' perspectives may produce different conclusions. To conduct a fair gender-based study, it is imperative to investigate male and female learners in separate studies, facilitating a greater comprehension of their individual experiences and perspectives and allowing for significant comparisons to provide ideal pedagogical implications.

At both the individual and societal levels in Kuwait, there is a general acknowledgment of favourable attitudes toward the acquisition of the English language. English is highly regarded as an essential tool for enhancing future professional opportunities (Hayat & AlBader, 2022). For example, to enhance students' motivation and create a positive language learning experience, English language instructors could include culturally relevant content (see Section 3.5.1) and establish a supportive classroom environment (Alshuraiaan et al., 2023). This approach addresses the cultural backgrounds and interests of students, making the learning process more engaging and meaningful.

Although previous studies have examined sociocultural factors affecting language acquisition in diverse global settings (e.g., Cortés Ospina et al., 2024; Lim, 2009), there is insufficient recognition of how extensive socio-ecological systems spanning familial and classroom dynamics to societal influences affect the experiences of female learners in Kuwait. This gap is especially noteworthy when considering that Kuwaiti classrooms are situated at the intersection of traditional values and contemporary educational developments aimed at nurturing global competencies.

3.4.1. Identity in TESOL Settings

Recognising the impact of identity in TESOL settings is essential for understanding how sociocultural elements influence language learning experiences. The TESOL setting is a great place for discussing multiple identities from a sociocultural perspective (Kramsch, 1993). The relationship between cultural norms, educational practices, and individual identity in Kuwait has a considerable impact on how female learners participate in English language education. This section explores the complex dynamics of identity development and the factors that shape and reshape learners' identities within TESOL settings.

Exploring factors such as language learners' interactions with instructors and the use of the first language (L1) in teaching English (L2) can provide valuable insights into the unique challenges and opportunities faced by students in Kuwaiti TESOL settings. Although there is an increasing amount of research on identity in language learning, most of the current literature generally concentrates on Western contexts or broader GCC countries (e.g., Al-Issa, 2022; Duff, 2012; Norton, 2013b; Vaishnav, 2024), and that include thoroughly exploring

Kuwait's specific cultural and educational environments. Studies conducted by Norton and McKinney, (2011) and Block (2007) have emphasised the significance of identity in the process of language acquisition (Block, 2007; Norton & McKinney, 2011). In the TESOL classroom setting, a language instructor's ability to grasp the social context of learning environments is as essential as their knowledge of the subject matter and pedagogical skills. Having established the importance of identity in TESOL settings, the focus now turns to teacher-student interactions, a widely discussed topic (e.g., Guan et al., 2025; Al-Munawwarah, 2021), yet in the current study, it is examined through the lens of the language learner. Understanding how learners perceive and engage in these interactions is essential to uncovering how their identities are negotiated and shaped within the Kuwaiti TESOL setting.

3.4.1.1. Learners' Experiences in Teacher-Student Interaction

Teacher-student interactions are recognised as a core element within language learning settings (Adams & Oliver, 2019). English Language Learners (ELLs) risk academic underperformance (Shin, 2017) but shifting classroom power dynamics can help. For example, Levine (2020) highlighted the importance of teacher-student collaboration, moving away from traditional teacher authority. This shift reshapes learner identities in TESOL, making students active participants rather than passive recipients. As mentioned before, identity, capital and ideology are main fundamentals in language learner's investment (see [Section 3.2.2.](#)). In Kuwait, where cultural norms play a role in engagement, this approach impact linguistic confidence and cultural agency, influencing whether learners embrace or withdraw from language learning. According to Gan and Yang (2018), it is vital to understand the dynamics of teacher-student interactions in TESOL settings to develop effective teaching practices and maximise language learning outcomes. Research indicates that teachers have a substantial influence on student learning and development (Sanders & Rivers, 1996, as cited in Hofkents et al., 2023). What remains to be explored is how, and to what extent, this influence is perceived and acknowledged by language instructors themselves, and how aware they are of the broader sociocultural dimensions shaping their learners' learning experience.

Studies found that children benefit academically, socially, and behaviourally when teachers improve their skills through training and coaching on teacher-student interactions (Pianta et

al., 2021). It would be useful to explore whether the same applies to undergraduate language learners by exploring their perspectives on the role of their language instructor. Recent studies have highlighted significant interest in teacher-student interactions within the field of language learning within universities in Kuwait (Alshuraiaan, 2023). One of the study's key findings revealed that cultural factors, classroom dynamics, and instructional practices significantly shape teacher-student interaction quality and effectiveness (Alshuraiaan, 2023). This insight addresses important gaps in our understanding of TESOL education, specifically within the Kuwaiti context. However, it is important to consider whether language learners perceive and internalise this influence. Despite the significance of teacher-student interaction, there is limited research examining its impact within TESOL settings at Kuwait University (Alshuraiaan, 2023), and specifically from a sociocultural perspective. While teacher-student interaction plays a crucial role in language learning, it is only one of many factors influencing educational outcomes in Kuwaiti universities.

According to Pedler et al. (2020), student engagement in the classroom consists of three interrelated dimensions: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. Behavioural engagement refers to students' active participation, including their attendance, involvement in learning tasks, and engagement in school-related activities beyond regular lessons, such as projects or group work. Emotional engagement focuses on their feelings and attitudes towards learning, encompassing emotions such as interest, enjoyment, frustration, or anxiety, which influence motivation. Cognitive engagement reflects the depth of their investment, including their ability to self-regulate, apply learning strategies, and embrace challenges (Pedler et al., 2020). As these dimensions are interconnected, teachers play a crucial role in fostering engagement across all areas, highlighting the importance of effective teaching (Pedler et al., 2020). It also highlights the importance of cultural awareness in order to make the best out of the three interrelated dimensions between the teacher and students.

Building on this, the quality of teacher-student interaction emerges as a central mechanism through which these dimensions of engagement are activated and sustained, particularly within culturally diverse settings. Alshuraiaan (2023), using sociocultural theory (SCT), explored teacher-student interactions in the language classrooms at Kuwait University through

qualitative methods. The study examined how these interactions shape language learning, engagement, and motivation, linking them to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the role of scaffolding. ZPD represents the gap between what learners can achieve alone and with expert guidance (Alshuraiaan, 2023). The study analysed whole-class, small-group, and one-on-one interactions, highlighting the value of dialogue, feedback, and technology in learning. Challenges included large class sizes, language barriers, and limited individual attention. Findings stress the need for culturally responsive TESOL strategies that enhance engagement and proficiency. However, some scholars argue that ZPD is often oversimplified, reducing it to short-term support rather than its broader sociocultural role (Lantolf et al., 2014). This may explain why Alshuraiaan (2023) calls for further research to explore its deeper implications in teacher-student interactions. In the unique cultural context of Kuwaiti universities, including students' perspectives and experiences, remains underexplored in research on teacher-student interaction in TESOL setting (Alshuraiaan, 2023) which can challenge language instructors in choosing the right teaching practices. Filling this gap can provide meaningful insights into teaching practices that are better suited to the region's specific educational and cultural requirements. Bridging this gap necessitates prioritising student perspectives, as valuable insights into effective pedagogical methods can only be obtained by comprehending how learners perceive and interpret these interactions.

Research indicate that teachers frequently have difficulties in aligning their theoretical understanding of pedagogy with their practical classroom implementations, and that the effective interaction strategies were often absent from their teaching methods (Goldspink et al., 2008). This disconnect may stem from the assumption of what learners might need from an English learning classroom, rather than actively engaging with students' perspectives and designing strategies that are informed by their lived experiences and specific learning contexts. Gan and Yang (2018) contend that comprehending the dynamics of teacher-student interaction in TESOL setting is crucial for developing effective teaching methods and enhancing language learning results. Teacher-student interactions come in different shapes, such as student-led instruction, group discussions, one-on-one interactions, and feedback (Alshuraiaan, 2023), demonstrating that interaction in the classroom is not solely directed by the teacher, but involves mutual engagement between both teachers and learners.

One of the key moments of interaction in the classroom occurs when a teacher provides feedback to a student. Feedback involves information from a teacher, peer, parent, personal reflection, or experience that addresses specific aspects of a learner's performance or understanding (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In TESOL settings, feedback is not only a common instructional practice but also a culturally embedded form of teacher-student interaction. The way feedback is delivered and interpreted can vary depending on cultural norms, shaping students' engagement and response to learning. Effective teacher-student interaction, particularly in feedback exchanges, plays a crucial role in language development, influencing both motivation and the learning process (Wei et al., 2023). Understanding the influence of culture is essential for fostering effective and inclusive teacher-student interactions. The language and style of feedback play a crucial role, as they can either support or obstruct students' ability to engage with and apply corrections, thereby shaping their overall learning experience (Alshuraiaan, 2023). The topic of teacher-student interaction in Kuwait has predominantly been explored in the context of schools and young children (e.g., Alghasab et al., 2019). However, it is both valuable and essential to extend this investigation to the university level to determine whether these findings remain applicable to older learners such as undergraduates, particularly in the domain of language learning and in specific region such as the GCC countries and more specifically, in Kuwait and its sociocultural background.

In English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, how teachers use the target language is also considered important and part of the teacher-student interaction (see [Section 3.4.1.1](#)). Teachers in these settings often switch between the target language and the students' first language, especially when they share a common native language. It is claimed that using the first language can help lower students' anxiety and create a more supportive learning environment (Bruen & Kelly, 2017). However, while most of existing research tends to focus on teachers' practices and intentions, this study seeks to address that gap by exploring these interactions from the learner's perspective, focusing through narratives on how students experience, interpret these influences in the Kuwaiti TESOL context from their viewpoints. More on this notion will be explained in the subsequent section.

3.4.1.2. *The Use of L1 in Shaping TESOL Outcomes*

Each teacher has their own unique approach to delivering classroom materials, yet learners' reactions often remain unpredictable. A recent study found that adaptive teaching requires not only knowledge of instructional strategies but also the ability to diagnose and respond to diverse student needs within complex classroom discourse (Hardy et al., 2022). This unpredictability makes it challenging for dedicated teachers to find ways to ensure that language learners gain the most benefit from their classroom experience. One of the strategies used in a TESOL setting is the use of L1 to teach L2. There has been great amount of research that compared L1 use by both teachers and students (e.g., Hall & Cook, 2014; Leoanak & Amalo, 2018; Littlewood & Yu, 2011) and has provided important insights from both teachers and learners' perspectives, but the area still needs a further exploration. In addition, previous studies believed that the use of L1 to teach L2 can be beneficial in many ways such as giving instructions for grammatical rules, comprehension checks, or explaining vocabulary (e.g., Atkinson, 1993; Auerbach, 1993; Cook, 2016).

Research shows that in many EFL classrooms, teachers spend over 40% of their speaking time using the learners' first language (L1) (Rabbidge, 2014). In the study conducted in a South Korean elementary school, Rabbidge explored the Korean English teachers' classroom language use and found that teachers prioritised the use of L1 as a source of motivation to their learners, regardless of the Korean Ministry of Education instruction to apply the Teach English through English (TETE) approach. The study called for additional studies to explore techniques that teachers can use to maintain student motivation while teaching exclusively in English. It also suggested investigating the potential need for an alternative to the TETE policy, which might better balance language exposure and student engagement (Rabbidge, 2014).

This tension between policy and practice in classroom language use is not unique to South Korea. A study conducted in Indonesia similarly found that one of the primary challenges for teachers, regardless of their level of experience, is determining how to effectively approach the use of learners' first language (L1) in the second language (L2) classroom (Werang & Harrington, 2022). Werang and Harrington (2022) observed that previous research hasn't addressed the role of L1 as a classroom support tool in enough detail. In their study, they focused on student teachers in Indonesia, examining how they used Bahasa Indonesia (L1 in

Indonesia) while teaching English (L2). Although many considered the use of Bahasa Indonesia in English classrooms to be insufficient, they claimed that it was frequently impossible to avoid, leading to mixed opinions about its role. The study concluded that more attention is needed to understand how switching between English (L2) and Bahasa Indonesia (L1) impacts classroom interactions and teaching strategies.

From a theoretical base, Nanda et al. (2024) adopted the Sociocultural Theory (SCT), and more specifically, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as their framework (for definition, [see Section 3.2.](#)), which posits that learners acquire knowledge more effectively when assisted by knowledgeable persons, such as their instructors. In the study, scaffolding, as a concept of the SCT, was employed by using L1 to promote more effective L2 learning for students, believing that the teachers' use of L1 is underrepresented in the literature. The study findings categorised the use of L1 in three areas: teaching and learning, vocabulary and grammar, and classroom instruction. The findings revealed three main views among teachers using L1 in their L2 classrooms. The first view was named the virtual position, in which teachers believe the L1 is unnecessary because when students are exposed to English-only classrooms, it helps them practice and improve the language naturally. The second view was the maximal position, which negates the first by arguing that an extensive use of L1 can support low proficiency learners who might have challenges learning the English language. The optimal position was the third view which suggests that the L1 use should be kept to the minimum, based on the learners' needs, the teacher and learner's proficiency, and the nature of the performed task (Nanda et al., 2024). The study concluded by highlighting the L2 teachers' awareness in using L1 is crucial for facilitating students' language learning process. While the study offers valuable insights, it reflects only the teachers' perspectives; understanding how learners themselves perceive and experience the use of L1 would offer a more balanced and informative view.

Beyond the Sociocultural Theory, other research has highlighted the crucial role of social dynamics in educational settings (Ferguson, 2003). It stated that teachers often use L1 not only for instructional purposes but also as a tool for social interaction, fostering a sense of connection and inclusivity in the classroom (Ferguson, 2003). Ferguson (2003) further argued that the classroom functions as both a space for formal education and a social environment

where educators and students actively negotiate relationships and identities. This is particularly relevant in the Kuwaiti context, where shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds between teachers and students can foster stronger connections and support learners' engagement and confidence, both of which emerged as key factors in the present study. These interactions contributed to a supportive learning atmosphere, shaping students' engagement, confidence, and overall language development.

In Kuwait, Alghasab (2017) explored the use of Arabic (L1) in Kuwaiti EFL classrooms, specifically in girls' primary schools, and found that L1 use was largely unplanned and unintentional. Rather than being employed for instructional purposes, L1 was mainly used to build social relationships and foster interaction with learners, claiming that it offers motivation and emotional support. The study indicated that only using the foreign language (L2) in schools may foster a sense of detachment between teachers and students, while a common language builds solidarity and enhances relationships (Alghasab, 2017). Alghasab emphasised the importance of professional development programs to better equip teachers for creating effective learning environments. The study also advocated for an "interactive decision-making" approach, where teachers respond immediately to specific tasks that require the use of L1. Additionally, the research concluded with a call for future studies to shift focus toward understanding students' perspectives on L1 use in classrooms, rather than solely examining teachers' viewpoints (Alghasab, 2017), a main goal for the current study.

With this study in mind, the need to extend Alghasab's findings to university students becomes evident. While much attention has been given to the use of L1 in school settings, and focusing more on teachers' viewpoints, university students' viewpoints also require consideration, as their language learning journeys are more complex. By the time they are undergraduates, these students bring a diverse range of experiences with English, shaped by years of prior exposure and their varying socio-ecological backgrounds. Given that existing research on the use of L1 in learning and teaching L2, it would be valuable to explore students' perspectives on being taught by English-speaking instructors and how this influences their sense of belonging in the TESOL setting. For example, Alghamdi (2014) examined how expatriate teachers in Saudi Arabia's higher education system used culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) (see [Section 3.5.1.](#)) and faced challenges with their students. These findings

collectively illustrate that the use of L1 in language classrooms is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, involving both instructional and social dimensions. Not all language learners' experiences are the same. Some students may have been positively influenced by effective instruction and supportive environments of using L1 in L2 classroom, while others may have faced challenges that left them with negative perspectives. For example, Alotaibi et al.'s (2014) study showed that during the 2012-2013 academic year, 78.87% of school graduates in Kuwait performed poorly on the English Language Test (ELT). Alotaibi et al.'s (2014) justified that the low proficiency may be why EFL instructors in Kuwaiti colleges often rely on Arabic (L1) when teaching English (L2). Therefore, it would be useful to explore the students' perspectives on the English-only classrooms and their influence of language learning.

Alrabah et al. (2015) conducted a study at Kuwaiti colleges, interviewing 60 English language instructors from the language centre of the college. Data from five colleges revealed that L1 was used for classroom management and influenced by sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic factors. Despite this, some teachers held negative attitudes toward L1 use, highlighting a gap between practice and perception. The study emphasised the need for better teacher training on L1 integration and suggested further research on teachers' perspectives to understand the implications of L1 use in EFL classrooms. In a recent study on the same topic, Alazemi et al. (2021) explored the use of L1 in TESOL setting in the Public Authority for Applied Education and Teaching (PAAET), one of the prominent institutions, along with Kuwait University, shaping higher education in Kuwait. Alazemi et al. (2021) investigated Kuwaiti students' perspectives on using L1 in L2 classrooms at PAAET colleges. The study revealed widespread approval of L1 use for enhancing comprehensibility, academic outcomes, and addressing psychological barriers to learning. This study emphasised student perspectives, introducing a novel aspect to the debate, in contrast to previous research in Kuwait that primarily concentrated on teachers and policymakers. It also highlighted the need for balanced L1 inclusion, teacher training programs, and further research to explore the reasons for L1 use and its impact on learning outcomes. Overall, L1 was found to facilitate understanding and support the learning process.

Emerging evidence indicates that the absence of a shared first language (L1) in multilingual classrooms presents both challenges and opportunities (Illman & Pietilä, 2018). This

variability suggests that there are no definitive conclusions, as outcomes may differ depending on the context and students' identities, their socio-ecological backgrounds, and their investment in the TESOL classroom. Achieving a clear understanding of this dynamic requires the use of appropriate data collection tools for better analysis. These tools should include methods for eliciting students' perspectives on the use of L1 by capturing their lived experiences directly based on their socio-ecological backgrounds and link them to their perspectives. Such approach facilitates a deeper exploration of how students navigate these linguistic contexts, how they construct their identities, and how they envision their future selves (see [Section 3.2](#)). These factors, in turn, offer critical insights into their perceptions of and responses to teacher interactions. Understanding how these varied experiences impact the students' language learning needs and perceptions of L1 use is also crucial for developing inclusive and effective pedagogical practices at the university level, such as the courses provided by the ELU, which are mandatory regardless of the student's major (see [Section 2.4.1.2](#)). Most studies, however, concentrate on instructors' teaching strategies, often assessing outcomes from students without thoroughly investigating their perspectives.

A central focus in a recent study on the role of English in higher education in Kuwait Wright (2024), used translanguageing as a lens to examine how language ideologies shaped socio-political structures and influenced students' opportunities for participation. Translanguageing, defined as the fluid use of multiple languages within a single linguistic repertoire to enhance knowledge construction and maximise learning potential (García & Wei, 2014). While sharing some common aims with the current study, the study advocated for a more globalised approach to English Language Teaching (ELT), emphasising the integration of local knowledge to create a more inclusive and humanising educational experience (Wright, 2024).

Building on this perspective, other scholars have also recognised the empowering role of incorporating learners' L1 languages in the classroom. Cox and Philips (2022) demonstrated that incorporating learners' native language in the classroom can be highly empowering. Their study found that when instructors integrated the L1 alongside the L2, students felt more confident, welcomed, and independent. This multilingual approach helped alleviate traditional power imbalances, enabling learners to develop more positive, empowering identities. These findings support the argument for using L1 in L2 classrooms to foster greater learner

engagement and investment in language acquisition. Norton (2013) argued that traditional teacher–student power dynamics can lead to subordinate student identities, in other words less powerful, thereby undermining learners’ investment in language learning. Understanding how teachers integrate students’ first languages into the educational process can provide significant insights into effective language instruction methods. However, in the Kuwaiti context, where English is taught as a foreign language within complex socio-cultural dynamics, these insights must be complemented by a deeper understanding of learners’ language acquisition processes and their investment in learning.

Considering the role of identity and investment in language learning, it becomes evident that learners’ experiences, shaped by intersecting identities and socio-ecological systems, can significantly influence their attitudes towards language acquisition, their level of engagement in classroom interactions, and their overall proficiency. Disregarding these factors in societies such as the GCC countries, where a homogeneous learning environment might be assumed, risks promoting a uniform approach that fails to recognise the diverse needs, backgrounds, and perspectives of students. A learner-centred approach is crucial in TESOL, particularly in settings such as the English Language Unit (ELU) at Kuwait University, where Arabic (L1) plays a role in shaping identities, communication, social expectations, and learning experiences. By integrating insights from learners’ lived experiences, language instructors can make informed pedagogical decisions that enhance student engagement, and overall learning outcomes. This approach moves beyond viewing language instruction as a mere transmission of knowledge, instead, it positions the TESOL setting as an interactive and social space where students feel supported in their language acquisition journey.

Research on the use of L1 in Kuwaiti TESOL setting highlights its unique role in English language teaching. Different studies have provided insights into many aspects that impact the process of language acquisition and educational methods in Kuwait. For instance, Alrabah et al. (2015) examined the use of learners’ first language (L1) (Arabic) by English teachers in college classrooms in Kuwait. The study found that English teachers in Kuwait used Arabic (L1) as a teaching tool and for classroom management, though to varying degrees. Their use of L1 was influenced by affective, sociolinguistic, and psycholinguistic factors, highlighting its role beyond pedagogy in supporting emotional, social, and cognitive processes (Alrabah et al.,

2015). However, despite its practical benefits, teachers generally held negative attitudes towards L1 use, revealing a contradiction between beliefs and classroom practices (Alrabab et al., 2015). This tension between the practical use of L1 and teachers' attitudes towards it draws attention to the emotional dimension of language learning, making it important to consider how other common factors in the TESOL setting, such as foreign language anxiety, shape learners' classroom experiences and outcomes.

3.4.2. Foreign Language Anxiety

While teacher-student interaction plays a crucial role in shaping the language learning experience, especially in the classroom, it is equally important to consider the emotional factors that influence language learners' engagement. One such factor is Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), which can significantly affect learners' participation, confidence, and overall progress in TESOL setting. Among the several definitions of anxiety in general, Webster's Dictionary defines anxiety as "*apprehensive uneasiness or nervousness usually over an impending or anticipated ill: a state of being anxious.*" Scovel (1978) stated that anxiety is a complex, unmeasurable entity influenced by multiple causes that are usually related to a particular place, object, or incident. According to Spielberger (1983), anxiety in general is the feeling that occurs if an individual faces an unpleasant experience and as a result ends up feeling uncomfortable and unstable and fears the exposition to a frustrated incident. Anxiety is categorised into two categories: The first, *state anxiety*, as described by Philip (1987), is tied to a specific time and place that is mostly temporarily, typically triggered by a sudden emotional incident. This type of anxiety subsides once the incident concludes. The second type, *trait anxiety*, as the name suggests, is more stable and closely linked to an individual's inherent personality traits (Xu & Xie, 2024). Both categories are considered subjective incidents experienced by the individual and represented into these two forms (Xu & Xie, 2024).

Expanding on this comprehension, Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) introduced the concept of *situation-specific anxiety*, a persistent form of anxiety tied to specific contexts. This type of anxiety refers to the apprehension experienced by English learners (ELs) when they are required to perform tasks in a language in which they lack proficiency. MacIntyre and Gardner (1993) also believed that this form of anxiety arises from the challenges associated with

acquiring a new language, distinguishing it from general anxiety. After narrowing the focus into anxiety in the context of foreign language learning, Horwitz et al. (1986) defined Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) as a type of anxiety related to self-perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and behaviours that emerge from the unique challenges experienced in foreign language classrooms.

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), initially presented by Horwitz et al., (1986), focuses on the type of anxiety encountered by students in language learning settings. It was then introduced as Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) when other researchers broadened the scope beyond the classroom context to understand anxiety related aspects of foreign language and learning. It is defined as a unique combination of self-perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and behaviours associated with language acquisition, stemming from the uniqueness of the foreign language learning experience (Horwitz et al., 1986). The language anxiety is marked by difficulties including fear of speaking, test anxiety, and concern from negative evaluation, all of which can hinder students' performance and advancement. FLA encompasses several key dimensions that impact learners' confidence and performance (Liang et al., 2024). *Communication apprehension* refers to the fear of speaking and interacting in a foreign language, often driven by concerns about making mistakes, feeling embarrassed, or being judged negatively. *Test anxiety* arises from the fear of poor performance in academic assessments, particularly language exams, though its classification as a core component of foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) remains debated. *Fear of negative evaluation* involves anxiety about being judged by teachers or peers, especially in classroom settings where students are required to speak or perform publicly (Liang et al., 2024). The foundational study on FLA (Horwitz, 1986) highlighted the significance of addressing Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) in educational contexts to promote a more supportive atmosphere and improve language acquisition which established the groundwork for comprehending FLCA and its influence on language learning experiences. Prior to this study, studies aimed to quantify the determinants of anxiety, frequently producing inconsistent findings without a definitive explanation for the cause of anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). Horwitz (1986) developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) in order to identify the anxious students. The findings indicated that the students' FLA was detectable, but with the reasons behind it unknown.

Even after many years of research, Horwitz and other researchers have continued examining the origins of FLA and have not yet identified a definitive cause. Scholars have presented differing perspectives on this issue. For example, MacIntyre (1995) proposed that anxiety may be a variable of individual differences. Also, a great number of researchers believed that FLA is a result of language learning disability (e.g., Sparks & Ganschow, 1993; Sparks et al., 2000). Horwitz argued that all anxiety originates from learning disabilities, as it is even present in successful language learners (Horwitz, 2000). Unlike earlier quantitative studies on FLA, Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) and Pavlenko (2005, 2013) challenged its narrow interpretation by highlighting its dynamic nature, which previous research had overlooked. This led to a shift towards qualitative approaches in FLA research.

Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) examined through interviews the correlation between perfectionism, a personality characteristic, and FLA. Personality traits like perfectionism frequently originate from fundamental beliefs. A perfectionist may possess an unrealistic belief that achieving perfection is necessary, which can increase anxiety in language learning (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). Their findings revealed a correlation between the two; nevertheless, the generalisability of their study was constrained by the small sample size of participants. They emphasised that each learner may possess distinctive reasons for experiencing FLA and recommended that subsequent studies should investigate the influence of personality factors more thoroughly.

A clear shift towards qualitative inquiry beyond the TESOL classroom is evident in Yan and Horwitz (2008). The research examined the factors affecting FLA by conducting interviews with 21 students. The study used Interrelationship Digraph Analysis (IDA) to examine data across multiple variables, including regional variations, test types, gender, class arrangements, instructor attributes, parental influence, and language aptitude. While students perceived these factors as indirect contributors to FLA, they still played a role in shaping anxiety levels. Notably, peer comparisons and learners' interest and motivation emerged as key influences on FLA, highlighting the complex interplay of personal, social, and educational dynamics in language learning (Yan & Horwitz, 2008). Yan and Horwitz assert that socio-cultural factors are significant anxiety triggers requiring further examination. Even though there

has been significant research, scholars have not achieved an agreement on a definitive and universal characterisation of this complex and diverse concept. Despite its significance as a psychological condition, a widespread and common definitions continue to be elusive (Marnani & Cuocci, 2022).

While numerous studies on FLA have related its causes to cognitive, pedagogical, and classroom-related strategies within TESOL settings (e.g., Ahmad Koka et al., 2020; Al-Saidat et al., 2023; Bruen & Kelly, 2017; Sahiouni, 2021), there is still a need for further exploration into the factors contributing to FLA to create less stressful and more supportive language learning environments (Marnani & Cuocci, 2022). Despite the valuable insights provided by these studies, a direct and broader sociocultural, familial, and socio-ecological influence shaping FLA remain underexplored. Elements such as peer dynamics, regional contexts, and familial roles show the interaction of diverse systems in shaping language learners' experiences.

3.4.2.1. FLA and the Ecological Systems Theory

With a focus on studies that examine FLA through a socio-ecological lens (See [Chapter 4](#)), this section explores a selection of relevant research. A study that focused on cultural characteristics and perceptions claimed that anxiety is a social phenomenon, suggesting that language learners experiencing FLA may exhibit variations across different regions and nations (Lim, 2009). Horwitz (2016) emphasised the influence of cultural variables on language learners' FLA levels, which differ across various cultures. For example, research has established that findings drawn from Western contexts, particularly North American studies, lack reliable application in non-Western cultural environments (Al-Saraj, 2014).

Linking the sociocultural perspective to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (see [Chapter 4](#)) offers an opportunity for comprehending how learners' language exposure is shaped by their sociocultural contexts, bearing in mind the cultural differences. The ecological approach asserts that personality traits are formed not in isolation but through interactions throughout diverse systems, including family, peers, and educational environments (see [Chapter 4](#)). These systems, therefore, influence learners' beliefs and attitudes towards

language acquisition, highlighting the necessity of incorporating socio-ecological aspects while analysing the correlation between personality traits and FLA. The ecosystems will be explained in detail in Chapter 4.

Despite the growing interest in FLA and the impact of the sociocultural variables, few studies have theoretically examined this issue, particularly through the application of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, with limited focus on the GCC region. For example, a study by Kasbi and Shirvan (2017) applied Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to investigate FLA in an Iranian EFL classroom, providing significant insights into the impact of ecological factors on student behaviour and language acquisition. However, their implementation of Bronfenbrenner's concept was limited to the classroom setting and did not encompass student's wider ecological surroundings. The study excluded the influence of external factors such as family, friends, or social beliefs at the micro- and meso-system levels on the students' language learning experiences and their anxiety. This exclusion leaves an opportunity for deeper research to acknowledge the interconnectedness of the language learner's background.

A contributing factor to FLA is the difference between the sociocultural background of a foreign language learner and that of the target language (Alnuzaili & Uddin, 2020). Bronfenbrenner's theory highlights the interconnected nature of ecological systems, indicating that individual behaviour cannot be comprehensively understood without analysing the interactions among different environmental levels (see [Chapter 4](#)). The study did not consider external effects, therefore missing an opportunity to offer a more comprehensive explanation of the interaction between ecological systems and their impact on language learning experiences and FLA. There is a growing recognition that cultural differences could impact FLA, yet research in this area remains underdeveloped (Alnuzaili & Uddin, 2020). To address this gap, the current study extends Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model (a developed version from the Ecological Systems Theory) beyond the classroom, exploring the broader socio-ecological factors that influence FLA in the Kuwaiti context.

Although comprehensive studies on FLA have been undertaken worldwide, investigations from the GCC countries, offer significant insights into the regional variations of FLA. Koka et al.,

(2019) investigated in a mixed method approach to examine the level of FLA among Saudi EFL learners and discovered that students exhibit significantly elevated levels of FLA. The study revealed high anxiety levels in reading, writing, and speaking, which hinder learners' academic performance. Koka et al. (2019) identified key anxiety triggers regarding language learning, including communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety, which were particularly prevalent, and discussed in previous research. Many students experienced feelings of inferiority when struggling to express themselves, further heighten their anxiety. While 32.1% reported neutral responses, anxiety remained widespread (Koka et al., 2019). The study proposed strategies to reduce anxiety and enhance learning outcomes, highlighting the need for further research to develop effective interventions for managing FLA in EFL settings. However, their research did not thoroughly investigate the fundamental causes of the issue. The authors asserted that their findings provide a modest yet significant contribution to the comprehensive understanding of FLA, facilitating future study to reveal deeper insights into its causes and effects.

Moreover, Moafa's (2024) quantitative study contributes more recent insights to the evolving research on FLA by analysing the influence of language learning preferences and determining test anxiety as the predominant contributor. The study revealed that 73.43% of individuals experienced varied degrees of anxiety while speaking in English, with 14.06% indicating high anxiety and 39.06% moderate anxiety (Moafa, 2024). Despite these findings, the study neglected to examine the fundamental causes of FLA, resulting in a significant gap in comprehending other factors such as the socio-ecological factors that influence learners' experiences. This underscores the necessity for more qualitative approach to investigate the varied and intricate factors affecting FLA, establishing a basis for more thorough ways to manage this ongoing problem.

In a recent systematic review, findings from various researchers were included to explore the causes and effects of FLA (Naser Oteir & Nijr Al-Otaibi, 2019). The literature identifies several contributing factors, including learners' beliefs about language learning, and the previously mentioned factors in the FLA research. These factors are categorised into three primary sources: the learner, the educator, and instructional practices. In highlighting the significant effects of FLA on students, the study revealed that anxiety often leads to reduced motivation,

decreased interest in learning, reluctance to communicate with peers, and, in some cases, course withdrawal. Additionally, teacher behaviours, classroom procedures, and the broader learning atmosphere were also previously cited as significant contributors (Naser Oteir & Nijr Al-Otaibi, 2019).

Nonetheless, merely recognising these issues is inadequate. For example, learners' attitudes regarding language acquisition may stem from identity development, as well as cultural beliefs and personal experiences that were not examined in the study. Examining FLA in the TESOL classroom context necessitates an investigation into the factors within learners' socio-ecological backgrounds that contribute to negative experiences. Explanations remain limited without comprehending fundamental issues such as social dynamics and cultural expectations. In addition to that, it is crucial to examine FLA through the lens of investment (see [Section 3.2](#)). Anxiety in language learning is not merely a reflection of lower motivation but rather a consequence of the complex interplay between learners' identities, perceived power relations, and the value they assign to language use. High levels of anxiety can signal a reluctance to invest in language learning due to social exclusion, or identity conflict. Similarly, avoiding peer communication is not simply a matter of preference but may stem from deeper socio-cultural influences, such as the tensions between individualism and collectivism in language learning (see [Section 3.5.3](#)).

Having traced the evolution of research on FLA from early studies to the most recent findings, a clear pattern emerges. Researchers increasingly emphasise the need to consider cultural and societal perspectives, explore learners' identities, and adopt more qualitative approaches to deepen understanding. This growing shift highlights the importance of the current study, which integrates all these elements by examining language learning through a socio-ecological lens, capturing the interplay between the language learners and the wider society they live in. This perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of how external influences shape language learning experiences, setting the stage for the following discussion on socio-ecological perspectives in language learning.

3.5. Socio-ecological Perspectives on Language Learning

As our investigation has progressed through the multifaceted identities of language learners, the foundational influence of household environments, and the cultural complexities inherent in TESOL contexts, we now transition to the socio-ecological perspectives, where the focus is on sociocultural aspects that further enhances our understanding of the language learning process. Language learning perspectives reflect influences from society, culture, technology, beliefs, and even religion. The range of factors is broad, making it impractical to address them all in detail. This section examines various social factors that shape language learning, recognising that these are only a few among many interconnected influences. It explores how cultural relevance affects language learning, the role of technology in facilitating intercultural communication, and the impact of collectivism and individualism in TESOL setting. These areas offer valuable insights into the broader relationship between socio-ecological contexts and language learning experiences.

3.5.1. Culturally Relevant Language Learning

Culturally relevant language learning can play a key role in boosting learner engagement in language education. Scholars argue that incorporating cultural content into language teaching helps learners develop not only their language skills but also their ability to navigate and understand different cultures (e.g., Byram, 2020; Kramsch, 1993). The term culturally relevant pedagogy refers to the theoretical framework of culturally relevant teaching, while culturally relevant teaching describes its practical application (Milner, 2011). This approach enriches the learning experience by making it more meaningful and connected to real-world contexts. Kramsch argues that engaging learners with culturally meaningful materials connects them more deeply to the language, aligning with the socio-ecological perspective that learners' cultural identities significantly influence their investment in language learning. In addition, Byram's (2020) framework for intercultural communicative competence highlights the importance of integrating cultural understanding into language teaching, helping learners develop a deeper awareness and critical perspective on culture. Byram (2020) first introduced intercultural competence, defining it as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural boundaries. Byram believes that foreign language teaching (FLT)

is distinctive as it centres on the experience of "*otherness*," necessitating learners to interact whether they are familiar with the other language or not (2020). Therefore, academic instruction should remain closely connected to students' cultural experiences by integrating community cultural aspects into classroom learning (Barnhardt & Oscar Kawagley, 2005).

Culturally relevant language learning is a multifaceted concept that can be approached and discussed from various perspectives, often with different terminologies. One such perspective developed by Ladson-Billings (1995), is culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). The CRP model has, over the last three decades been shaped by the inclusion of Culturally Relevant Teaching CRT principles, which has resulted in five themes. One of these themes was identity and achievement, alongside equity and excellence, developmental appropriateness, teaching the whole child, and student-teacher relationships (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Together, these themes provided a framework for understanding CRP in context (Hernandez, 2022). In fact, pedagogical strategies that incorporate students' identities in the classroom are implemented through the CRP framework (Hernandez, 2022). Recent studies build on the foundational theories by exploring the practical applications of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) in diverse learning contexts.

Milner (2011) employed the terms culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and culturally relevant teaching (CRT) interchangeably, reflecting the multifaceted nature of this perspective, which can be conceptualised and expressed through various terminologies. This interchangeable use underscores the close relationship between the theoretical framework and its practical application, highlighting the dynamic and adaptable nature of this approach being that culturally relevant language learning is a multifaceted discipline. CRP involves three key aspects of teacher-student interaction: fostering social competence, achieving academic success, and developing critical awareness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). CRP engages both students and educators, however, if educators are unaware of CRP, they may neglect their students' academic requirements, hindering their capacity to offer essential support and realise their full potential (Yuan, 2018). In the context of Kuwaiti TESOL classrooms, where cultural and linguistic diversity intersects with traditional norms, the principles of CRP, or any other culturally relevant concept, seems to offer valuable insights into how language

educators can better understand and support learners' identities, needs, and engagement with English.

An analytical study examined the cultural aspects of English language learning, using theoretical frameworks and existing research to explore how culture shapes language acquisition and teaching methods (Suryavanshi, 2020). The study concluded by highlighting the vital role of culture in English language learning, emphasising that understanding cultural contexts enhances communication, learning styles, and teaching practices. It underscored the importance of intercultural competence and integrating cultural content into teaching to make learning more engaging and effective. Culturally informed language learning not only improves proficiency but also prepares learners for global interconnectedness, offering social, economic, and professional advantages (Suryavanshi, 2020). A recent study, Hernandez (2022) also highlighted the benefits of CRP in diverse schools in the United States, focusing on academic achievement, cultural competence, and social justice. The study explored teachers' perceptions of CRP through interviews with 20 in-service teachers across eight states. Key themes included teachers' understanding of CRP and classroom environments, as well as the need for school and district support, resources, and training. The findings suggest that CRP can help reduce achievement gaps among English Language Learners (ELLs), low-income students, and racial and ethnic minorities by connecting classroom learning to students' lived experiences (Hernandez, 2022). However, the study had limitations, such as participant availability, small sample size, and challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study encouraged future research to focus on improving pre-service teacher training in CRP and exploring its impact on student outcomes.

Turning to studies that are more relevant to the GCC countries, Alghamdi (2014) examined how expatriate teachers in Saudi Arabia's higher education system used culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). The study found that while many teachers recognised the importance of adapting their teaching to fit students' cultural contexts, they faced challenges such as limited understanding of the country's and the students' local norms, along with the lack of institutional support and the insufficient training (Hamdan Alghamdi, 2014). The study highlighted the need for professional development to help teachers apply CRP in diverse classrooms. Although focused on Saudi Arabia, the study provides useful insights for other

GCC countries, including Kuwait, which shares some similar cultural and educational contexts. The study highlights an important and region-specific issue, which is the expatriate teachers' struggle to understand their students' cultural backgrounds. In contrast, Western studies tend to focus on the challenges faced by learners such as migrants or refugees (e.g., Alharbi, 2024; Andrews, 2010; Barkhuizen & De Klerk, 2006; Hignett & Barkhuizen, 2024; Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2003) as they adapt to the culture of the foreign country or native-speaking teachers.

Another study from Saudi Arabia highlighted a critical issue in the Arabian GCC countries, where native English-speaking teachers are frequently recruited to teach English but may lack awareness of Arab students' cultural contexts (Habli, 2015). This research examined the importance of culturally responsive teachers who understand their students' cultural backgrounds and integrate this understanding into the curriculum to foster a supportive and inclusive learning community (Habli, 2015). In other words, this means to communicate effectively and use students' cultural contexts to design instructional strategies, ensuring that teaching practices are relevant and meaningful to learners' experiences and identifying the characteristics that enable them to positively influence the development of English literacy skills among Arab students (Habli, 2015). The study emphasised the need for teachers to have cultural awareness skills and underscored their impact on student outcomes. The study can serve as a foundation for further research in the Middle East and the Gulf context, underscoring a unique issue in the region.

Recent research on TESOL practices in Kuwait has examined strategies that integrate students' cultural contexts to enhance English language learning. Given the limited number of studies investigating the cultural perspective in language learning, particularly at Kuwait University, Alshuraaian et al. (2023) represents one of the closest and most recent efforts to address this gap. The study highlights the importance of aligning teaching methods with students' cultural identities and demonstrates how culturally responsive approaches can increase engagement and meet the specific needs of learners in Kuwait. It also focused on the importance of integrating authentic materials, adopting learner-centred approaches, and investing in professional development to enhance English language education in Kuwait, with implications for curriculum design, teacher training, and policymaking. The study suggested to

support teaching practices that align with Kuwaiti learners' cultural backgrounds, fostering inclusivity, autonomy, and targeted language support (Alshuraiaan et al., 2023).

Different research on culturally and linguistically responsive teaching highlights the importance of using students' cultural backgrounds as assets in language classrooms. Walker (2019) reviews multiple studies on culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and its implementation in education, emphasising its importance in fostering equity, critical thinking, and identity development. Walker (2019) examined four studies from the literature exploring how culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) supports social justice in education, enhances cultural awareness, and helps teachers address systemic inequalities. Although the review highlighted key aspects of CRP, its broad focus across multiple studies limited the depth of analysis and the ability to draw general conclusions (Walker, 2019). Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) plays a crucial role in education, making it essential to examine it from the students' perspective, as it can directly shapes their learning experiences and interactions with educators. Language learners are at the centre of this approach, while language instructors play a crucial role in designing and implementing effective teaching strategies that enhance engagement and optimise learning outcomes. Previous studies have predominantly focused on Western contexts, making it valuable to explore the application of CRP in the GCC countries. This is particularly relevant in a complex society such as Kuwait, often perceived as homogeneous, though linguistically and culturally diverse (Alshuraiaan, 2023).

Therefore, cultural aspects in language learning are presented in many forms, but they revolve around the interconnected and complex roles of the language instructor, the learner's cultural identity, within the broader societal and cultural context. Knowing that identities are multifaceted (see [Chapter 3](#)), these elements also help in shaping the learner's identity and investment in the language learning process. By recognising the culturally relevant language learning, we gain a deeper understanding of how culture influences language education and how it can be adapted to meet the needs of diverse learners even from the same society. This exploration shows the connection between culture, identity, and the socio-ecological factors that underpin successful language learning. Building on this understanding of the relationship between culture, identity, and socio-ecological influences, the next section turns to the role of

intercultural communication and technology, explaining how digital tools and cross-cultural interaction shape language learning in increasingly connected educational environments.

3.5.2. Intercultural Communication and Technology in Language Learning

Kramsch (1993) introduced the idea that culture serves as a framework shaping the way language is perceived and used, highlighting its inseparable connection to linguistic meaning. She emphasised that incorporating cultural elements into language teaching enhances learners' understanding of the target language. Beyond cultural awareness, technology integration in language learning is another impacting (socio-ecological) factor that affects intercultural communication (IC). Intercultural communication refers to the exchange of messages between individuals from different cultural or social backgrounds, which can occur through verbal or nonverbal forms (Raddawi, 2015). Culture can refer to a nation or ethnicity, but it can also be shaped by faith, gender, or even discourse communities, where shared speech patterns and communication styles create distinct identities (Paulston, 2012). Defining intercultural communication is complex, as it extends beyond surface-level cultural knowledge. Although intercultural and cross-cultural communication overlap in the literature as both focus on cultural differences, Piller (2009) explains that intercultural communication examines how people from different cultures interact, while cross-cultural communication compares communication practices across cultures. While intercultural communication can be applied in various fields, it is particularly relevant in foreign language education, especially in English language courses (Snow, 2018). English serves as a global lingua franca (see [Section 2.3.](#)), enabling communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Snow, 2018). Its dominance in international affairs, education, and business (House, 2018) is reinforced by technology as the default language in virtual spaces, which shapes intercultural interactions (Snow, 2018).

Zhang and Zhou (2023) found that technology-based interventions generally supported the development of students' intercultural communication skills, especially when immersive tools like virtual reality were used to simulate realistic cultural interactions. However, many of these interventions took place under close instructor supervision in classroom settings, raising concerns about how effective they would be in independent learning contexts (Zhang & Zhou,

2023). The study also noted several practical challenges, such as unreliable translation tools, students' unfamiliarity with some technologies, and difficulties maintaining engagement in online environments, all of which could limit the success of these interventions beyond controlled settings.

Byram (1997) stressed the importance of developing intercultural competence, which allows language learners to engage with and appreciate different cultural perspectives. The exchange of messages between individuals happens in different ways, and one of the most common ways today is through technology. In digital spaces shaped by competing and overlapping value systems, learners interact with both human and non-human agents, often being positioned in subtle and shifting ways (Pennycook, 2006; Toohey, 2000). Moreover, Bardhan and Orbe (2012) emphasise the role of IC in exploring how identities are constructed and negotiated through communicative interactions in various contexts. One of these contexts is through applications and platforms that offers chat services where communicative interactions occur. Access to technology, digital and social media influencers influence participation in online communities (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Ahrndt (2020) highlights that intercultural communication involves individuals with differing cultural identities, fostering greater self-awareness (Martin & Nakayama, 2010), which is another explanation for IC, which could be found through technology. Globalisation also has increased cultural diversity and interaction, making cultural exchange a constant feature of modern society. One way to increase globalisation is by using various platforms that offer cultural knowledge. Together, these definitions underscore the importance of intercultural communication in navigating cultural differences and understanding identity in diverse interactions, such as in a language learning environment.

3.5.2.1. Technology in Language Learning

In language learning, technology has been pivotal in transforming how learners acquire and practice new languages. Technological advancements have extended beyond formal settings, offering diverse, informal avenues for language acquisition. One example is Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), which explores computer applications in language learning (Chapelle, 2010). Extending from CALL, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) capitalises on the portability and accessibility of mobile devices to facilitate language

acquisition anytime and anywhere (Kukulska-Hulme, 2018). Despite the significant role of CALL and MALL in language learning, there remains a gap in the literature on the independent use of technology outside the TESOL classroom to enhance English language skills, as opposed to teacher-led initiatives within formal classroom settings (Lai, 2019). This gap may be relevant to the fields of technology and intercultural communication, potentially offering valuable insights into how language learners independently engage with digital tools beyond the TESOL classroom context and contribute to intercultural understanding.

The integration of technology for educational purposes is applied in different contexts in Kuwait such as for language skills or teacher training (e.g., Erguvan, 2015; Etedali, 2009; Hassan et al., 2019). In the context of this study, CALL and MALL can also illustrate how Kuwaiti female language learners engage with technological tools that are shaped by their socio-ecological environments, including family expectations, societal norms, personal preferences, and educational purposes. Exploring this area through the lens of the society, culture, and the different environments (see [Chapter 4](#)), the current study will shed light on learners' perspectives regarding how they apply the English language through CALL and MALL, and how such practices shape their intercultural communication experiences.

This interconnected learning environment of a language learner is now possible through digital advancements, allowing learners to expand their linguistic and cultural knowledge beyond traditional classroom settings. Building on previous discussions in the literature review, Godwin-Jones (2013) explored the integration of intercultural communication competence (ICC) into language learning through technology, particularly through telecollaboration, where learners engage with peers or native speakers from different cultures using digital tools. CALL and MALL serve as two examples of this approach, enabling learners to engage with language autonomously, catering to their specific needs and preferences. Although globalisation and technology promise greater connectivity, they have also created new forms of control and social division, increasing polarisation (Duchêne et al., 2013). In other words, a growing digital divide may occur between two groups, possibly resulting in different viewpoints. Digital divide refers to the gap between individuals with adequate access to technologies like computers, telephones, and the internet, and those lacking such access (Yaman, 2015). It arises from inequalities in factors such as income, age, language, geography, and education, which

subsequently influence the utilisation of these technologies. This inequality results in variations in chances for communication, education, and socio-economic advancement, impacting areas such as language instruction and multicultural access to digital resources (Yaman, 2015). Online interactions are often described as fluid and dynamic, but this can hide deeper inequalities. As digital and physical spaces become more intertwined, it is crucial to uncover the hidden power structures that reinforce these disparities (Jones, 2021).

According to House (2018), intercultural communication should be an essential component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course for several reasons. First, many learners in these courses aim to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds, often using English as a lingua franca. Second, while intercultural communication is a vast and complex field, time constraints in English courses necessitate a prioritisation of key concepts that learners can benefit from to ensure meaningful and practical learning. Attempting to cover all aspects of intercultural communication in a language course could weaken the depth of understanding. Third, a crucial element of intercultural communication is the interpretation process, where a language learner becomes familiar with cultural practices and learns appropriate responses, facilitating navigation of cultural differences and minimising misunderstandings (House, 2018). Given these complexities, the challenge becomes even greater when introducing two distinct cultures, such as Western and Gulf cultures, into the language learning process. The differences in cultural norms, values, and communication styles can add another layer of difficulty, making intercultural communication a crucial yet intricate aspect of EFL education in the GCC countries. As introduced earlier (see [Section 2.3.1](#)), even in a small country like Kuwait, cultural differences exist within its own society, such as those between *Hadhar* and *Badu*, further shaping how individuals engage with language and intercultural communication. Exploring how these dynamics unfold in language learning contexts, especially from the learner's perspective, would provide valuable insights into the interplay between cultural identity, language use, and the role of technology in fostering intercultural communication. Given this, it is essential to examine how technology influences intercultural interactions in the unique context of Kuwait, as it impacts both the medium and the nature of communication.

3.5.2.1. *intercultural communication, technology, autonomous learning, and EFL*

Wider platforms for languages to influence each other have emerged through globalisation and technology (Hopkins, 2022). Culture is widely recognised as essential to language learning, yet there is no clear agreement on its scope, how it should be integrated into teaching, or the role of technology in this process (Godwin-Jones, 2013). In today's globalised world, cultural, linguistic, and technological influences play a crucial role in shaping how people learn languages (Kramsch, 2014a). Technology is transforming language learning by giving learners access to a wide range of online resources and language learning platforms (Huber, 2008). Learners can use digital tools and applications to customise their learning experiences based on their needs and interests, giving them greater control and fostering independence (Reinders, 2012).

Individuals approach second language learning in different ways. Today, English language instructors face challenges when integrating culture into their teaching. Hossain (2024) highlights some of these challenges in integrating cultural elements into language learning. Teaching materials often prioritise grammar and vocabulary over cultural content, limiting learners' exposure to cultural diversity (Hossain, 2024). Additionally, some resources reinforce stereotypes, making it difficult for language teachers to present a more nuanced understanding of different cultures (Pennycook, 2006). A study on integrating culture and technology in the English language learning process found that students initially showed varying levels of participation, with some hesitant due to unfamiliarity with the content or technology (Cortés Ospina et al., 2024). However, engagement increased significantly as culturally relevant elements were introduced, underscoring the importance of cultural connections in maintaining student interest and participation (Cortés Ospina et al., 2024). Cultural misunderstandings on the other hand can be a concern, as differences in norms and values can lead to misinterpretations, highlighting language instructors' need to foster cultural awareness. To address these challenges, language instructors require further training in intercultural competence to create more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments (Hossain, 2024).

In a globalised world where the internet and digital platforms are widely accessible, learners have more opportunities to choose methods that align with their socio-ecological realities and

personal identities. Technology has made the world feel smaller, somewhat like a global village, where with a single click, individuals can explore other cultures, religions, and lifestyles or engage with content that interests them. This accessibility allows language learners to personalise their learning experiences, shaping them according to their needs and preferences. While this approach encourages cultural exchange and real-world language practice, challenges such as misunderstandings and cultural insensitivity highlight the need for teacher support and preparation (Godwin-Jones, 2013). The study notes that video-based exchanges can replicate face-to-face interactions, though the absence of nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions and gestures, can make communication more difficult. It also promotes a broader view of cultural learning, encouraging engagement with diverse perspectives rather than just the target culture. The study called for improved assessment tools for ICC and highlighted gaps in language education, stressing the need for a structured approach to integrating cultural competence into learning (Godwin-Jones, 2013).

When it comes to learning English through technology, investment can play a crucial role in how learners engage with technology (see [Section 3.2.2](#)). While digital tools are increasingly integrated into TESOL settings, such as at Kuwait University, the willingness of learners to use these technologies beyond formal settings varies, depending on their ideologies and future identities, especially given their availability today in Kuwait. Their choice to engage with language-learning platforms, applications, and digital resources at their own pace and for their own incentives reflects not only their autonomy but also how their identities shape their approach to learning. Their identities, shaped by their socio-ecological backgrounds, will determine their interest and what they are looking for in language learning through technology. Therefore, the current study goes beyond the TESOL settings to examine how technology influences learners before they enter or after they leave the classroom. By understanding how learners engage with English outside the classroom, particularly through technology, educators can gain understanding of the influence of identity and socio-ecological elements on their language learning experiences and intercultural communication, as informed by their decisions and the rationales for those decisions. Al Shuraiaan et al. (2024) explored the role of technology in language education at Kuwait University, highlighting its benefits in providing easy access to diverse resources and improving writing skills. However, they found that technology could also cause distractions and foster reliance. Overuse of tools like spellcheck

and social media was shown to weaken language learners' critical thinking. The study also identified unequal access to technology as a persistent issue, with disparities affecting learning outcomes. While traditional methods provided a solid foundation, integrating them with modern technology proved essential. The study recommended professional development for faculty members and improved infrastructure to support effective technology use. Most importantly, the study also suggested future research on how cultural contexts shape the effectiveness of technology in language learning (Al Shuraiaan et al., 2024). Although Al Shuraiaan et al. (2024) highlighted the cultural perspective, they did not explain how it influences technology-mediated language learning. This lack of clarity on applying cultural context could be one of the reasons behind the disadvantages of technology identified in their study, such as superficial learning, weakened critical thinking, and overreliance on digital tools. Understanding how cultural factors shape the use of technology might help address these issues and enhance its effectiveness in language education.

One way to consider the use of technology in language learning in Kuwait is when students take charge of their own learning through technology, they gain not only access to vast linguistic resources but also a greater sense of autonomy and responsibility, an opportunity that educators are also creating by embracing digital tools in the TESOL classroom (Hossain, 2024). For example, Xiangming et al. (2020) explored how technology can help reduce FLA (see [Section 3.4.2.](#)) by integrating an application into language learning in a quantitative study over ten weeks. While the study reported a significant decrease in anxiety, its findings were inconclusive because the application was not specifically designed for English language learning. This highlights an important gap; if technology is to be effectively used for language acquisition, it must align with learners' objectives and the specific challenges they face. In the context of intercultural communication and technology in language learning, this is particularly relevant. Language learning is not just about mastering grammar and vocabulary, but also it involves navigating different cultural and social settings, which can heighten anxiety. If technology is to support learners in these challenges, it needs to be designed with their linguistic and cultural needs in mind.

Although technology has created opportunities for expanding access to authentic language experiences, there remains a clear gap between classroom instruction and the skills learners

actually need beyond it (Kramsch, 2014b). In the context of intercultural communication, learners' use of digital tools in authentic, real-world settings may have a greater impact than formal instruction. That is largely because, outside the classroom, learners tend to engage with language based on their interests and needs, allowing for more personalised and meaningful learning experiences. This reinforces the argument that language learning is shaped not only by structured teaching but also by the learner's socio-ecological background, personal investment, and their incentives behind the engagement with technology. By understanding how learners navigate these digital spaces, researchers and educators can gain insight into how learners develop their linguistic skills beyond traditional TESOL classroom instruction.

Through intercultural communication, ideally, differences tied to race, geography, or political boundaries should not be barriers to communication but rather opportunities for connection (Seregina et al., 2019). In the GCC countries, research has explored the use of technology in various forms as a medium of instruction (e.g., Alenezi & Alanezi, 2024; Al-Ghasab, 2022; Aljazzaf, 2020; Al-Seghayer, 2022; Mohamed et al., 2024). However, its role as a tool for intercultural communication, particularly in how language learners in the Kuwaiti society engage with technology and how their socio-ecological backgrounds shape their experiences, remains largely overlooked. In today's world, the rise of the internet and mass media has made it increasingly difficult to separate one's own culture from foreign cultures due to growing interconnectedness (Uryu et al., 2014). Understanding how these learners navigate digital spaces, interact with different cultures, and absorb linguistic and cultural influences through technology is an area that needs further exploration.

It is important to note that certain forms of language follow rigid regulations, such as academic writing, political speeches, and classic literature. However, everyday language, such as online chats, marketing, personal blogs, and casual conversations, is much more flexible and unpredictable (Kramsch, 2014b). People use words in creative or unexpected ways, often changing their meaning depending on the situation.

This makes language less fixed and more influenced by social and cultural trends (Kramsch, 2014b). This raises an important concern autonomous learners may not necessarily develop structured English language skills but instead absorb informal and unpredictable language

patterns. This challenges whether their engagement with technology and digital communication contributes to meaningful language learning. In the field of education, computer-mediated communication in foreign language proved to have clear benefits, such as increased learner enthusiasm, greater language output, and enhanced creativity, but it also raises concerns (Kramsch, 2014b). Studies have shown that the same technology that overcomes physical distance may also blur cultural differences, creating a more unified way of communicating and interacting (Kramsch, 2014b).

Given these insights, it becomes evident that the different outcomes of the intersection of intercultural communication, technology, and language learning requires an in-depth understanding of how learners interact with digital tools. While TESOL settings in Kuwait often incorporate specific technologies designed to enhance language acquisition (e.g., Alanezi, 2021; Al-Fadhli, 2008), the question remains whether these tools align with what learners truly find meaningful in their autonomous learning experiences. It is not sufficient to assume that the integration of technology within formal education settings inherently meets the diverse needs of language learners. Although a substantial body of research has explored the use of technology within TESOL setting for various instructional purposes (e.g., Al Shuraiaan et al., 2024; Alsabbagh, 2019; Zhang, 2024), it would be valuable to investigate how language learners independently engage with technology beyond the classroom. Understanding whether they aim to explore and learn about other cultures, improve specific language skills, or seek interactive and flexible learning environments can provide critical insights. This exploration can reveal whether learners view technology as a means to foster intercultural communication and enhance linguistic proficiency, or simply as a convenient tool for autonomous learning in general. Hossain (2024) claims that effective language education in a globalised world must take a multifaceted approach, integrating culture, technology, and diverse learner backgrounds. This integration is essential for creating inclusive and engaging learning environments that reflect the complexities of real-world communication (Hossain, 2024). By incorporating cultural awareness and digital tools, educators can better support learners from different backgrounds, ensuring that language learning is both meaningful and adaptable to their needs (Hossain, 2024). This emphasis on cultural awareness and digital integration naturally leads to a closer exploration of intercultural communication within specific regional contexts. The following section explores how these dynamics unfold in the

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, where unique sociocultural factors shape the nature and challenges of language learning.

3.5.2.2. *Intercultural communication and the GCC countries:*

In general, English language courses prioritise language skills, which leaves little time to cover the full scope of intercultural communication (Snow, 2018). In the GCC countries, this challenge is even more pronounced due to cultural and religious restrictions that limit what can be discussed in classrooms (Gobert, 2015). Many topics commonly found in Western English-language textbooks are considered inappropriate (taboo) or even forbidden in the GCC countries. Since taboos are specific to each culture (Gobert, 2015), they present a unique challenge in the GCC countries, where Islam is the official religion, and nearly the entire national population is Muslim. Subjects that are acceptable in Western societies, such as alcohol consumption or premarital relationships, may be offensive to Gulf Muslim Arabs, as cultural and religious teachings strictly prohibit them (Gobert, 2015). This is why teachers must also consider the differences across GCC countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as variations between Muslim families about what they regard as acceptable classroom discussions and whether they are culturally accepted. Factors such as globalisation, travel, studying abroad, and family influence contribute to these differences (Gobert, 2015), making it challenging to decide what is suitable to include in the TESOL course material. However, beyond explicit taboos, the GCC countries, including Kuwait, might also face exclusive cultural sensitivities that, while not strictly forbidden, may still be considered controversial or unsuitable for discussion. These issues, shaped by societal norms and expectations, add further complexity to language education.

In Kuwait, Al-Sumait et al. (2022) investigated intercultural communication competence (ICC) within Kuwait's expatriate-majority context, where expatriates made up around 75% of the population. The study examined multilingual student populations at three local universities, with a total of 858 participants, highlighting how adaptation to diverse cultural environments shaped ICC. The findings revealed that expatriates outperformed Kuwaiti nationals due to the pressures of adjusting to different cultural norms, while multilingualism positively influenced ICC. Interestingly, attending English-language universities did not significantly enhance ICC,

and factors like gender and age showed no notable differences (Al-Sumait et al., 2022). This suggested that Kuwaiti culture, despite its diverse and multicultural environment, might not naturally support the development of strong ICC among its nationals. The limited impact of English-language education indicated that language exposure alone was not enough without meaningful intercultural interactions. This pointed to a societal pattern of limited engagement across cultural groups, even within a multicultural setting. The study recommended integrating cognitive-focused intercultural lessons into curricula, emphasising the need for educational strategies that goes beyond language instruction to actively promote intercultural awareness in the Kuwaiti context (Al-Sumait et al., 2022).

The GCC countries' cultural norms, including Kuwait's, are deeply rooted, yet exposure to other cultures increasingly influences the socio-ecological backgrounds and influences their identity. It can be expected that the region's economic stability (see [Chapter 2](#)) enables many citizens to travel, allowing them to experience different cultural traditions and insights. Moreover, the widespread availability of the internet and mobile technology further accelerates this cultural exchange, as people can access global content instantly. After reviewing the previous literature, although such exposure can broaden perspectives, it can also create tensions between traditional values and external influences on identity formation. This complexity makes it difficult to determine how best to introduce intercultural communication in GCC countries' classrooms. However, despite these challenges, English language learners in the region continue to use technology as a key tool for language acquisition, demonstrating its growing impact on both language learning and cultural awareness (e.g., Al Shuraiaan et al., 2024; Alenezi & Brinthaup, 2022; Alsabbagh, 2019; AlSuwaihel, 2024), which will be discussed in the coming section.

3.5.3. Individualism and Collectivism in Language Learning

As digital learning settings evolve, the cultural elements influencing language acquisition also transform. A key consideration in this regard is the role of individualism and collectivism in shaping learners' engagement and interaction. Hofstede (1984), describes individualism and collectivism as societal characteristics rather than individual traits, shaping how cultures define social connections and responsibilities. Individualism is marked by loose social ties, where individuals are responsible for themselves and their immediate family, while

collectivism is emphasised by strong, tightly connected groups, such as extended families, which offer support and protection in exchange for loyalty (Hofstede, 1984). This distinction is relevant to the present study, as it primarily focuses on the Kuwaiti female language learner but takes a holistic approach, considering how learners perceive language learning through a societal lens, influenced by their cultural background and social environment. Hofstede (1980) highlighted several aspects in his cultural dimensions' theory, including individualism and collectivism. Originally, Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimension theory explains how cultural differences shape behaviour and interactions across countries. It identifies key cultural aspects that influence how people think and act. The theory focuses on several key dimensions such as power distance, which looks at how societies deal with inequalities, and individualism versus collectivism which examines whether people see themselves as independent or part of a group (Su, 2022).

This theory is useful in areas like communication, management and education (Chen & Unal, 2023), as it helps people navigate multicultural environments. It offers insights into how cultural differences influence behaviour and interaction, making it relevant for diverse settings. According to Hofstede (1994), individualism is a cultural orientation in which social ties are loose, and individuals are expected to care for themselves and their immediate family. This trait is common in many Western and developed societies, where personal independence and self-reliance are highly valued (Hofstede, 1994). In contrast, collectivism refers to cultures with strong, cohesive in-groups, often extending beyond the immediate family to include relatives (Hofstede, 1994). Su (2022) defines individualism as a focus on self-identity, personal agency, and values that prioritise individuals over the collective, while collectivism emphasises collective identity, shared agency, and group-oriented values.

Individualism and collectivism are often presented as opposites. However, this view oversimplifies the complexity of these concepts. Individualism and collectivism are looked at as independent-self, and interdependent-self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In other words, individualistic societies typically promote the expression of individual traits and perspectives, highlighting the importance of individuality (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Collectivism, on the other hand, is a cultural orientation that prioritises cohesive communities, where common interests, goals, and conventions outweigh individual preferences (Hofstede et al., 2010;

Triandis, 1995). However, the way individualism and collectivism is understood can vary greatly depending on the context, the field of study, and the specific focus of research (Chen & Unal, 2023), such as the TESOL context. Individualism and collectivism in the TESOL context can differ significantly than any other discipline. The idea that individualism and collectivism are opposing concepts has been challenged by research findings (Alshahrani, 2017). In general, the concepts reflect the extent of an individual's integration within group structures (Alshahrani, 2017). A more current approach treats individualism and collectivism as separate dimensions rather than two ends of the same spectrum (Chen & Unal, 2023). This means that people, groups, or even entire societies can exhibit a combination of individualistic and collectivistic traits, rather than fitting neatly into one category.

Recognising individualism and collectivism as a multidimensional construct allows for a more flexible and realistic understanding of how these cultural orientations that manifest in different settings (Chen & Unal, 2023). One key issue of the flexibility of the terms is the lack of clarity around how these concepts are defined and measured, which can make theory-based research difficult. To address this, researchers are encouraged to focus on achieving conceptual clarity and ensuring that the constructs they use are meaningful across different cultural contexts (Chen & Unal, 2023). Although Chen and Unai focused on individualism and collectivism within the context of organisations and management, the study's insights extend beyond these settings by shedding light on individuals and their identities, which makes it inspirational to the current study.

Individualism and collectivism within the cultural dimension are equally relevant to language learners, as the complexities and ambiguities surrounding these concepts can present similar challenges in understanding learner identities within TESOL setting. The vagueness of these terms may affect how learners position themselves and interact, influencing both their language learning experiences and outcomes. In TESOL setting, the cultural backgrounds of both teachers and students play a significant role in shaping the learning experience. These cultural perspectives, whether leaning towards individualism or collectivism, affect how individuals interact, teach, and learn.

When considering the TESOL setting as a collectivist context, learners are expected to do collaborative work, placing importance on group achievements and supporting their peers (Parra & Geriguis Mina, 2021). Their participation frequently stems from a sense of responsibility towards their classmates and the wider community (Parra & Geriguis Mina, 2021). On the other hand, Hofstede's (1980) theory on cultural dimensions had a huge impact on how we understand interactions between different cultures. It has been applied in many areas like managing diverse teams, marketing across cultures, human resources, and even teaching and learning in multicultural settings (Su, 2022). The theory helps us make sense of how cultural differences shape the way people think, behave, and work together, offering valuable insights for navigating the complexities of intercultural communication in the TESOL setting. In the context of the current study, understanding the individualist and collectivist approach in the TESOL classroom provides a framework for exploring how individualistic and collectivistic orientations influence language learning experiences among Kuwaiti female learners.

In a study that examined Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions theory and its relevance to second language acquisition (SLA), highlighted how cultural differences, including individualism and collectivism, can create misunderstandings between teachers and learners, particularly in multicultural classrooms (Su, 2022). To address these challenges, the study suggested several strategies to enhance intercultural communication. One key recommendation was the cultural awareness training, which helps language learners understand and appreciate cultural differences, fostering more effective communication. Another suggestion was to integrate Hofstede's cultural dimensions into the language learning curriculum, providing learners with a framework to understand how cultural values shape communication and language use. The study also advocates for interactive learning activities that simulate real life intercultural experiences, allowing learners to practise their communication skills in supportive environments (Su, 2022). Additionally, it highlighted the importance of feedback and reflection, giving learners the opportunity to receive constructive feedback on their intercultural communication and reflect on their experiences to improve their strategies. Finally, the study underscored the need for teacher training and professional development to enhance language instructors with the knowledge and skills needed to address cultural differences. This can lead to more culturally responsive teaching practices, ultimately

supporting better learning outcomes in diverse classroom settings (Su, 2022). Although the study included both teachers and learners in TESOL environment, its primary focus was on teachers and how they can address cultural differences effectively. However, what is equally important is understanding how language learners perceive these cultural differences, especially when engaging with specific tasks in TESOL setting that reflect individualistic or collectivistic orientations, bearing in mind the unique context of Kuwait and the female language learners' perspective. Tasks such as teamwork, for example, can reveal how learners with individualistic tendencies approach autonomy and personal responsibility, while collectivist learners may prioritise group harmony and collaboration.

In their systematic review study on FLA, individualism and collectivism, Toyama and Yamazaki (2022) highlighted that while extensive research exists on individualism and collectivism in education, it remains underrepresented in the literature. Collaborative learning has been shown to be effective across various domains, including social and cognitive development. However, its success is influenced by multiple factors such as teachers' beliefs, task design, group composition, communicative skills, and curriculum, with culture playing a central role (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2022). Cultural norms shape how cooperative learning is received, as seen in East Asia, where it does not align readily with traditional educational practices (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2022). Given that cooperative learning is more widely accepted in Western contexts, further research is needed to examine its cultural adaptability (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2022). The concept of individualism and collectivism directly relates to the current study, which explores how past learning experiences and socio-ecological factors, such as cultural orientation, shape Kuwaiti female learners' identities, classroom experiences, and engagement with the English language. The initial exposure of learners at a younger age to English may have affected their engagement with the language in the classroom environments in higher education, especially when concerning their peers, either positively or negatively.

3.5.3.1. Cooperative, Competitive, or Self-study

Individualism and collectivism are evident in TESOL settings through the use of different learning approaches. For example, cooperative learning involves learners working in small groups to support one another in mastering academic content (Ahmadi Safa & Afzalimir,

2021). This approach reflects a collectivist perspective, as it emphasises collaboration, shared responsibility, and mutual success. In an Iranian study, Ahmadi Safa and Afzalimir (2021) examined the complexities of teaching speaking skills in second and foreign languages, through the comparison between cooperative and competitive learning, emphasising the role of self-confidence in language learning. Findings indicated that while both approaches significantly improved EFL learners' speaking abilities, only cooperative learning enhanced self-confidence. In contrast, competitive learning did not have a meaningful impact on self-confidence, making cooperative learning the more effective approach overall (Ahmadi Safa & Afzalimir, 2021). Moreover, learners showed a preference for cooperative learning, suggesting that teachers should create supportive environments when incorporating competitive strategies. Although these findings reinforce the importance of collectivist approaches in language learning, they also highlight the need to consider learners with individualist traits, who may not experience the same benefits from collaborative work and could find teamwork less suited to their learning preferences.

Self-study was defined as a learning approach in which students independently identify their learning needs, set goals, and manage resources, with or without external support (Knowles, 1975). This approach aligns with an individualist perspective, as it emphasises autonomy, personal responsibility, and self-regulation in learning, which also intersects with autonomous learning through technology. A study conducted at the College of Basic Education in Kuwait explored students' perspectives on self-study, which involved 324 female English Department students aged 17 to 30 (Taqi, 2019). Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combined questionnaires and interviews to provide both statistical insights and personal experiences. While self-study fosters skills such as time management and critical thinking, the findings revealed that freshmen and students with lower GPAs were hesitant about it (Taqi, 2019). Taqi (2019) argues that teacher guidance remained essential, and integrating autonomous learning into the curriculum was recommended. Internet access played a key role in supporting independent learning, and teachers needed to facilitate interactive and self-directed learning experiences to ensure its effectiveness (Taqi, 2019).

Research has shown diverse perspectives on individualism and collectivism in language learning, with studies highlighting both the benefits and challenges of each approach.

However, what is most valuable is understanding why learners prefer one over the other, rather than simply noting their preferences. Exploring students' perspectives can provide deeper insights into the factors that shape their learning experiences, offering a more nuanced understanding of their needs. Moreover, based on the literature and the potential overlap between individualist and collectivist concepts, some learners may show traits of both orientations, depending on the context. To enhance intercultural communication, understanding both teacher and learner perspectives is key to fostering effective communication and meaningful learning experiences in diverse TESOL settings.

3.6. Chapter Summary

To conclude, this chapter has reviewed key concepts related to identity, culture, and language learning, laying the groundwork for the study's theoretical framework. It examined how identity and investment are shaped by sociocultural factors, both within and beyond the classroom. The chapter also considered the household environment, including parental influence and the often-overlooked role of live-in domestic workers in English language exposure. The literature review highlighted how Kuwaiti learners navigate TESOL settings, shaped by cultural expectations, teacher-student dynamics, and Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). It also introduced socio-ecological perspectives, including the roles of intercultural communication, technology, and cultural orientations such as individualism and collectivism. The next chapter introduces the Bio-ecological Model as theoretical foundation to the complex, multi-layered influences shaping language learning among Kuwaiti female learners.

4. Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework: Tracing the Impact of Socio-ecological Influences on Female L2 Learning

4.1. Overview

This chapter outlines the theoretical underpinnings of the study, considering how Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory supports the application of the socio-ecological framework to analyse the experiences of female language learners at Kuwait University. The chapter starts with an introduction to Bronfenbrenner's theory (4.1) and its progression from the original Ecological Systems Theory to the Bio-ecological Model. This underscores the theory's application in this study, underlining its significance in comprehending socio-ecological impacts on language acquisition.

The chapter subsequently covers the fundamental ecosystems of the ecological framework, analysing the micro-, meso-, macro-, exo-, and chrono-levels of influence. It situates these ecosystems within the Kuwaiti context, illustrating their significance for TESOL setting and learners' identity and investment in English language acquisition. This chapter further addresses the interaction between social norms, familial dynamics, and educational situations. Finally, the chapter presents the Neo-ecological Theory, exploring its development in the digital era and implications for language acquisition. It concludes by situating this study within broader discussions on language learning and socio-ecological systems, establishing a revised, context-specific model that forms the basis for the analysis in the following chapters.

4.2. Theoretical Framework

The study's framework is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which has evolved over time, with the Bio-ecological Model (1994) representing its most recent and comprehensive version and serving as the study's foundational basis.

Bronfenbrenner's theory underwent several changes, each aimed at improving its effectiveness and achieving better outcomes related to context in development. Ecological Systems Theory (EST) uses the terms "ecology" and "ecosystem" metaphorically to describe and conceptualise contexts (Chong et al., 2023). Although the name of the model has

changed over time, this does not indicate a shift in its fundamental meaning but rather a refinement of its components to make the concepts of the theory more focused. In introducing the Bio-ecological Model, Bronfenbrenner explains:

“The present formulation makes no claim as a paradigm shift (if there be such a phenomenon); rather, it continues a marked shift in the center of gravity of the model, in which features of earlier versions are first called into question but then re-combined, along with new elements, into a more complex and more dynamic structure.”
(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007)

Despite the continuous change of the ecological theory, it consistently maintained an ecological focus, explicitly highlighting the interconnectedness of person and context (Tudge et al., 1997; Tudge et al., 2009). This study uses the Bio-ecological Model, despite some recent studies continuing to use the term Ecological Model and will constantly refer to it as such throughout the study. It is equally important to shed light on the earlier versions to fully understand the evolvement of the theory and comprehend the developmental process that shaped the current form of the theory.

Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-ecological Model of human development originated as a theoretical framework designed to explain stability and transformation in human biopsychological traits (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Bronfenbrenner’s theory evolved from the work of earlier human development theorists such as Lewin, Thomas and Thomas, Mead, and Freud (Crawford, 2020) and even Piaget’s constructivist approach (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008). In its early stages, the model was not explicitly outlined but was embedded within research designs, described as “latent paradigms”, meaning its fundamental principles existed but were not fully expressed (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Notably, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory drew inspiration from General Systems Theory, introduced by Bertalanffy (1968). While General Systems Theory originated in engineering and technology, its principles were applicable to the social sciences due to its focus on explaining phenomena through the interaction of processes. At a time when scientific research largely aimed to reduce systems into smaller, independently examined units, Bertalanffy’s approach signified a paradigm shift, advocating for the study of whole systems and their interrelations (1968). Therefore, in the

1970's, influenced by the General Systems Theory, the Ecological Systems Theory focused on how environmental contexts influence human development to fill the gap in developmental psychology (Dhal, 2011). The Bio-ecological Model highlights the importance of considering the interactions that are complex, reciprocal, and subtle in the individual's biological and personal characteristics (Rojas-Drummond, 2016). In other words, a person's development and behaviour, such as how they learn a language, is not shaped by a single factor, but through ongoing interactions between their identities and their surrounding environment. These influences are constantly shifting and influencing each other, meaning that learning is never shaped in isolation, but as part of a wider, dynamic system.

Initially, before the evolution of the Bio-ecological Model, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was among the first to emphasise the role of context in development, arguing that reliance solely on controlled environments like clinics or laboratories is inadequate due to varying contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). With his focus on context, Bronfenbrenner addressed the limitations of previous approaches in applying findings from controlled environments to real- world setting (Jaeger, 2016). The theory aimed to examine the interplay between multiple processes and their evolving contexts within the natural environment of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). He then developed the ecological systems model and introduced the initial four layers of context to explain how micro-, mesos-, exo-, and macro-level systems influence a child's development, introducing these concepts in 1976 (Jaeger, 2016), which later became the most recognisable aspects of his theory. Each of these layers represents a different level of influence on the individual, from the immediate setting of the home or classroom (microsystem) to the interactions between these settings (mesosystem), to broader social structures like parents' workplaces (exosystem), and finally to the overarching cultural and societal norms (macrosystem). These layers do not operate in isolation but are constantly interacting, shaping the learner's development in dynamic ways. Bronfenbrenner later introduced the chronosystem, a fifth layer that considers time as an influential factor. Each system will be explained in detail in the subsequent section. **Error! Reference source not found.)**

The ecological systems model is used to comprehend how the different ecosystems influence individuals in their community (Gonzales, 2020). Bronfenbrenner explained his theory as

multiple nested systems, presented in circles (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem), comparing them to the famous Matryoshka Russian dolls (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Other authors (for example Singh et al., 2015) represented how a child is situated within the microsystem, which is encompassed by the mesosystem, and subsequently within the wider circles, thus reflecting the intersectionality of these systems (Jaeger, 2016). Crawford (2020), explained that the ecological model focuses on understanding human interactions within the interconnected systems of their environment, building upon the foundational work of Bronfenbrenner (1979). Bronfenbrenner (1979) asserts that “*human development is the product of interaction between the growing human organism and its environment*” (p. 16). This perspective views the individual as an adaptable entity within their social context, emphasising that development occurs through experiential and ongoing interactions (Crawford, 2020). Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) emphasised the dynamic relationship between a child and a parent, saying that the individual actively influences the systems affecting their lives. This perspective underscores the complex and interconnected nature of human development, reflecting the ecological model’s holistic approach. The systems will be explained in detail in this chapter. Therefore, the ecological systems formed the basis of my analysis, in which I discuss socio-ecological factors’ impact on female language learners in Kuwait.

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4.3. The Bio-ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994)

The Ecological Systems Theory Model was later modified because of the extensive research focus on the environment rather than actual development, a limitation Bronfenbrenner described as “*context without development*” (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) aimed to create a comprehensive framework that incorporates the various factors influencing development across different systemic levels. Consequently, to address this issue, the revised version of the theory modified the ecological model again in the 1980’s to include the integration of person, process, and temporal elements inside the framework (Jaeger, 2016). In 1994, this evolution and improvement resulted in the establishment of the Bio-ecological model, which positioned “*proximal processes*” as the continuous, intricate interactions between persons and their environments to be the central to human development (Tong & An, 2024). It is a model that focused on the proximal development processes,

denoting the lasting and continual ways of engagement within the surrounding environment. It includes four main properties: *Process, Person, Context, and Time* (PPCT), highlighting a concurrent examination of all these components (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007):

“...development takes place through the process of progressively more complex reciprocal interactions between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment”

(Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

The proximal processes are the recurrent interactions between a person and their environment, and these interactions are the main drivers of human development, shaping how people grow and change over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). In their paper, *Nature-Nurture Reconceptualized in Developmental Perspective: A Bioecological Model* (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), they redefine the *nature versus nurture* debate by emphasising the interaction between genetics and environment in human development. It introduces proximal processes as the mechanisms that transform genotypes into phenotypes (physical characteristics). The Bio-ecological Model argues that development is not solely determined by genetics but is significantly shaped by environmental contexts that can either enhance or limit genetic potential (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). The Bio-ecological Model addresses two key aspects of human development. Firstly, it examines the continuity and change in people’s biopsychological characteristics as they grow. Secondly, it focuses on advancing scientific tools and research methods to study these developmental changes effectively. This involves enhancing theoretical models and research designs to better understand how people develop within different contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), such as the language learning context.

4.3.1. Language Learning and the Ecological Perspective

Bronfenbrenner (1977) presented the ecological approach to education to highlight the dynamic link between learners and their settings. Lier (1997) was one of the earliest scholars to present an ecological approach to language learning, challenging traditional views by conceptualising the learning environment as a complex adaptive system. Lier’s paper

emphasised the importance of observation, suggesting that new methods are needed to examine learning as a dynamic process shaped by meaningful interactions within accessible environments (Lier, 1997). This perspective promotes a more integrated understanding of language learning, recognising the intricate interplay between learners and their environments. Many scholars later followed the work of Lier and published research related to the interaction between individuals, time, and contexts (e.g., Kramsch, 2008; Tudor, 2003).

Rosa and Tudge (2013) critique the evolution of research after Bronfenbrenner's theory, highlighting that it mainly emphasised contextual influences on child and parent development, neglecting the core aspect of ecological systems theory "proximal processes". The proximal process is a fundamental notion of the Bio-ecological Model and is contained in the microsystem that has received inadequate attention in research studies due to Bronfenbrenner's lack of clarity (Merçon-Vargas et al., 2020). It is defined as "*particular forms of interaction between organism and the environment ... that operate over time and are posited as the primary mechanism producing human development*" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 994). These interactions are bidirectional, involving regular activities with individuals, objects, or symbols over an extended period, which can be considered complicated (Merçon-Vargas et al., 2020). The formative years of an individual's development are crucial, yet not all children have access to the same opportunities due to a variety of factors (Gonzales, 2020), including cultural and societal influences that can further shape their experiences. In other words, if there is parental abuse or neglect, the proximal processes within the family home microsystem where a child resides can become detrimental (De Britos, 2020). Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory represented a notable shift from previous approaches that mostly concentrated on the child or the parent in isolation. His concept highlighted reciprocal influences, acknowledging the bidirectional effects between individuals and their immediate environments (Crawford, 2020).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory has been widely applied in language learning research, but often overlooking its broader socio-cultural foundations (Chong et al., 2023). The Douglas Fir Group (2016) offered a significant adaptation in their groundbreaking work of the ecological systems to L2 learning by focusing on three core layers (micro-, meso-, and macro-systems) to explore how learners engage in multilingual environments. While

influential, their framework did not fully address the exosystem or chronosystem, limiting a comprehensive view (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016). Recent studies (e.g., El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Stanley & Kuo, 2022), highlight the importance of recognising dynamic, reciprocal interactions within learning environments, including the roles of families, communities, peers, and teachers. These findings support the relevance of using a holistic ecological lens to better understand the diverse factors that influence language learners' development, engagement, and identity formation, especially in contextually unique settings such as Kuwait.

A quantitative study conducted in Malaysia explored 101 university students' preferred learning environments for French language acquisition in a distance learning context, using the Ecological Model to examine the impact of environmental interactions on learning (Khairul Amali et al., 2023). The study found that the language used by teachers significantly influenced the learning environment, with students valuing socially safe spaces where mistakes were accepted without judgement. They appreciated high-quality feedback that was meaningful rather than frequent and preferred understanding over memorisation. At the microsystem level, students showed low interest in integrating cultural backgrounds into teaching. In the mesosystem, they valued environments that normalised mistakes. Within the exosystem, they preferred clear feedback and regular assessments. At the macrosystem level, students favoured teacher-led instruction over self-directed learning. The study recommended creating supportive learning environments and diverse teaching strategies, calling for further research into distance learning's impact on student performance.

The Bio-ecological Model encompasses multiple systems that reflect different aspects of the individual and the broader society, highlighting the interconnectedness between personal development and social contexts. It is adaptable and can serve as a valuable framework for understanding the complex interactions between individuals and their identities (see: Edwards & Burns, 2016). However, while these studies provide valuable insights, they predominantly focus on common language learning settings, such as the TESOL setting, without addressing specific cultural norms or societal trends that could have an impact on the learners' attitudes toward language acquisition. Given its comprehensive scope, it is difficult to overlook its relevance in understanding the complex dynamics influencing human behaviour and language learning. This gap underscores the need for a context-specific

application of the Bio-ecological Model to explore how socio-ecological factors influence language learners' experiences. In particular, the sociocultural dynamics of Kuwaiti society present unique challenges and opportunities for female language learners at Kuwait University, whose learning experiences are shaped by cultural norms, gender expectations, and institutional structures.

Applying the Bio-ecological Model in the Kuwaiti context allows for a holistic exploration of the interconnected ecological systems that influence these learners, from immediate interactions within the classroom to broader societal influences, including those shaped by *Hadhar* and *Badu* family backgrounds. This approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding different concepts such as identity, investment, and sociocultural factors, and how they intersect to shape language learning experiences. This approach not only bridges existing gaps in the literature but also contributes to a deeper understanding of language learning within a unique cultural context. Therefore, this study applies the Bio-ecological Model to examine the socio-ecological backgrounds of female learners at Kuwait University, aiming to reveal the complex dynamics influencing their language learning.

4.3.2. Contextualising the Bio-ecological Model

"...this [the concept of ecology] means that evidence of learning (or even more so, an understanding of learning) cannot be based on the establishment of causal (or correlational) links between something in the input and something in the output. New ways will need to be developed to observe learning contexts and processes and to document plausible or actual learning opportunities or occasions."

(Lier, 1997, p786).

Despite its relevance, the ecological model remains underexplored in the GCC countries, including Kuwait, leaving a gap in understanding its potential insights into language learning. While research has examined the theory and the role of proximal processes in language acquisition (e.g., Ashiabi & O'Neal, 2015; Johnson & Puplampu, 2008; Koller et al., 2019; Leaf Zhang, 2018), studies assessing their impact within Kuwait or the wider GCC countries are yet

to be done. This gap underscores the need for further research to explore how interactions within and across ecological systems influence language learning in the Kuwaiti cultural context, reinforcing the value of applying the Bio-ecological Model to this study.

In Kuwait, where societal dynamics are varied and complex despite to the country's small size (see [Chapter 2](#)), it is crucial to consider the entire spectrum of ecological systems to fully understand the contextual influences on language learning. Exploring the integration of these systems is essential when analysing the experiences of Kuwaiti female language learners, as it enables a thorough investigation about the effect of these systems on their language acquisition processes and perspectives. A less generalised study on ethnic minorities (Zhao et al., 2024) underscored the importance of adopting the ecological approach, arguing that such approach allows for a more holistic understanding of the various influences on language acquisition. The ecological approach is not limited to ethnic minorities; its adaptability enables it to be applied across diverse sociocultural contexts where individuals have different experiences in their native cultural and linguistic environments. This section investigates how the Bio-ecological Model applies to Kuwaiti female language learners at Kuwait University, focusing on the influence of socio-ecological factors on their language learning experiences. It also considers the critical role of identity and investment in the language learning process, providing a comprehensive understanding of how these elements interact within their cultural context.

This centralised, narrative-driven methodology of the current study offers a culturally complex perspective, distinguishing it from the broader framework suggested by the Douglas Fir Group (2016), as discussed earlier in this chapter. By focusing on female language learners' experiences and using narrative approaches, this study captures authentic stories (narratives) that reveal diverse perspectives in language learning within the Kuwaiti society. This approach aligns well with the Bio-ecological Model, offering a more detailed understanding of how various factors from different ecological systems shape language learning within a specific cultural context. It also enhances the understanding of the learner's identity and investment in language acquisition under the umbrella of the Bio-ecological Model.

Recent research by Cox and Phipps (2022) examined identities and language acquisition through an ecological lens, concentrating on language learning needs of refugee women in Glasgow. The study found that the ecological approach enhanced learners' confidence and empowerment by fostering investment ([see Section 3.2.2](#)) in language learning (Cox & Phipps, 2022). It challenged traditional power dynamics, enabling refugees to develop multilingual identities ([see Section 3.2.2.](#)), recognise their potential, and experience identity transformation, thus promoting a sense of belonging (Cox & Phipps, 2022). The Cox and Phipps (2022) study implemented the ecological approach, with the application of translanguaging ([see Section 3.2.3.](#)), by enabling learners to select topics of interest and engage in outside activities, such as walking in the park or taking a bus journey. Students perceived these multilingual activities as dynamic and diverse rather than fixed elements. which created a sense of equality between the learner and the instructor. While the study intersects with various cultural, social, and ideological ecosystems, its relationship with the Bio-ecological Model and its impact on language learners' perspectives on learning English has largely been overlooked.

The current study addresses this gap by directly listening to learners and seeking to understand their experiences within the society and preferences of language use, which could lead to more effective language learning outcomes. Kuwaitis constitute a population tightly rooted in its cultural and national identity ([see Section 2.2.](#)). This does not, however, prevent learners from experiencing different ecological factors such as familial influences, educational structures, and societal norms that affect their identity development and their investment in language learning. Applying the ecological framework within the Kuwaiti setting evaluates its adaptability and shows its significance in comprehending the interplay of interconnected factors in the Kuwaiti society, offering a new insight into the role of the socio-ecological factors in language learning and identity formation in Kuwait.

The term “ecological” generally refers to a comprehensive ecosystems-oriented perspective, while the prefix “socio-” specifies a focus on social and cultural interactions within these systems, especially relevant to the Kuwaiti setting. Therefore, this study employs a socio-ecological framework to investigate the interaction between social systems and cultural settings in influencing female learners' identity and investment to English language

acquisition. The term “socio-ecological” is intentionally selected to emphasise that this study concentrates on the learners’ social experiences and viewpoints, with a specific emphasis on the interrelated social and cultural elements that impacted their language learning journeys. The study focuses on these specific features to better understand how female learners in Kuwait navigate the social and cultural contexts of language acquisition.

In summary, different studies have applied Bronfenbrenner’s approach in different educational settings (see, for example McLinden, 2017; Panopoulos & Drossinou-Korea, 2024; Rojas & Avitia, 2017). However, there is limited theoretical and conceptual evidence examining socio-ecological factors through the lens of the Bio-ecological Model within the specific context of TESOL setting and Kuwaiti female learners at Kuwait University. The following section expands on the socio-ecological perspective by examining the Bio-ecological Model, highlighting their importance in formulating the research questions and their relevance to comprehending the complex dynamics of female learners' language acquisition experiences in Kuwait.

4.4. The Socio-ecological Framework

The intricate relationships within ecological systems are, to some extent, neglected in educational contexts, with the focus on some more than the other. For example, researchers employed the ecological approach and examined various aspects of the microsystem such as a child's interaction with peers, family, education, and community (see for example, Chipuer, 2001; Criss et al., 2009) or the mesosystem that reflects the interactions between the microsystems (e.g., Durlak et al., 2007) to determine factors that help or hinder their growth (Neal & Neal, 2013). Although studies using the Ecological Systems Theory (EST) framework have primarily focused on microsystems and mesosystems, empirical research on exosystems and macrosystems in developmental contexts remains less common (Neal & Neal, 2013).

This socio-ecological framework would enable not only language learners, but also researchers and more importantly, teachers to analyse and evaluate teaching practices in different settings. Research on teacher education has faced criticism for the theory’s inconsistent quality, with variations in results and methodologies making it difficult to trust or rely on the findings (Borko et al., 2007). Critics argued that this inconsistency undermined the

credibility and validity of the research. Additionally, it was noted that many studies failed to address complex challenges in education, such as improving teaching methods or enhancing student learning outcomes (Borko et al., 2007). This lack of practical application limited the impact of research on educational practices, leading to calls for more rigorous methodologies and a stronger focus on solving real-world problems in teaching and learning (Borko et al., 2007). Therefore, research that has overlooked sharing conceptual frameworks and designs related to language learning has made it difficult to create clear comparisons and new findings (Borko et al., 2007). The absence of such frameworks has led to a notable gap in the literature, thus limiting the generalisability of research findings within the field TESOL.

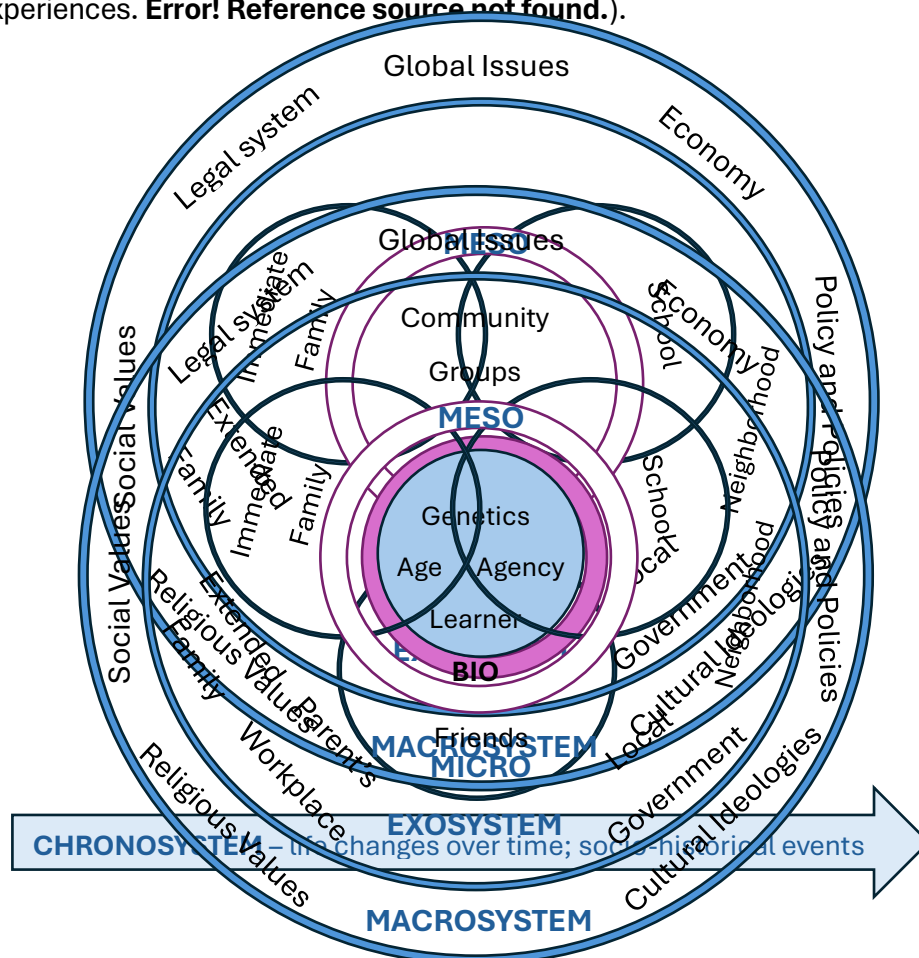
Mulisa (2019) highlighted the need for a holistic approach to understanding education quality within higher education in Ethiopia by applying Bio-ecological Model, arguing that traditional assessments focusing solely on curricula and student competence fail to capture the complex interactions between personal, social, and ecological variables. This perspective is highly relevant to the context of Kuwait, where the educational system similarly prioritises curricula and student competence (e.g., Alajmi, 2021; Alsabbagh, 2019; Alzankawi, 2022), potentially overlooking the broader socio-ecological factors that shape language learning experiences. Just as Mulisa (2019) challenged the narrow focus on educational outcomes, this study contends that English language learning in Kuwaiti TESOL setting cannot be fully understood without considering the interconnected systems that influence learners' experiences. Applying a bio-ecological perspective in this context not only fills a notable gap in the literature but also offers a more comprehensive understanding of how socio-ecological dynamics impact language acquisition. After all, the learner gives language its value by engaging with it through their actions, thoughts, feelings and participation in activities (Lier, 1997). Neal and Neal (2013) propose that the interactions and connections among persons are equally significant as the setting. The emphasis must also be on individuals and their interactions, arguing that a setting includes a group of people engaging with one another; although these interactions occur in a specific location, the location itself is just one factor influencing the individuals. Within the framework of this study, the notion of "settings," characterised by social interactions rather than only natural settings, corresponds with the experiences of Kuwaiti female learners.

TESOL setting, including language learning environments, are influenced by both their physical characteristics and the relationships and activities that take place within them. These interactions are shaped by overarching cultural norms, gender roles, and familial expectations, illustrating the interrelation between the intersected ecosystems. This study emphasises the social dynamics within these environments, showing how learners' experiences in English language acquisition are influenced by cultural and societal factors, thereby offering a detailed comprehension of the ecological systems affecting their development. Kuwaiti female learners' interactions within several systems such as family, classmates, and classrooms significantly influence their language acquisition experiences. These interaction patterns underscore the reciprocal influence of various systems, establishing a distinct socio-ecological setting for each learner. Studies demonstrated that the complex challenges in education involved not only the learner and the teacher but also the environment in which they interact, along with their perspectives on language learning (e.g., Dewaele et al., 2024; Gobert, 2015; Illman & Pietilä, 2018). This interconnectedness underscores the importance of using a bioecological perspective to explore these dynamics and environments.

In the context of Kuwait, such an approach could provide valuable insights to enhance the language learning journey for both teachers and students. Although research on multilingualism, where socio-ecological issues are considered, often focuses on immigrants, refugees, or multilingual individuals living abroad, these studies are typically conducted in Western contexts where such situations are more prevalent. By contrast, exploring the bio-ecological perspective within the GCC countries, where English is learned as a foreign language for different sociocultural reasons, could yield distinct findings. The environment significantly influences individual growth and learning processes and acts as a crucial component of our knowledge acquisition process. To optimise this, we should investigate how the environment may enhance learning and explore how individuals might contribute positively (Wuryaningrum, 2023). These insights would not only contribute to regional research but also offer a more context-specific understanding of language learning dynamics.

4.5. The Ecosystems: Levels of Influence

There are five ecosystems in the Bronfenbrenner's initial model of language learning that shape the individual's experiences and interactions. To have a clearer understanding of the connections among these systems, it is more beneficial to concentrate on their interactions and relationships (Neal & Neal, 2013). The model illustrates human development using a circular diagram **Error! Reference source not found.**), consisting of four concentric circles initially labelled as microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems (Darling, 2007). Later, a fifth level, the chronosystem, was added to account for the influence of temporal changes arising from both individual and environmental factors (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This addition reflects the model's emphasis on the dynamic nature of human development over time. A sixth system, the Neo-ecological Theory (Navarro & Tudge, 2023), was introduced, reflecting Bronfenbrenner's vision of continuous evolution within his theory ([see Section 4.2.](#)) . Navarro and Tudge (2023) argued that to remain relevant to today's world, the model must account for technological and virtual environments as essential contexts for adolescent development, requiring key modifications to reflect our digital age. Building on these developments, this study will adopt the Bio-ecological Model, with the inclusion of the Neo-ecological Theory to explore how language learners engage with contemporary realities, particularly technological and virtual environments and their role in shaping perspectives and learning experiences. **Error! Reference source not found.**)



4.5.1. The microsystem

Bronfenbrenner defines the microsystem as:

(Figure 9) Bioecological Model – Adopted from Bronfenbrenner (1994, pp. 1643-47)

“a part of the environment that directly influences the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment”

(Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 39).

Parent’s

Workplace

The microsystem is regarded as the most impactful environment due to its direct and regular interactions with a learner (De Britos, 2020). In its initial formulation, encompassed the individual’s direct role, together with immediate experiences and social interactions (Neal & Neal, 2013). In the educational context, microsystem is where various elements with which the learner directly interacts (Khairul Amali et al., 2023). Bronfenbrenner (1994) elaborated on the

interactions that grew progressively intricate over time. He noted that these interactions could be social or symbolic and needed to be continuous to effectively enhance learning and

thinking skills *(Bioecological Model – Adopted from Bronfenbrenner (1994, pp. 1643-47))* as in

higher education that influenced students’ learning outcomes, including peer interactions, educational resources, teacher-student relationships, leisure activities, teaching methods, and family dynamics. These factors directly impacted students’ experiences and academic performance within the immediate learning environment (Mulisa, 2019). In the context of the present study, this understanding of the microsystem’s influence is crucial for exploring how parental practices and the household environment shape the choices and interests of Kuwaiti female learners in English language learning. Applying the Bio-ecological Model examines whether and how these immediate influences impact their language acquisition practices, providing a context-specific perspective on the microsystem’s role in educational experiences.

On a micro level, a recent study (Griffiths & Soruç, 2021) highlights the importance of individual differences in language learning environments, emphasising the necessity of considering aspects such as age, gender, ethnicity, and cultural background. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding these complexities, focusing on the interplay between individuals and their environments (Darling, 2007). Childhood language acquisition is influenced by a bidirectional process, where language use begins with the individual and extends to family and community interactions, eventually being shaped by societal language policies (Nalls, 2020). Conversely, it can also start from top-down influences, where language policies impact communities, families, and finally the individual child (Nalls, 2020). This dual-directional perspective supports the current study's approach of examining adult learners' experiences by tracing them back to childhood influences, providing a deeper understanding of how early experiences shape adult learning behaviours in language acquisition.

A recent study by Laketa et al. (2023) examined the influence of linguistic, affective, parental, and educational factors on the development of bicultural identity in teenagers. The study highlighted the significant impact of parents' linguistic and cultural knowledge on the development of their children's bicultural identities. Studies (e.g., Lük, 1986; Lyon, 1996) indicate that in households where parents are interlingual (speak different languages), the maternal language frequently shapes the linguistic acquisition of children within their household, reflecting on the socio-ecological impact. Cultural variations played a crucial role in shaping microsystems and influencing language acquisition, as they directly impacted the encouragement and support children received in learning new languages. While previous studies emphasised the significant influence of parents, particularly mothers, on children's language development, it is important to contextualise these findings within the unique societal norms of Kuwait. In the current study, it would be insightful to investigate parental roles, or other potential caregivers such as live-in domestic workers, in the lives of undergraduate female learners, exploring whether cultural norms and gender roles within the household affected these influences differently compared to earlier stages of development. Additionally, examining the extent to which cultural beliefs shaped parental language practices would provide a deeper understanding of how socio-ecological factors impacted language learning experiences within Kuwaiti households.

In contexts such as Kuwait where English is a foreign language, parents significantly influenced their children's language acquisition, either facilitating or hindering their efforts. For example, a study in Kuwait found that parental encouragement played a crucial role in shaping motivating their children, and their attitudes towards English language learning, highlighting the impact of parental involvement on Arab students' motivation (Daniel et al., 2018). Although the study emphasised the importance of parental encouragement in English language learning in Kuwait, it did not explore gender-specific experiences or the socio-ecological factors affecting female university learners. This current study fills this gap by exploring Kuwaiti female language learners' experiences through a Bio-ecological lens, providing a context-specific understanding of language acquisition dynamics.

Consequently, the parental encouragement or lack thereof in language acquisition can impact the child's perspectives, and overall success in acquiring English. In the context of foreign language acquisition in Kuwait, it is pertinent to examine the influence of parents in designating who undertakes the responsibility of teaching their children English at home. Al-Fadley et al. (2018) investigated thirty-three teachers' views through interviews on the effectiveness of parental involvement in English language learning for primary school students in Kuwait's public schools. Through additional observations and document analysis, the study revealed that parental involvement was regarded as valuable but varied based on socio-economic status, educational backgrounds, and cultural factors, including parents' perceptions of English language learning. Some parents placed less importance on learning English, influencing their level of engagement, which as a result, impacted their child's academic level (Al-Fadley et al., 2018). The findings underscore the importance of considering socio-ecological factors in understanding parental roles (microsystem) in language acquisition, highlighting a need for a context-specific approach in Kuwait. Applying approaches from other studies to Kuwait, a context where English functions as a foreign language rather than within a bilingual framework, affords the opportunity to investigate these dynamics in an environment where families aren't required to acquire the language, unlike migrants or refugees in bilingual settings, but rather for other reasons, such as educational, socio-ecological or professional development.

4.5.2. The Mesosystem

The mesosystem constitutes the second layer of the system **Error! Reference source not found.**). It is defined as the interaction between multiple microsystems and the relationships that form between them (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the mesosystem is the mutual supportive interactions between microsystems that proved to benefit the developing individual. This is evident in TESOL settings when language learners engage in conversations with peers, creating an interactive environment that connects two or more social groups, thereby positioning the learner as an evolving individual within a dynamic social context (Chong et al., 2023). This means that within the mesosystem, the interactions between an individual's characteristics and processes play a crucial role in either facilitating or hindering development. These dynamic interactions influence language acquisition over time, leading to variations in learning outcomes. For example, Saghafi et al. (2017) conducted their study in an Iranian EFL classroom with upper-intermediate learners investigate the foreign language writing anxiety, using the ecological lens. The study found that prior learning experiences significantly impacted writing anxiety. Positive experiences, such as studying abroad, enhanced confidence and writing ease, while negative experiences, including teacher criticism and peer ridicule, led to heightened anxiety and reluctance to engage in writing tasks, demonstrating the long-term influence of microsystem interactions on language learning behaviours (Saghafi et al., 2017).

Teacher's influence is another important factor in the mesosystem in language learning. Dashti et al. (2021) argued in their study on students from the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET) in Kuwait that teachers play a critical role in fostering students' learning and must be mindful of their teaching methods and influence. Dashti et. al., (2021) demonstrated a dynamic in their study that is consistent with the mesosystem by highlighting the direct relationship between the educational environment (PAAET) and the language learner. Dashti et al. (2021) emphasised the importance of teachers being aware of both internal and external factors influencing students' fear of speaking English, including past negative experiences such as ridicule. These experiences significantly discouraged students from practising their speaking skills and affected their willingness to communicate. The study also highlighted that ridiculing students for their mistakes led to reduced motivation and

reluctance to participate, underlining the need for encouragement and constructive feedback to enhance student engagement in English language learning (Dashti et al., 2021).

In summary, the mesosystem plays a pivotal role in language learning by connecting multiple microsystems, such as educational environments, social interactions, and cultural influences. To understand how these dynamics influence language learners, the current study aims to explore the mesosystem (and the other systems) to examine the interactions between these intricate factors. By doing so, the study will provide a context specific understanding of the socio-ecological factors shaping the female language learners' experiences in Kuwait. Building on this, the next section explores the exosystem, which represents the third system in the Bio-ecological Model.

4.5.3. The Exosystem

Bronfenbrenner defines the exosystem as follows:

“The exosystem comprises the linkage and process taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person, but in which events occur that indirectly processes within the immediate setting in which the developing person lives”

(Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p.24).

The exo-system, recognised as the third level in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, includes environments that indirectly influence an individual's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The impact primarily depends on the degree of the individual's engagement with their wider environment. It can be seen in different aspects of an individual's life. In language learning, the challenges or successes students face are often shaped by factors outside the TESOL setting, such as family dynamics, cultural expectations, or community influences that are indirectly influencing the language learner. These exosystem elements play a vital role in shaping learners' experiences, impacting their identity as language learners. An absent parent, for example, can be a crucial element of indirect influence in the exosystem (De Britos, 2020).

The exosystem denotes a broader social framework in which the individual is not involved directly, but the effect is shared through interactions with other systems (Berk, 2000).

Other examples include the impact of a parent's work schedule and the difficulties presented by family dynamics (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). These variables show how indirect social and environmental factors influence development through the interaction with various immediate systems. With this understanding, it is essential to recognise how the socio-ecological factors of female learners at Kuwait University may be indirectly impacting their language learning processes, especially when they convey disinterest in acquiring the language for an ambiguous or indistinct reason. Potential exosystem influences on language learners in Kuwait can be seen in parental socioeconomic status (Assaf, 2023; e.g., Darwish, 2016), educational policies and decision related to curriculum (e.g., Alajmi, 2021; Alsabbagh, 2019; Sadeq et al., 2020) or cultural expectations (e.g., Almutairi, 2020; Al-Nouri, 2019) which can all contribute to indirectly impacting language learners' perspectives toward English.

It is crucial to recognise that although Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is illustrated as a series of concentric circles, this representation diminishes the intricacy of his framework. For that, the ecosystems are better understood as networked rather than nested. Neal and Neal (2013) argued that in Bronfenbrenner's theory, the idea of systems being "nested" one inside another does not always reflect reality because not all systems directly influence each other. For example, an immediate family member, such as a parent, is directly connected to the individual. However, that same parent might interact with the educational institution (e.g., attending school meetings or discussing policies) without the child being directly involved, which shows that systems interconnect in complex ways rather than being neatly nested within one another (Neal & Neal, 2013). Microsystems for example, do not only reside within mesosystems; instead, mesosystems emerge from the relationships and interactions among various microsystems. Likewise, if one embraces a strictly nested view, it may seem that the child is immediately included within the exosystem. The exosystem encompasses external structures that indirectly influence the child, as a child does not engage actively in these systems (Jaeger, 2016).

4.5.4. The Macrosystem

Bronfenbrenner (1994) posits that the macrosystem constitutes the overarching framework of a society or culture that influences the behaviours and actions of individuals and systems at all other levels. Tudge et al. (2009) elaborated on the macrosystem, describing it as encompassing and influencing all other systems. While cultural groups share common values, these values only affect a person's development if they are encountered within the person's microsystems (Tudge et al., 2009). The macrosystem encompasses the broader cultural, social, religious and political context such as female learners' beliefs and sociocultural perspectives on language learning. It incorporates extensive cultural influences or beliefs that have enduring implications for the developing person (Neal & Neal, 2013). Lier's (1997, p.783) argue that *"the concept of ecology embraces not only the context of classroom learning but, more fundamentally, the very definitions of language, of development, and of mind"*, which aligns with the overarching principles of all ecological systems. However, it strongly reflects the macro level perspective, as it encapsulates the broader societal, cultural, and ideological contexts that shape the developing individual. Chong et al., (2023) emphasise that Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is valuable in second language research for its ability to contextualise language learning within the interaction of multiple systems. This approach highlights how learners are shaped not only by their immediate environments (microsystem), such as classrooms and families, but also by broader societal and cultural influences (macrosystem).

Khairul Amali et al. (2023), in their study of Malaysian students learning French illustrated the impact of macrosystems by showing how societal expectations and cultural settings affect learners' experiences and opportunities in language learning environments, The macrosystem is particularly crucial, since it embodies the expectations that affect the language learners identities, Stibbe (2015) described dynamic cultural identity as an ever-changing narrative, emphasising that identity continuously evolves over time. Peng (2023) conducted two studies to examine cultural identity changes among Chinese and Western EFL students using the ecological framework from an eco-linguistic perspective, focusing on the period before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found macro-level factors as the most influential in shaping cultural identity, with traditional values and national identity impacting Chinese

students, and modern societal values influencing Western students (Peng, 2023). These findings highlighted the dynamic role of the macrosystem in cultural identity development. The macrosystem interacts with other layers in the life of a language learner, including the microsystem (e.g., familial and peer influences) and the mesosystem (e.g., the interconnections among home, school, and religious environments), to impact their learning experiences. Chong et al., (2023) defined the macrosystem in their study as the social, cultural, and political setting, illustrated through the introduction of school-based assessment into the language curriculum.

In Kuwait, Al-Nouri (2019) examined the perspectives of teachers and students from the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET) on the high failure rates in English language learning, identifying factors that reflect influences consistent with the macrosystem, though the theory itself was not applied. The study found that the transition from English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in secondary education to English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) at PAAET was challenging due to insufficient preparation at the secondary level along with teachers' lack of training, leading to a gap in expected competencies (Al-Nouri, 2019). Moreover, students perceived speaking English as adopting Western traditions and diminishing the value of Arabic, leading to identity conflicts and reluctance to use English outside the classroom, which hindered their language proficiency (Al-Nouri, 2019). Although the study did not directly highlight the ecological perspective, the findings demonstrated how the macrosystem encompasses the interactions between different microsystems, which proves that issues arising in one microsystem can influence the dynamics and conditions in others (Wuryaningrum, 2023). The study shows how this is reflected in the complex relationship between identity, culture and language learning in Kuwait.

Comprehending these interconnected networks clarifies the influence of overarching cultural and ideological frameworks on individual learners, their engagement with English as a second language (L2), and their overall identity development. This approach is applied in the current study to enhance the field of knowledge by using ecological systems to an underexplored perspective of the Kuwaiti society, providing insights into the dynamic and context-specific aspects of language acquisition in Kuwait.

4.5.5. The Chronosystem

An updated version of the ecological theory is unsurprising, as Bronfenbrenner acknowledged revising and refining the concepts from his 1979 work, demonstrating his continuous effort to improve his theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). Bronfenbrenner (1979,1992) expanded his original theory by introducing the chronosystem, which recognises that environments evolve over time, influencing individual development. It examines the temporal changes in environments and how they affect the other systems. This concept was not originally included in Bronfenbrenner's initial framework (Neal & Neal, 2013). Bronfenbrenner incorporated the chronosystem into his framework to illustrate that our environment is not stable but rather evolves and transforms throughout time, paralleling our own development (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Lau and Ng (2014) explained the chronosystem as reflecting changes in environmental events and sociohistorical contexts, such as life transitions experienced over time. They further highlighted that Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem illustrates his belief that individual learning and environmental interactions evolve over time, reflecting ongoing development and change (Lau & Ng, 2014). The chronosystem demonstrated the gradual development of various ecosystems, highlighted how life events and transitions shape individual development by interacting with environmental contexts over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), potentially correlating with some findings of the current study, including the use of social media and technology in general, which will be discussed further in section 6.7. Bronfenbrenner (1979) originally defined "setting" as a physical location where interpersonal interactions occur. However, Neal and Neal (2013) argued that with modern technological advancements, setting is no longer limited to a physical space. Instead, the individual has become the central focus, as interactions now occur both face-to-face and virtually. This shift redefines setting to emphasise the person rather than the location. The contribution of Neal and Neal (2013) is relevant to the current study, as the participants demonstrate familiarity with technology and have used it as a tool whether as a facility at Kuwait University (see [Section 2.4.1.](#)) or for second language acquisition. Although studies using the Ecological Systems Theory (EST) framework have primarily focused on microsystems and mesosystems, empirical research on exosystems and macrosystems in developmental contexts remains less common (Neal & Neal, 2013).

Leaf Zhang (2018) examined the chronosystem in the context of international students in Texas, USA, noting a gap in the literature due to the challenges of collecting longitudinal data. The study emphasised the importance of life transitions and development over time, particularly in relation to academic advising (Leaf Zhang, 2018). However, it primarily focused on the experiences of international students, highlighting their transitions and adjustments. This focus on international student transitions suggests the need for further exploration of the chronosystem in other contexts. In Kuwait, for instance, female undergraduate students undergo their own unique transitions and educational journeys, including English language learning, even though they are not international students. Investigating these transitions could provide useful outcomes.

The Bio-ecological Model becomes more powerful with the inclusion of the chronosystem, highlighting how time and changing contexts shape how people develop and learn. This matters particularly for Kuwaiti female learners, whose experiences continue to evolve in a dynamic society. This basic understanding helps us engage with newer theoretical developments, especially the Neo-ecological Theory, which offers a more refined way to interpret complex, dynamic learning environments. A detailed explanation on one of the recent developments of the theory is in the upcoming section.

4.5.6. The Neo-ecological Theory

With the five ecosystems proposed by Bronfenbrenner explained in the previous sections and acknowledging the theory's capacity to evolve through modifications and expansions, this section introduces one of the most recent modifications in the Bio-ecological framework, the Neo-ecological Theory developed by Navarro and Tudge (2023) with a great focus on technological impact on youth development. There were other earlier modifications on the Bio-ecological Model (e.g., Rosa & Tudge, 2013), but the technological perspective was not included in these studies. Before the development of the Neo-ecological Theory, Johnson and Pupilampu (2008) introduced technology into Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems as a techno-subsystem within the microsystem. This approach considered technology as a component of the immediate environment, interacting directly with the individual (Johnson & Pupilampu, 2008). However, it was limited to the microsystem level, unlike the Neo-ecological

Theory, which expands the role of technology across multiple systems, reflecting its pervasive influence in today's digital age.

In their study, Navarro and Tudge (2023) emphasised the significance of technology in shaping youth development, highlighting its influence on human growth within the digital age. They argued that technology's role extends beyond youth, impacting the lives of children, families, and individuals across all ages (Navarro & Tudge, 2023). Although this neo-ecological perspective marks an initial step in adapting the Bio-ecological Model to contemporary digital environments, it is highly relevant to the present study. The extensive use of technology in the lives of today's language learners in Kuwait necessitates an updated theoretical approach to fully capture the socio-ecological factors influencing their learning experiences.

In the Neo-ecological Theory, two systems from the Bio-ecological Model, the microsystem and the macrosystem, were revised to better reflect the realities of today's world. This adaptation introduced two types of microsystems: the physical and the virtual, with the latter recognised as the central influence in the lives of adolescents today (Navarro & Tudge, 2023). Additionally, the study underscored the significant impact of cultural and societal influences emerging from the macrosystem, particularly in shaping digital developments. The Neo-ecological Theory also re-evaluated the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (see [Section 4.3](#)), emphasising the critical role of context and time and the bidirectional and dynamic interactions that might occur in them (Navarro & Tudge, 2023). This is particularly relevant in the digital age, where the boundaries between physical and virtual contexts are increasingly blurred and challenging to define (Plowman, 2019; Uzelac, 2008). Given the widespread integration of technology and social media in the Kuwaiti society (see [Section 3.5.2.2](#)), understanding the virtual microsystem and its interactions with cultural norms and societal values and beliefs is crucial. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how these learners' perspectives and identities in language learning are shaped by virtual interactions and online cultural influences, offering context-specific insights into the socio-ecological factors affecting language acquisition in Kuwait. Building on the Neo-ecological Theory and its recognition of the virtual microsystem as a central influence on human development, it is essential to consider the role of technology in language learning. It can be said that technology has not only reshaped educational environments but has also created

new avenues for language acquisition, reflecting the evolving socio-ecological settings in which learners navigate today.

After presenting the theoretical framework guiding this study, it is evident that the focus is on the language learner and the multifaceted Bio-ecological systems influencing their language learning experiences. These systems encompass cultural, societal, and ideological factors that interact bidirectionally within language learners' lives, influencing their language learning process, hence, the term *socio-ecological* was chosen to represent these objectives.

Recognising that these systems vary for each learner, this study seeks to uncover the perspectives that emerge from these interactions and understand the underlying reasons by linking them to the socio-ecological approach. To achieve this, the study carefully selects appropriate data collection methods and analytical approaches to provide comprehensive insights. By integrating the contextual background of Kuwait, the literature review, and the theoretical framework, the following chapter outlines the research design and methodology, justifying how they align with the study's objectives and contribute to a nuanced understanding of language learning in this unique context.

4.5.7. Rebranding the Theoretical Contribution: A Neo-Ecological Model of Language Learning in Kuwait

Reframing the Bio-ecological model is tailored to the specificities of the Kuwaiti context and anticipates several key areas of influence which are expected to emerge from the narratives of participants. This study puts forward a revised version of Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological model to better reflect the sociocultural environment surrounding Kuwaiti female language learners. While the original model offers a layered structure of nested systems, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, this research adopts the recent Neo-ecological stance (Navarro & Tudge, 2023) that conceptualises these systems as overlapping, networked, and fluid (see (Figure 10). The revised model in the current study anticipates a more dynamic interaction between female Kuwaiti learners and their surrounding environment, where identity is not shaped by isolated influences, but co-constructed across systems.

The model is customised to the nuances of the Kuwaiti environment and suggests many significant areas of influence anticipated to arise from participant narratives. For example, family dynamics might play a central role in shaping learners' engagement with English. This

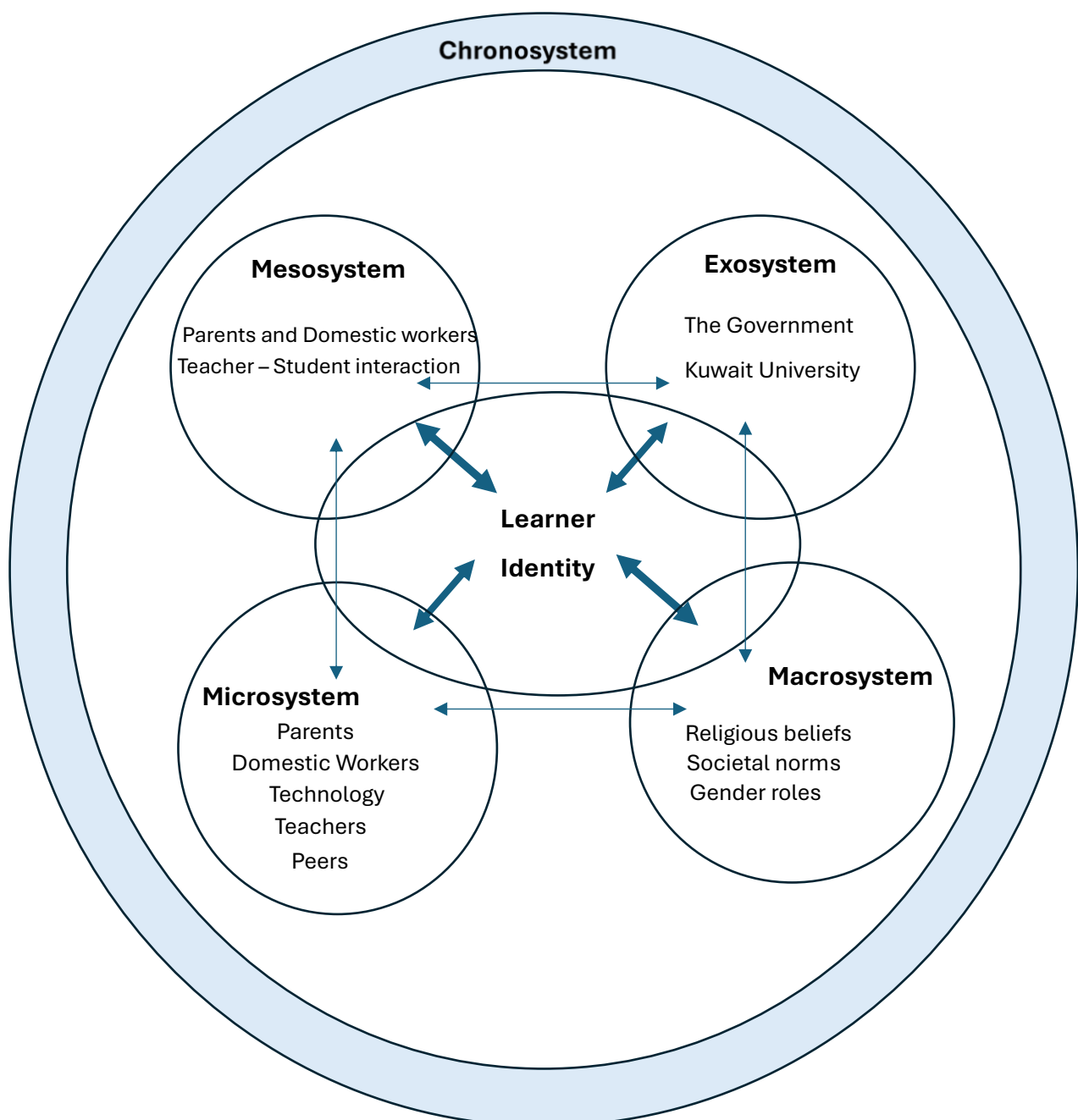
includes not only the influence of parents and siblings in encouraging or discouraging language use, but also broader household expectations tied to gender roles, academic success, and cultural values within the Kuwaiti society. This aligns with Neal and Neal's (2013) rethinking of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems as networked rather than nested, where contexts are not separated by rigid boundaries but are interlinked and influential. In the case of the household, we do not observe the microsystem acting in isolation, rather, it actively embodies elements of the macrosystem, such as cultural norms, religious beliefs, and cultural/tribal ideologies around gender and status. These macro-levels flow into and shape the micro-level interactions within the household. This networked perspective reflects how Kuwaiti female learners' identities are negotiated across multiple overlapping systems, not confined within one layer at a time. It can be expected that family attitudes will inform learners' incentives and may affect their investment in English across different contexts.

In addition, the unique role of domestic workers within many Kuwaiti households is likely to surface as an informal yet meaningful influence. Early exposure to English through interactions with housemaids, many of whom are non-Arabic speakers, may offer learners an alternate access point to the language. This influence could cut across multiple systems, from the microsystem of the home to the exosystem of labour arrangements and the macrosystem of religious beliefs and sociocultural norms.

Peer relationships, especially within the TESOL classroom, are also likely to contribute to learners' investment. Experiences of judgement, support, or competitiveness among peers may influence the willingness to engage and show a linguistic identity. Similarly, teacher-student interactions and the pedagogical climate are expected to emerge as pivotal in reinforcing or challenging learners' investment in the classroom. Technology is likely to appear as a significant factor in language learning, with digital tools and platforms such as social media and mobile apps mediating learners' exposure to English and expanding access beyond the classroom. These tools may intersect with other systems, reshaping peer interaction, teacher feedback, and personal learning trajectories. These examples illustrate that movement between ecological systems is not always linear or top-down. In some cases, influence flows in both directions, for instance, peer relationships within the microsystem may actively shape interactions across the mesosystem, such as collaboration between teachers and learners. In other cases, the flow is predominantly one-way, as when macro-level forces like cultural norms or religious ideologies filter down and shape practices across all other

systems, often without being directly questioned or resisted. This further supports the need for a networked, rather than strictly hierarchical, view of ecological influence.

The reframed model below allows for these influences to be understood not as separate factors, but as part of a larger, interdependent network. It anticipates that learner identity will emerge at the intersection of multiple systems and shifting contextual forces. Rather than positioning learners as passive recipients of environmental inputs, the model recognises them as active agents navigating a complex social ecology. The model that follows visually represents this reconceptualisation, offering a framework through which the data can be interpreted in subsequent chapters.



4.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the theoretical foundations guiding this study, focusing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and its development into the Bio-ecological Model. The theory offers a structured way to understand the layered influences on language learning, particularly for female learners at Kuwait University. The chapter examined the core systems (micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chrono-levels) situating them within the Kuwaiti context to highlight their relevance to TESOL settings and learner identity.

Furthermore, it also explored how social norms, family roles, and educational contexts interact to shape language learning experiences. Finally, the discussion extended to the neo-ecological perspective, one of the latest developments of the Bio-ecological model, considering the impact of digital tools on language acquisition. In addition, this chapter introduced a rebranded theoretical contribution in the form of a Neo-ecological model tailored to the Kuwaiti context. Building on Neal and Neal's (2013) networked model and Navarro and Tudge's (2023) Neo-ecological stance, this revised framework moves beyond static, nested layers and instead conceptualises systems as overlapping and fluid. This model provides the conceptual foundation for interpreting participants' narratives in the following chapters, informing the use of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) and Short Story Analysis (SSA) in line with the study's theoretical orientation. (see Chapter 5). The next chapter outlines the theoretical approach of the study, detailing how the research was designed and carried out within the Bio-ecological Model as a theoretical framework to explore the complex experiences of the female language learners.

5. Chapter 5: Methodology

5.1. Overview

This chapter presents the methodological framework of the study, outlining the processes and approaches undertaken to address the research questions. It begins with an overview of the study's aims (5.2), which focus on exploring the socio-ecological factors that influence English language acquisition among female students at Kuwait University. The chosen methodological framework is a narrative research design (5.3), which provides a comprehensive approach to understanding participants' experiences through *the analysis of narratives* which offers insight into how participants' stories were interpreted.

The chapter proceeds by detailing the preparation stage (5.4), including the researcher's role as both an insider within the educational context and a reflexive observer. The data collection process (5.5) is then outlined, describing the research site and participant recruitment, which involved inviting female students from diverse academic majors within the College of Education at Kuwait University to voluntarily contribute to the study. The locations for data collection are identified, followed by an explanation of the data collection methods, which include semi-structured interviews and student reflective diaries, both of which were employed to capture participants' nuanced experiences.

Procedures ensuring validity, reliability, and triangulation in qualitative research (5.5) are also discussed, highlighting translation and reflexive notes as key measures to enhance credibility. The chapter then elaborates on the data analysis methods (5.6), beginning with translation and transcription before presenting the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach. The six-phase guideline of RTA is described in relation to the analysis of interview and diary data, followed by an exploration of researcher reflexivity, positioning the researcher as a cultural mediator. Short Story Analysis (SSA) is also introduced as an analytical tool for examining participants' narratives through a socio-ecological lens.

Finally, ethical considerations (5.7) are addressed, emphasising the importance of informed consent and confidentiality. The integration of these methodological components ensures a

comprehensive approach to analysing the socio-ecological factors shaping the English language learning experiences of female students at Kuwait University.

5.2. Aim of the Study

This study applies a qualitative approach to explore the complex interplay between socio-ecological factors and English language acquisition among female students at Kuwait University. Zighan & El-Qasem (2021) assert that qualitative research is proficient in examining intricate occurrences and acquiring an extensive understanding of participants' perspectives. In the context of language learning. Narratives in language learning were categorised into three main types: autobiographical narratives that reflect personal experiences, narratives that describe language learning and teaching within a specific context, and narratives that explore issues related to the narrators' identities (Barkhuizen et al., 2013). As a result, Narrative Inquiry (NI) was chosen for the study to explore the personal experiences and perceptions that influence these students' personal language learning journeys, both in and out of the educational context, and in relation to their identities. The study seeks to reveal the different narratives underlying participants' unique language learning experiences through the selection of certain data collection methods that will be explained in detail in the subsequent sections.

The methodological design was guided by the context of this research within Kuwait. As a researcher and a language instructor in the English Language Unit at Kuwait University, my essential role in this setting shaped the selection of methods that would appropriately record the varied experiences of female learners while considering the wider socio-ecological perspective. To investigate these aspects, and as discussed in [Section 1.4.](#), the following research questions were identified:

1. How do past language learning experiences from the household influence Kuwaiti female language learners' perspectives and in constructing their identities within TESOL setting?
2. What socio-ecological factors influence female language learners' investment in acquiring English beyond the classroom?

3. What is the impact of socio-ecological variables on the experiences of female learners in Kuwaiti TESOL setting at Kuwait University?

These questions shaped the selection of methodological tools and methodologies, ensuring that the study captured both individual narratives and their connection to broader societal contexts. The selection of NI as the principal methodological framework corresponds with these questions, facilitating an in-depth investigation of participants' lived experiences while recognising the multifaceted social and cultural dynamics involved.

5.3. Narrative Research Design

“In narrative inquiry, I know that I am in the parade, part of the landscape about which I am writing.”

(Clandinin, 2022, p. 1)

According to Connelly and Clandinin (2012), narrative research explores how individuals perceive and interact with the world. Narrative Inquiry (NI) examines human experiences through storytelling, making it particularly suitable for investigating participants' language learning experiences and perspectives. Barkhuizen defined Narrative Inquiry:

“Narrative inquiry brings storytelling and research together either by using stories as research data or by using storytelling as a tool for data analysis or presentation of findings”.

(Barkhuizen et al., 2013, p. 3)

From a sociocultural perspective, narratives in methodology function as developmental tools that connect past, present, and future experiences (Swain et al., 2015). In other words, NI is a design that explores participants' stories about their lives and allows researchers to retell the stories by adding their unique viewpoints (Riessman, 2008). When it comes to language learners, narratives provide profound insights, which can be investigated through the socio-ecological lens, highlighting *proximal processes* as a facilitator for this investigation in various contexts and different times (see [Chapter 4](#)). In fact, the breadth and depth may not be as present in other experimental research as they are in narratives (Swain et al., 2015). The way

we understand the world and our place in it is shaped by the stories we hear, influencing how we connect with others and construct our realities. Through narratives, people make sense of their world and shape their communities by sharing lived experiences, seeking support and connection through these stories (Clandinin, 2006). This study adopted a narrative approach for this very reason, as the stories of language learners can indirectly reveal the kind of support they needed from language instructors. In telling their stories, language learners will reflect on their imagined communities and identities (see [Section 3.2.](#)) which will provide insightful outcomes to language learning research.

Building on the qualitative approach, this study is applying the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism is a theoretical approach that emphasises the importance of comprehending the more profound implications of human behaviour and societal occurrences (Pulla & Carter, 2018). While quantitative research prioritised identifying broad trends and assessing the impact of different systems, often through standard role classifications, placing less emphasis on the significance of context, the interpretivist research focused on how individuals constructed, negotiated, maintained, and reshaped meaning within specific social environments (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). The interpretative nature of narrative research necessitates that researchers consistently question and revisit their interpretations, recognising that these are continuously provisional and incomplete (Lee & Simon-Maeda, 2006). It is an important approach for the NI because it centres on the student rather than the instructor or the TESOL classroom in general as a broader societal view. After all, insights into the deeper aspect of human behaviour are always shaped by the philosophical perspectives that researchers bring to their work (Dang et al., 2024).

Interpretivism is distinguished by its appreciation of the presence of subjectivity in research. It is the objective of researchers to comprehend the distinctive perspectives and experiences of individuals and the ways in which they influence their perspective of the world (Kouam Arthur William, 2024). Therefore, as a researcher for this study, I aim to acknowledge my role in the investigation while being cautious of any biases that could influence the data and its interpretations. While a wide range of theoretical frameworks is available for narrative analysis, the final choice should align with the researcher's specific interests and purposes, ensuring analytical replicability and relevance to the study's aims (Pavlenko, 2007). Therefore,

I aim to understand the personal perspectives of the participants without modifying them. The Interpretivism in research paradigms focuses on exploring personal perceptions and meanings of phenomena to enhance contextual understanding (Khatri, 2023), which is why it is considered relevant in the current study. However, one of the limitations of the interpretivist approach is securing access and navigating the power dynamics between researchers and participants (Trangbæk & Cecchini, 2023). In the context of this study, access to participants was straightforward, as my position as a faculty member at Kuwait University facilitated direct engagement without significant barriers.

Furthermore, interpretivist research is not just to record participants' statements. Instead, it requires researchers to engage in interpretation, drawing on theoretical, analytical, and methodological frameworks to make sense of their accounts (Trangbæk & Cecchini, 2023). Selecting a research paradigm means that this paradigm guides and informs the entire investigation. For that, interpretivism was selected for a better understanding of the learners' educational experiences in a TESOL classroom within their socio-ecological contexts. The methods were carefully chosen to allow participants own their stories and what they have experienced and to narrate it the way they find it suitable. Then, it is the researcher's role to make sense of the storied narratives based on the epistemological positioning of the research.

Various stages were implemented to guarantee the reliability and accuracy of participants' narratives such as audio recordings of the interviews maintained their exact phrasing, guaranteeing that no details were lost in translation. During the analysis, I kept reflexive notes to document my ideas, decisions, and any personal biases that may have influenced my judgements. Ortlipp (2008) highlighted that using exploratory and reflective journals allowed researchers to trace the evolving understanding of their roles as researchers, interviewers, and interpreters of interview data. These journals also enabled the documentation of decisions made and the theoretical justifications for those choices (Ortlipp, 2008). Moreover, frequent consultations with my supervisors offered an extra layer of accountability, facilitating the identification and adjustment of any unintentional bias, thus ensuring that the participants' perspectives were central to the research.

The narrative approach facilitated the gathering and exploration of participants' perspectives, providing deep comprehension of their real-life experiences and the importance they highlight to these stories. The study captured the complexity and nuances of individual viewpoints by focusing on narratives and aligned with the broader goal of understanding the learners from a socio-ecological perspective. Through narratives, participants will be able to decide on their stories and present them in their preferred sequence. In turn, they will prioritise specific parts and overlook others based on their personal experience. This enabled the researcher to analyse the study findings from the perspective of their storytelling and relate that to the theoretical foundation of the current study. This type of collaboration between the participant and the researcher can provide valuable findings.

While narrative methodology offered valuable insights, it also presented several challenges, particularly when exploring large-scale social phenomena, where the complexity of interpretation might occur, making it difficult to present a coherent story (Stanley, 2008). Additionally, maintaining a clear separation between the researcher's interpretations and the participants' narratives was challenging due to the deep engagement required in NI, which risked influencing the analysis (Stanley, 2008). Although Stanley (2008) viewed the difficulty in separating the researcher's interpretations from participants' narratives as a limitation, Ortlipp (2008) argued that maintaining a certain degree of personal presence in interviews could enhance the depth of NI. The study conducted individual interviews and aimed to establish a 'non-hierarchical' relationship by engaging authentically with participants (Ortlipp, 2008). This was achieved by sharing personal opinions and experiences when appropriate, answering participants' questions, and encouraging thoughtful responses. By adopting this approach, Ortlipp stated that the study created a more open and interactive interview environment, which fostered richer and more authentic narratives. Wei (2023) believes that it is the responsibility of the educational narrative researcher to gather and convey stories, documenting experiences, and crafting narratives. By sharing and revisiting these narratives, they foster meaningful learning for individuals and communities (Wei, 2023)

Another limitation in the narrative methodology noted by Stanley (2008) was that small-scale narrative studies seemed to work well, but their limitations became more noticeable when applied to larger-scale research. These challenges underscore the importance of selecting an

appropriate methodology. In this study, the number of participants remained manageable. Moreover, under the foundational theoretical framework, although the interviews were semi-structured (see Section 5.5.3.) the questions were purposefully designed to explore the socio-ecological perspective, which relied on the researcher's skill in framing questions that were open-ended and non-leading, allowing participants to express their experiences freely and authentically. The semi-structured interviews were conducted to enhance the NI process.

These relatively concise interviews were detailed and long enough to provide valuable information. The interviews were then analysed using the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Clarke & Braun, 2021), and short stories analysis (Barkhuizen, 2016), which will be explained in the data analysis section, to better understand how learners express their perspectives from a socio-ecological viewpoint. Connelly and Clandinin (2012) noted that narratives are shaped by lived stories, revealing the evolving nature of individuals, settings, and experiences throughout the inquiry. These narratives also highlighted the personal and social dimensions of both the researchers' and participants' lives, as well as the contexts in which the inquiry took place (Connelly & Clandinin, 2012). Through the narrative approach, the research contributed to understanding how female learners navigate English language learning within Kuwait's unique sociocultural environment, with participants actively involved in constructing and validating their narratives through both interview discussions and reflective diary entries.

5.3.1. Analysis of the Narratives

Polkinghorne (1995) distinguished between the *analysis of narratives* and the *narrative analysis*. The former involves coding and categorising themes, aligning with Bruner's (1986) paradigmatic approach and resembling Clarke and Braun's (2013) thematic analysis. On the other hand, Polkinghorne (1995) defined *narrative analysis* as constructing coherent stories from multiple data sources, addressing earlier ambiguities in narrative research. While he distinguishes it from *analysis of narratives*, Barkhuizen (2011) notes overlapping features and blurred boundaries. Barkhuizen also observes that *analysis of narratives* has become more common in TESOL due to its structured approach, making it suitable for this study's focus on learners' narratives within a socio-ecological context. Given the different concepts of narratives, the current study adopted the *analysis of narratives* approach, as it allowed for a

systematic yet nuanced exploration of learners' experiences. This method not only captured the structured thematic elements but also kept richness and authenticity of learners' narratives, which is essential for understanding the complexities of language learning within a socio-ecological context.

With these considerations and after briefly explaining the definition of *analysis of narratives* and its connection to thematic analysis, as well as the definition of *narrative analysis* and its correlation with storytelling, and the ambiguity in their definitions, I have used the term *analysis of narratives* in my research to apply the aim of the study through looking at longer narratives to clarify and explore the socio-ecological influences impacting female language learners at Kuwait University, and also for the wide application of *analysis of narratives* to the field of TESOL (Barkhuizen, 2011). The *analysis of narratives* proved particularly fitting for this study, as it enabled the identification and understanding of themes that aligned with a socio-ecological perspective by organising the narratives into meaningful insights regarding learners' perspectives, identities, and environments.

The *analysis of narratives* approach enhances the analytical depth and highlights participants' lived experiences by presenting their narratives in a manner that mirrors their lived experiences and socio-ecological environments. Ranjit (2011) explains that narrative, as a technique, is characterised by its absence of a defined framework and planned content, and that through storytelling, the researcher learns about the participant's personal experience. Sometimes, the researcher will encourage the participant to go into further detail but will be mostly passive during the conversation (Ranjit, 2011). This study takes narratives into account to comprehend participant stories, examine how they provide meaning, and see how they assess their lives (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). The primary focus here is to investigate students' viewpoints, as outlined by the research questions. A narrative approach, and more specifically, the analysis of the narratives, is an ideal approach in which the participant's perspective is presented without the researcher's interference during the semi-structured interviews, except for guiding the participant towards specific aspects to provide further insight and elaboration.

The combined use of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (see [Section 5.6.1.](#)) and Short Story Analysis (SSA) (see Section 5.6.2.) provided a suitable framework for exploring learners' narratives. Reflexive Thematic Analysis uncovered recurring patterns across the data, ensuring that broader themes aligned with the socio-ecological perspective were identified. Simultaneously, SSA preserved the individuality of each participant's account, allowing their voices and unique experiences to emerge naturally. Both methods will be explained in detail in the subsequent sections.

5.4. The Preparation Stage

The data collection preparation began before the start of the academic Spring term of the year 2022/2023. In my position as a language instructor affiliated with the same English Language Unit (ELU) at Kuwait University, I contacted my colleagues to ask for their assistance in conducting a pilot review of the study's interview questions and diaries. I also gathered input from former students, whom I had previously taught on other courses from the ELU, and with whom I have maintained ongoing communication. Additionally, I sought the expertise of one of our experienced and senior language instructors within our ELU to review the semi-structured interview questions and provide me with her valuable insights. The instructor was a valuable asset in proposing some changes to the interviews. The objective was to ensure the methods' appropriateness for the research inquiry before meeting the potential participants.

5.4.1. Role of the Researcher

The researcher's role is crucial in qualitative research, as their positionality, reflexivity, and engagement greatly impact the study process and findings. Creswell and Poth (2016) argue that qualitative researchers serve as essential instruments in data collection, interpreting the dataset through their subjective perspectives. One aspect of researcher reflexivity is recognising how personal familiarity with participants' experiences can influence every stage of the research process. This includes participant recruitment, data collection through interviews or observations, data analysis, interpretation, and the formulation of conclusions. This familiarity potentially shapes how data is understood and findings are presented (Berger, 2015).

While conducting the current study, I valued my role as both an insider by being a language instructor in the English Language Unit, where I collected my data, and as a researcher of the study. My familiarity with the Kuwaiti educational system and my professional background as a language instructor allowed me to handle the data collection process with sensitivity and awareness. Although me being an insider was an addition to the data collection process, it also required careful planning to ensure that interpretations were guided by participants' perspectives rather than assumptions based on shared experiences between the researcher and the participant. For that, researchers must critically evaluate their own potential biases to ensure the credibility of their findings (Galdas, 2017). Positionality of a researcher describes the attitude an individual adopts and their viewpoint on a research task within its social and political framework (Holmes, 2020).

My positionality in the current study facilitated easy communication with the participants, as they know that I understand the cultural dynamics that shaped their experiences. This type of understanding established trust between me and the participants, knowing that I could share, comprehend, and learn about the cultural commonalities and differences. Researcher positionality influences the research process, and this can be reached with the researcher's reflexivity to avoid any potential biases (Holmes, 2020). Berger (2015) highlights that reflexivity involves a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of one's positionality, acknowledging how this may affect the research process and outcomes. This resonates with Richards' (2003, p. 9) argument that qualitative research has a '*transformative potential for the researcher*,' highlighting how research participants can profoundly influence the researcher's perspective. This aspect reflects one of my key motivations and intentions in conducting this study, that is to engage in a learning process inspired by the students' experiences. My aim was not merely to gather information or record results but to understand their perspectives deeply and learn from them. This approach enriched my personal and professional growth, allowing me to emerge from the research filled with new ideas and insights.

The researcher's involvement in the data collection of the qualitative research is essential to the co-construction of the data (Fink, 2000). According to Paris and Winn (2014), co-construction involves a collaborative process where researchers and participants mutually

influence the research outcomes through dynamic exchanges of ideas. Participants take agency over their involvement, allowing for fluid roles that enrich dialogue and foster equity (Paris & Winn, 2014). They argue that building trust and relationships is essential, achieved through intentional design features that promote open communication and respect, and that researchers must reflect on and address power dynamics to create an inclusive environment where all voices are valued (Paris & Winn, 2014). Critical reflection on methodology helps identify moments of shared meaning-making during interactions (Paris & Winn, 2014). Therefore, throughout the research process, I viewed myself not only as a researcher but as a co-constructor of meaning alongside my participants. Engaging with their narratives challenged my assumptions and gave me the opportunity to look at language learning from a perspective I had not previously considered, making sure that the participants' perspectives were the centre of the study. This approach presented challenges in analysing the narratives, as it required me to remain constantly aware of my dual role as a researcher and language instructor, ensuring that I built mutual trust with the participants. By maintaining reflexivity and co-constructing knowledge with participants, my goal was to uncover findings that represent the participants' experiences and contribute to the discourse on language learning in Kuwait.

5.5. Data Collection

Data collection in qualitative research is a fundamental process that involves gathering non-numerical data to gain insights into thoughts, views, or experiences (Dewi, 2022). The process of data collection involves several key considerations and strategies to ensure that the data collected is relevant, comprehensive, and meaningful. Gathering qualitative data involved a flexible, evolving process that captured all relevant contextual details linked to both the research topic and the study environment (Dang et al., 2024). To gain better insight into the perspectives of the female language learners in the ELU at Kuwait university, semi-structure interviews and reflective diaries were collected from 16 participants. This section details the research sites and introduces the participants and describes the methods used for data collection. It offers a comprehensive understanding of the context, the people involved, and the tools applied in the research process.

5.5.1. Research Site

The recruitment of participants for this study focused on female students enrolled in English language courses at Kuwait University's College of Education. As a language instructor and former coordinator for ENG142 at the ELU, I had the flexibility to choose a convenient location for conducting the interviews. The interviews were scheduled to take place in person at the English Language Unit (ELU) in Kuwait University. I selected the ELU library as the interview venue due to its quiet and relaxed environment, which provided participants with a suitable area to feel comfortable and communicate freely. The preliminary procedures spanned a duration of one week, commencing with the establishment of the team on Microsoft Teams and concluding with the completion of the interview schedule. The scheduling of the interviews was done over the weekend to allow the students enough time to consider a convenient date and time that would not interfere with their academic commitments at the University.

5.5.2. Recruiting Participants

The study employed non-probability volunteer convenience sampling (Vehovar et al., 2016) to select the participants. Volunteer sampling occurs when individuals choose to participate in response to general invitations (e.g., on social media or other online platforms). In this approach, the decision to participate is made by the respondents themselves (voluntarily), rather than by the researchers (Vehovar et al., 2016). However, convenience sampling involves choosing participants who are easily accessible, which often introduce biases due to the non-random selection process (Vehovar et al., 2016). Both methods enabled researchers to gather information rapidly and efficiently; however, they also presented limitations in terms of representativeness. Since participants were not randomly selected, the findings might not accurately reflect the broader population (Vehovar et al., 2016). Nonetheless, understanding these methods is crucial when choosing an appropriate research methodology (Vehovar et al., 2016). In this study, these methods were chosen because the invitations for participation were made within a TESOL setting (in the classroom). Although the selection occurred within a specific context, the participants were still diverse, as they came from different majors within the College of Education. Therefore, while the sampling was context-specific, it maintained a degree of variability that led to random selection, enhancing the study's potential to uncover meaningful insights. The sampling approach was also appropriate for the investigation to

explore the socio-ecological influences on language learning, as it gave the option to students to participate, which ensured that participants were comfortable sharing personal experiences about their personal perspectives, household environment, cultural background, and learning journey. Forcing individuals to participate may result in less reflective responses, which may compromise the authenticity of the information collected.

The recruitment process began with an announcement in two sections of the same course (ENG142), in which I explained the commitment required for both interviews and reflective diaries. I entered the classroom, introduced myself, and explained the purpose of the study. I emphasised the voluntary nature of participation and assured participants of confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms. Students who expressed interest were provided with detailed information about the research process, emphasising that their participation would involve sharing personal narratives about their language learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom. All students who were interested in participating were asked to apply using a provided link, after which I would contact them for further steps. The number of participants in qualitative research, particularly in narrative research design, can vary significantly based on the research goals and the depth of analysis required. While Creswell and Creswell (2017) suggest that a narrative design typically includes one or two individuals, they also emphasise that there is no definitive answer regarding the number of participants, as the literature presents a variety of perspectives on this matter. In this study, sixteen students volunteered to participate from two different classes, but registered for the same course (ENG 142) offered by ELU.

I intentionally selected two classes with different instructors to be able to gather diverse perspectives from the participants about their experiences with their instructors. This approach allowed me to explore whether differences in language acquisition were influenced by the different teaching strategies of the two instructors. While the inclusion of sixteen participants might be considered large for narrative research, the selection was based on the diversity of experience that might emerge from the participants, providing a rich data that could enrich the analysis. The participant number in this qualitative study is considered large. However, qualitative research can indeed accommodate larger samples. A study by Xu and Xie (2024) identified the limited sample size as a limitation while examining FLA beyond the

traditional emphasis on language competency. The number selected balances the need for broader perspectives and nuanced understanding of each participant’s experiences.

ESL instructors in ELU are expected to have a diverse student population for CoE, coming from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in order to assist them with their language skills (Ammigan & Bentahar, 2024) that are required for their bachelor’s degree at Kuwait University. Therefore, the volunteers were from different majors. Three volunteers were from the Arabic studies major, four from the Kindergarten major (Early Childhood Education), two from the English major, and two from the Math major. Only one participant was from each of the remaining majors: Social Science, Science, Islamic Studies, History, and Psychology (Table 2). In addition to the previous participant information provided, both teachers of the ENG142 course were female with at least 5 years of teaching experience. They were interviewed for their feedback and knowledge, and to provide an overview of the course, but these were not included in the analysis so that the study focused only on the students’ perspective. The participants of the study helped in ensuring that the study’s findings were detailed, diverse, and comprehensive. The table below (Table 2) presents each participant’s profile, including their university major and age.

(Table 2) Information of the Participants

	Pseudonym	Major	Age
1	Rawyah	Arabic Language	23
2	Shaikha	Arabic Language	22
3	Wadha	Arabic Language	37
4	Dana	English	19
5	Dalal	English	18
6	Farah	History	20
7	Lamya	Islamic Studies	20
8	Soad	Kindergarten	32
9	Maha	Kindergarten	22
10	Anfal	Kindergarten	20
11	Awrad	Kindergarten	22

12	Noura	Math	21
13	Athari	Math	22
14	Hussah	Psychology	21
15	Munirah	Science	21
16	Sarah	Social Studies	20

5.5.3. Semi-structured Interviews

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) define a semi-structured interview as a method used to collect comprehensive narratives of an individual's experiences and life to comprehend and analyse the importance of those events. Assessing the quality of research is essential throughout all stages of the research process, but it is especially important to carefully examine the methods used for gathering data. It is important to select the appropriate instrument for evaluating the quality of research, which cannot be achieved without comprehending the study's objective, and in the case of the current study, exploring language learners' perspectives.

The significance of research quality assessment has significantly increased, prompting new discussions over the possibility of establishing universal quality criteria applicable across many research paradigms (Bryman, 2016). This issue has attracted significant attention from social researchers and policymakers interested in academic research (Bryman, 2016).

Bryman (2016) also highlights that participant observation and semi-structured interviews allow researchers to maintain openness towards the dynamic nature of the information they aim to understand. In a study on pre-service language teachers' mindsets, the researchers used semi-structured interviews to investigate various important aspects, such as the participants' backgrounds as language learners and teachers, their perspectives on language teaching and learning, and their overall well-being (Haukås & Mercer, 2022). Through semi-structured interviews, the study found that pre-service language teachers possess complex mindset beliefs that has a mixture of growth and fixed perspectives, indicating a system of interrelated beliefs (Haukås & Mercer, 2022). The method also provided flexibility for participants to explore their responses in detail, enabling nuanced discussions about their mindset beliefs, and allowed researchers to delve further into the participants' perspectives. (Haukås & Mercer, 2022).

In the current study, the methods used were carefully chosen. In response to the issue of quality, the semi-structured interview method was used. This selection was based on the necessity of investigating the study questions with an accepting mindset, allowing adaptability in the progression of the data (Bryman, 2016). The ability to adapt as a researcher is crucial for my research, as this adaptation seeks to explore complex and nuanced socio-ecological factors related to learning English as a foreign language that traditional methods may not sufficiently explore. The semi-structured interviews are conducted with the emphasis of reaching a study objective through the Bio-ecological lens rather than being viewed as a regular talk for gathering information. The semi-structured interview method, which involves open-ended questions, enables a more profound comprehension of the topic under investigation. It also produces an in-depth insight into learners' experiences and beliefs in the field of language learning research, contributing to the advancement of knowledge in this area.

1. The Process:

In the present study, both pre- and post-semi-structured interviews underwent multiple steps, which are detailed in the following section. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore each participant's unique perspective, focusing on their individual experiences rather than aiming for a generalised understanding of the phenomenon (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Initially, I piloted the interview questions with a colleague from the ELU to ensure the flow and appropriateness of the questions, as well as to check the overall length of the interview.

After the refinement of the interview questions, I prepared a detailed interview roadmap (in Arabic) for each session, including spaces for real-time note-taking (see [Appendix 1](#)). Inspired by McIntosh and Morse (2015), who referred to this as an interview guide or schedule, I chose 'roadmap' because of the nature of the open-ended questions that ensured a structured yet adaptable framework, allowing follow-up based on participants' responses. The questions of the interview are designed based on the research questions of the study, and the primary aim was to uncover the participants' personal and subjective views, which may not be fully captured by other means. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) described the in-depth interview as a personal and intimate encounter where open, direct verbal questions were used to extract detailed narratives and stories. Furthermore, while all participants will be presented

with the same questions as per the interview roadmap, the interviewer maintains the flexibility to shift the focus significantly from the preset questions (McIntosh & Morse, 2015), based on the participants' responses.

The interview stages provide flexibility, allows the interviewer to explore topics in greater depth, clarifies any ambiguities, and assesses the interviewee's knowledge boundaries (Cohen et al., 2002). The way the questions are organised and asked can change based on how the participant responds (Rubin & Rubin, 2011), in contrast with unstructured interviews, which involve a conversational approach centred around a broad topic and can be time-consuming. It might be argued that there are numerous resemblances between the two approaches. However, during semi-structured interviews, the interviewer takes on a position of higher authority and control over the conversation, aiming to limit the discussion to the specific topic they are interested in (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). With the interview framework established and the roadmap in place, the next stage involves conducting the interviews in practice.

As a language instructor at Kuwait University, I had access to Microsoft Teams, which KU provided to all faculty members for remote teaching after the pandemic in 2020. After grouping all the participants, I sent a welcome greeting explaining the interview process while allowing them to inquire about any concerns they had. I then provided the students with a timetable for the interviews' dates and times, allowing students to select and view their availability to participate in the interviews. To prioritise the participants' comfort and convenience, I gave students the freedom to choose the time and day that most effectively accommodated their individual schedules, with the goal of reducing the probability of unexpected cancellations caused by scheduling issues.

Once all students had indicated their preferred interview times, I prepared for the interviews and was ready to meet them in person at the ELU library. Previous research by Wilson (2014) provided guidelines on how to conduct an interview that informed my work. Drawing inspiration from those, I developed my own set of guidelines to be introduced verbally to the participant at the beginning of the interview, that included the interview's purpose and subject matter, outlined key questions on various topics, and included additional comments and

recommendations (Wilson, 2014). Each interview lasted approximately 35 to 40 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded, a way to facilitate data storage and help create reliable transcriptions. Consistent with McLellan et al. (2003), recording interviews not only facilitated a more accurate transcription process but also enhanced the depth of analysis in educational research, ensuring that the nuances of participants' perspectives were reliably captured.

Additionally, I took notes to record any relevant information that emerged during the interviews, whether it was a noteworthy comment from the participant or a self-reminder for future reference on that specific interview. The notes were essential in enhancing post-interview preparation by including or eliminating questions. Furthermore, the process of notetaking served as a valuable means of recollection for the participant, particularly when noteworthy events relevant to the considerations in the study were mentioned. Patton (2002) also argues that recording interviews does not diminish the significance of taking notes during the investigation. At the conclusion of each interview, I immediately reviewed the guiding questions and added any supplementary remarks that were related to my investigation before beginning the next interview.

5.5.4. Student Reflective Diaries

In addition to the previous method, reflective diaries were used as a complementary tool for the post-semi-structured interviews to examine viewpoints and perceptions of the learners throughout the course in the TESOL setting. Notwithstanding the promising evidence supporting reflective diaries, their widespread adoption in higher education remains notably scarce (Wallin & Adawi, 2018a). Recently, diaries and electronic logs have become increasingly popular as methods for collecting stories in identity research (Block, 2010). In a study examining first-year student perceptions of diary writing as a reflective tool during their initial semester at university, students were advised to maintain a personal diary in which they recorded their thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Brooman & Darwent, 2012).. The study's limitations suggested that future research should explore how students' personal identities influence their engagement with diary writing and reflection (Brooman & Darwent, 2012), a consideration that was included in the current study.

A diary is a regularly maintained, often daily, log of personal experiences and observations that allows individuals to express their continuous thoughts, feelings, and ideas (Travers, 2011). When combined with other research methods, such as questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, students' diaries can provide a valuable source of additional data which is contextualised to specific instances such as language use and choice (De Meulder & Birnie, 2021). Using reflective diaries contributes to a comprehensive methodological framework by offering a richer, more nuanced understanding of students' experiences (Travers, 2011). As for learners, Wallin and Adawi (2018b) contend that reflective diaries function as structured spaces where students can organise and articulate their thoughts and insights. In the current study, participants were provided with additional time and space to elaborate, through their diaries, on their perspectives regarding the course and the TESOL setting more broadly, particularly in cases where they may not have had the opportunity to do so during the interviews. Diaries also have drawbacks; for instance, A study on EFL pre-service teachers found that, without sufficient support, their reflective entries were often overly descriptive, merely listing ideas rather than forming coherent connections (Altalhab et al., 2021). This insight encouraged me as the current study's researcher to provide comprehensive guidance by offering weekly reflective questions to participants, thereby encouraging deeper analysis in diary entries **Error! Reference source not found.**

To help students explain their experience during the course, I provided prompts to assist them in expressing themselves by creating a template with open-ended questions for the weekly diaries (Table 3). While the diaries consisted of four open-ended questions related to the TESOL setting of the ENG142 course, a fifth final question [*Any additional thoughts?*] was included to prevent researcher bias and allow participants to express their ideas independently. Diaries as a methodological approach can be gathered by instructing participants to maintain a set of records including open-ended answers or by employing a more organised method that involves the use of templates (De Meulder & Birnie, 2021). This approach is particularly relevant for understanding students' socio-ecological backgrounds and their interactions within their ecological systems because it provides a detailed and personal account of their daily experiences, revealing how their environment and cultural context influence their thoughts, behaviours, and learning processes.

2. The Process:

In the current study, I used a diary template consisting of five open-ended questions (Table 3), which were regularly uploaded to Microsoft Teams in the same format on a weekly basis for the participants to answer. Prior notice was provided to the students regarding the process for submitting their diaries and a reminder about the purpose of the study. They received the instructions through a post on the MS Teams channel that was specifically developed for communication between the researcher and the participants. Every weekend, I accessed the diaries online using MS Teams while I prepared for the post-semi-structured interviews. To differentiate between the two sections, students were required to provide their name, student ID, the week for which they were writing, and the original course time. Moreover, I gave students the option to choose whether to respond to the diaries in English or in Arabic. Only one student preferred to write her weekly diaries in English with all the remaining students completing it in Arabic.

(Table 3) Questions of Reflective Students' Diaries

Question Number	Question
1	My thoughts toward this week's lessons?
2	The most challenging moment this week and why?
3	What have I learned from this week?
4	What needs to be done differently to make a better learning experience?
5	Any additional thoughts?

5.5.5. Validity, Reliability, and Triangulation in Qualitative Research

In recent research, the notion of validity has evolved into several dimensions. In qualitative studies, researchers assessed validity by examining the authenticity, depth, and breadth of the data collected, the thoughtful selection of participants, the degree of triangulation, and the researcher's objectivity (Cohen et al., 2017). Golafshani (2015) argued that in quantitative research, reliability is used as a tool to explain phenomena, whereas in qualitative studies, the aim shifted towards gaining a deeper understanding rather than merely providing explanations. Golafshani (2015) also explained that while reliability and validity remain crucial in both

qualitative and quantitative research, their meanings differ. In qualitative studies, reliability is reinterpreted as “dependability,” which focuses on the consistency of findings, whereas validity concerns the accuracy of those findings with Golafshani (2015) arguing that that validity in qualitative contexts should be redefined to embrace a naturalistic approach, rather than relying solely on traditional quantitative standards. One practical approach to enhancing validity and reliability in interviews is by reducing bias to the greatest extent possible (Cohen et al., 2003). Cohen et. al. (2003) noted that bias could arise from several sources, including the interviewer’s attitudes, opinions, and expectations, the tendency to see participants in interviewer’s personal lens and to seek answers that match the interviewer’s existing beliefs. Bias might also occur when the interviewer misinterpreted the participant’s answers or when respondents misunderstood the questions.

In my study, I ensured that participants volunteered and were reminded of their ability to withdraw from the study at any point, thereby guaranteeing that the learners were comfortable about sharing their narratives. Moreover, to minimise bias, I carefully avoided leading questions, that is asking questions that are framed to steer respondents toward a preferred answer (Rubenstein, 1995). In social sciences research, leading questions shape respondents’ answers, affecting results and compromising validity and reliability (Di Bella, 2009). I supplemented interviews with reflective diaries to triangulate the data and deepen the analysis and to allow learners to share more of their perspectives at their own preference of time. The interviews and diaries captured authentic events occurring in the natural setting of female language learners within Kuwaiti society, viewed through a socio-ecological lens. Given the unique nature of the research, replication was not the primary marker of reliability (Cohen et. al., 2003). Instead, it was the analysis, grounded in a specific framework, that explained the phenomena. Following the completion of data collection, the study proceeded to the analysis phase, during which the interviews and reflective diaries were systematically coded and interpreted to reveal meaningful insights into the current investigation.

5.6. Data Analysis

As a researcher, I considered analytical tools that would facilitate the reader's comprehension of the analysis and enhance their understanding of the participants' viewpoints. Therefore, the current investigation will apply two analytical tools for the data analysis, I will start with the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Clarke & Braun, 2013, 2021) and then the Short Story Analysis (SSA) (Barkhuizen, 2016) as they appeared through the process of analysis. This process involves the NI as the overarching framework. Building on Barkhuizen's (2016) methodological framework of engaging deeply with NI, I provided reflexive commentary as the researcher after introducing each theme, and throughout the beginning and the end of each narrative, offering insights and interpretations derived from these narratives. The following sections will discuss in detail the approaches used for data analysis along with their descriptions and justifications.

The researcher's analysis is crucial for the research process since it incorporates the researcher's perspective and ideas (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative research transcends descriptive analysis in its depth; therefore, it is appropriate for the current study because the main objective is to highlight certain aspects and investigate the underlying reasons rather than provide an overall statistic or measurement (Ranjit, 2011). It poses questions that have the potential to uncover a more profound comprehension of what has been said and examines the underlying aspects of the data (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

While raw data may provide some indication of meaning, a thorough comprehension is necessary to investigate the intended message of the participant. Since the current study examines socio-ecological factors, data collection focused on the hidden significant value and further explored the findings. The choice of data analysis is dependent upon the researchers and their investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). For this study, two analytical tools for analysing the data were selected; the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Clarke & Braun, 2021) as the preliminary phase for detecting recurring patterns from the semi-structured interviews, and the second phase (in the subsequent section), Short Story Analysis (SSA), which served as a focused lens on each narrative to identify its similarities and differences relative to other narratives within the same theme. This will facilitate the analysis

of a socio-ecological perspective of the story and its influence on language learning aligning with the *analysis of narratives* approach (see Section 5.3.1).

In qualitative research, the significance of the interpretations provided by participants is given a highly valued position (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this study, data analysis was conducted on textual data obtained from semi-structured interviews and weekly diary entries. Text serves as the main form of data for communication in most studies, regardless of whether they are qualitative or quantitative in nature (Ranjit, 2011). Ranjit adds that eventually, the researcher determines what approach they feel most comfortable with and what they believe will help readers understand their research, whether that approach is text only or includes graphs, as in the case of quantitative or mixed methods approach. Now that the study has briefly outlined the analytical tools employed, the following sections will explain in detail how these methods were applied. The discussion will begin with an explanation of the Reflexive Thematic Analysis, and finally, the Short Story Analysis.

5.6.1. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

Thematic Analysis (TA) in general, is a qualitative research method for analysing and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. It involves identifying, analysing, and reporting themes or patterns that emerge from a dataset (Naeem et al., 2023). It is often regarded as a highly effective approach for comprehending the complexity of meaning (Guest et al., 2011). It is a data-collecting approach that enables active engagement and a comprehensive understanding of the various and complex perspectives provided by the participants. According to Hemming et al. (2021), the flexible methodology of thematic analysis enables researchers to systematically arrange and interpret vast quantities of qualitative data (Hemming et al., 2021). Several scholars argued that thematic analysis should not be viewed as a standalone method but rather as a flexible analytical tool that complements various qualitative research approaches (e.g., Boyatzis, 1998; Holloway & Todres, 2003; Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The existing literature provided limited guidance on the practical steps required to conduct a robust thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Braun and Clarke (2006) asserted that thematic analysis served as an effective approach for exploring diverse

participant perspectives, identifying both commonalities and differences, and uncovering unexpected findings.

Just like any other approach, thematic analysis also has its disadvantages. Although thematic analysis offered flexibility, this quality sometimes results in inconsistencies and a lack of coherence in the development of themes from the data (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Consistency and cohesion improve when an explicit epistemological stance is adopted to support the study's empirical claims (2001). Moreover, Clarke and Braun (2013) argue that TA's interpretative power is limited when it is not employed within an existing theoretical framework as in the current study. Attride-Stirling (2001) observed that many researchers who used thematic analysis did not provide detailed accounts of their analytic procedures or clearly articulate the theoretical and epistemological foundations that supported their analyses.

Clarke and Braun (2013) propose different perspectives to look at thematic analysis, and for this study, three specific variations were chosen as they are the most appropriate for the current research: (1) the inductive TA, in which the researcher's viewpoint, disciplinary competence, and epistemology can help explain the analysis. (2) the theoretical TA, where the analysis is conducted based on an established theory, which in the current study is the Ecological Systems Model theory. (3) the experiential TA, which involves analysing the participants' viewpoints, perceptions, and interpretations of the world (Clarke & Braun, 2013). All three types of thematic analysis were appropriate for this investigation as they were clear during the interview.

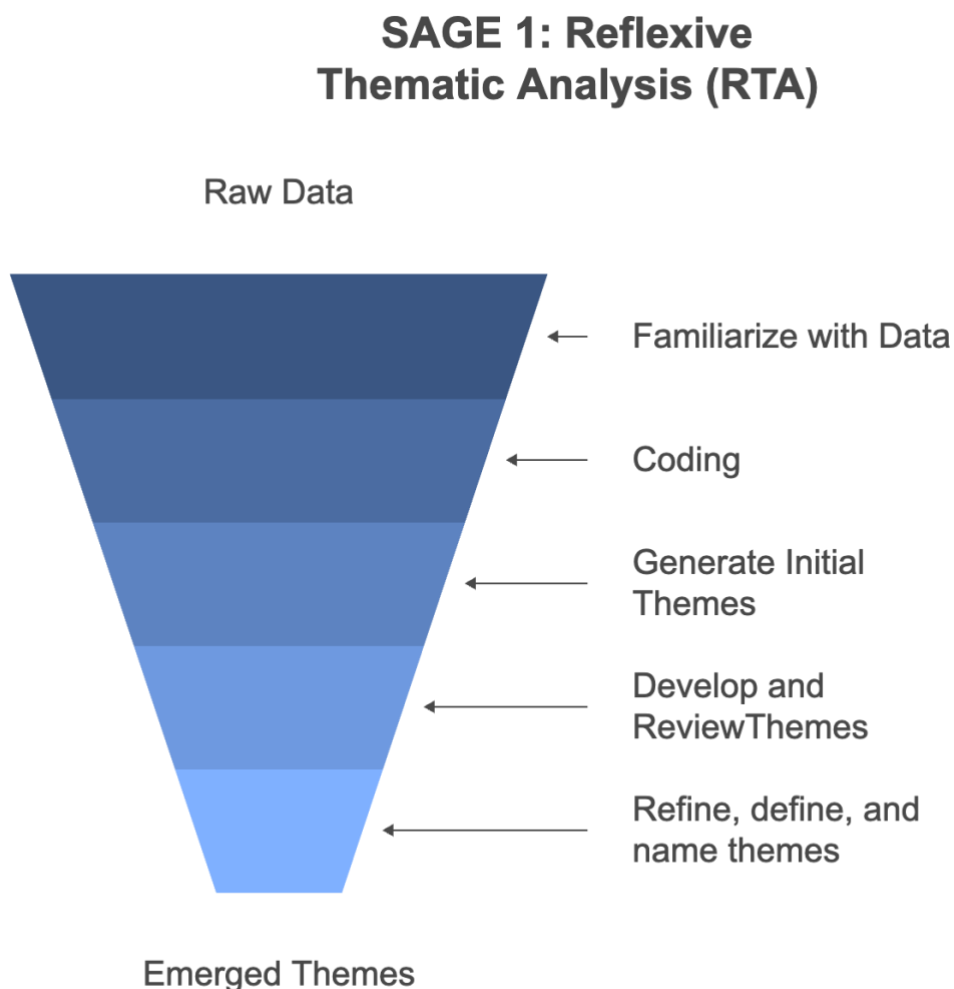
In the current study, the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was applied, an updated approach to thematic analysis developed by Clarke and Braun (2021). They argue that treating RTA as a rigid sequence of procedures would not result in a thorough analysis. However, they offered a set of details referred to as guidelines for the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) process (Clarke & Braun, 2021). Therefore, Clarke and Braun (2021) introduced the notion of 'reflexive' thematic analysis (RTA), defined as a *six-phases process* (see Section 5.6.1.1.) rather than a methodology **Error! Reference source not found.**, RTA proved its adaptability to a variety of theoretical frameworks, and valued the researcher's subjectivity, resulting in a rich

interpretation of the data set (2000). It also highlighted understanding meaning within its specific context, recognising that knowledge emerged through active engagement with the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Moreover, RTA has guidelines rather than strict protocols (Braun & Clarke, 2021), encouraging deeper analysis and meaningful outcomes.

To address concerns about over-reliance on Braun and Clarke's work, these citations are essential as they lay the theoretical and methodological foundation for RTA. As mentioned in the previous section, the chosen RTA approach builds upon the methodological foundations established earlier. It combines an inductive process that allows themes to emerge organically from the data, an experiential component that incorporates researcher interpretation, and a theoretical perspective that integrates existing frameworks. These analytical methods remain relevant within the selected reflexive approach. This multi-faceted approach improves the strength and thoroughness of the research findings by analysing the findings from different perspectives and research foundations. Reflexive Thematic Analysis involves a systematic process of identifying, analysing, and reporting themes from the data, enabling researchers to reveal fundamental concepts and interconnections (Yakuwa et al., 2022). This analytical approach directly underscores participants' voices while situating their experiences within broader sociocultural and ecological contexts, thereby improving comprehension of their lived realities and aligning with the study's objective.

To maximise the use of RTA, the theoretical framework discussed in [Chapter 4](#) is also applied in the analysis to mitigate any limitation. For instance, RTA could offer various interpretations of an attitude or perspective that could be looked at through the lens of socio-ecological aspects of language acquisition and could lead to the discovery of novel findings which will be looked at through the emerging themes. This framework addresses the interrelated layers of influence, including individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels, that impact participants' experiences and environments. By aligning RTA with the socio-ecological model, this study goes beyond a TESOL-cantered analysis to explore how socio-ecological factors, such as household dynamics, cultural influences, and societal norms, impact female learners of English as a foreign language. This ensured that the analysis covered the wider settings of English language learning, emphasising the necessity to move beyond the classroom and explore participants' socio-ecological backgrounds and lived experiences.

The flexibility offered by RTA is essential to the current study, which involves various narratives from female language learners coming from different majors at the College of Education (CoE). The six-phase analytical approach in the subsequent section facilitates the investigation of participants' narratives in every detail, revealing the complex interactions between their lived experiences and the wider social and ecological factors beyond the TESOL setting that influence them in the language learning process, ensuring the unique socio-ecological context of each participant is clearly presented through the emerging themes and key insights. **Error! Reference source not found.** explains the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) process.



(Figure 11) The Six-Phases of RTA – Adapted from Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021).

5.6.1.1. *The Six-Phases Process of RTA (Interviews and Diaries)*

This section outlines the six-phase framework of RTA adopted in this study, detailing the analytical process from initial data familiarisation to the finalising the emerging themes. The six-phase analytical process was applied to both semi-structured interviews and reflective diaries, enabling a systematic examination of patterns, divergences, and intersections across datasets for reaching comprehensive and detailed conclusions.

I analysed the interviews since the beginning of the data collection along with the reflective diaries. According to Pope et al. (2000), it is advisable to begin assessing the data while collecting it. This approach helps improve the interview questions and identify significant and multifaceted findings that require careful consideration (Pope et al., 2000). The reflective diaries enriched this analytical phase, informing and refining the subsequent semi-structured interviews to enhance data collection and interpretation. Data analysis began immediately after each interview, enabling me to assess and enhance the question protocols applied in the pre-established participant question forms that served as a guide for the interviews. I noted potentially important data related to the research objectives and questions whenever I identified significant findings. Following data transcription, translation, and preparation, I initiated the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) using Clarke and Braun's (2021) six-phase framework, as detailed in the following sections.

5.6.1.2. *Phase 1: Familiarisation with the dataset*

During Phase 1, I engaged with the data by repeatedly reading transcripts, listening to audio recordings in conjunction with reviewing the reflective diaries. During this phase, I began by listening to the recordings via OneDrive (SharePoint) and placing markers (Chapters), an option provided in SharePoint, on the audio whenever I encountered a significant section of the interview. This process facilitated locating a certain section of the recording later when I began my detailed review for the transcription. I started recording comprehensive observations on noteworthy aspects in the interviews and diaries that were relevant to my study and research questions as recommended in the six-phases process (Clarke & Braun, 2021). Once I completed the translated transcriptions, I uploaded them to NVivo data management program (a software for qualitative data analysis - Release 1.7.2), and a thorough verification process was undertaken by listening to the original recordings to confirm the accuracy of the translations while making necessary revisions. This process also helped

me to identify a possible direction for my RTA by keeping notes of any potential theme. It also enhanced my insight toward the dataset, and I became more aware of the details included that I might have overlooked during the interview. Finally, I prepared the text for the initial coding cycle (Phase 2). As for the reflective diaries, although the main questions for conducting the post semi-structured interviews were prepared, I made specific amendments based on the responses of the diaries. For example, students' perspectives on some of the in-class tasks helped me plan how to explore these answers further during the interview. Therefore, to ensure the post semi-structured interview was built upon the diary data, I tailored the interview questions to elaborate more on their reflections. After reading the entries, I prepared a note for each participant and attached it to the interview questions, highlighting important points from the diaries to acknowledge during the interview. Therefore, Phase 1 of the RTA set the foundation for a comprehensive analysis, bridging the diary entries and subsequent semi-structured interview data, thus contributing to meaningful findings (Clarke & Braun, 2021).

5.6.1.3. *Phase 2: Coding*

After familiarising myself with the data and comprehending the overall dataset, as well as completing the translated transcriptions, I initiated the coding process. My main objective was to identify data that was relevant to my research questions. In qualitative research, the researcher plays a pivotal role by organising transcripts for easier access, coding them to reveal meaningful patterns, and interpreting these codes by linking them to the research questions, retirement literature, and theoretical frameworks that illuminate the issue (Howell, 2002). Clarke and Braun (2013) suggest that researchers should include analytical notes, known as code labels, within each code to offer informative descriptions. Coding began once transcription and translation were completed, and it involved attaching brief phrases or words, referred to as codes, to segments of data that captured their key message or significance (Naeem et al., 2023). This step converted intricate text into an abstract format, highlighting elements relevant to the research questions, with key words serving as the foundation of this analytical process, facilitating the transformation of raw data into manageable, insightful units (Naeem et al., 2023). In other words, coding captures the most significant, summarised qualities of the data, embodying its very essence (Saldaña, 2013).

Upon finishing the coding process, the dataset was then organised based on identified themes that were relevant to the researcher's viewpoints, the research questions, or participants' standpoints. Themes played a central role in the analysis by grouping similar data segments to reveal recurring patterns and key ideas, ultimately synthesising these into broader, coherent categories that capture the essence of the data (Naeem et al., 2023). I then used NVivo to code the data manually in text form. After that, I compared the coding references through visual outputs to see which codes appeared most often. This helped me identify patterns across the data and group related codes together to build initial themes. To enhance analytical transparency, [Appendix 4](#) includes a snapshot of the NVivo coding process. After that, the Padlet platform **Error! Reference source not found.**) was used to generate a thematic map. Both applications provided me with the advantage of enhanced flexibility in visualising the interconnections between various themes and subthemes (also see [Appendix 5](#))

Given that the study involved sixteen participants, along with pre- and post-interviews and weekly reflective diary entries, it produced a considerable volume of qualitative data. RTA proved particularly appropriate, as it does not require a predetermined amount of text for coding, or a particular coding framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021), thereby offering the flexibility needed to handle such diverse and extensive data set. This method reduces the possible constraint of thematic analysis such as the risk of individual perspectives being overshadowed by extensive datasets (Clarke & Braun, 2013). In this phase, I conducted a focused search for specific words or concepts that were related to the investigation rather than fully comprehending narratives, which would be addressed in the SSA stage [Stage 1] (see Section 5.6.2). I carefully reviewed the notes from phase 1 and markers, listened to the audio again while reading the finalised transcriptions, and refined the data to identify possible themes. RTA enables coding at several levels, starting from specific interpretations and progressively taking into account the wider context (Clarke & Braun, 2021).

As for the reflective diaries, I focused on capturing "single meaning" as suggested by Clarke and Braun (2021). These single meanings prepared me for the next phase, in which I started linking the codes to the themes generated from the interviews. Additionally, during the weekly entries, I applied a strategy of coding by week to ensure that the diaries were thoroughly reviewed. The coding process for the diaries was relatively faster compared to the interviews

due to their shorter length and because they were already in text format. Through the organised coding of the diaries, I developed a reliable framework that could be integrated with interview data or used to produce new initial themes in phase 3. To fully comprehend the narratives and diaries included in the data, it was imperative to have a comprehensive understanding of the context.

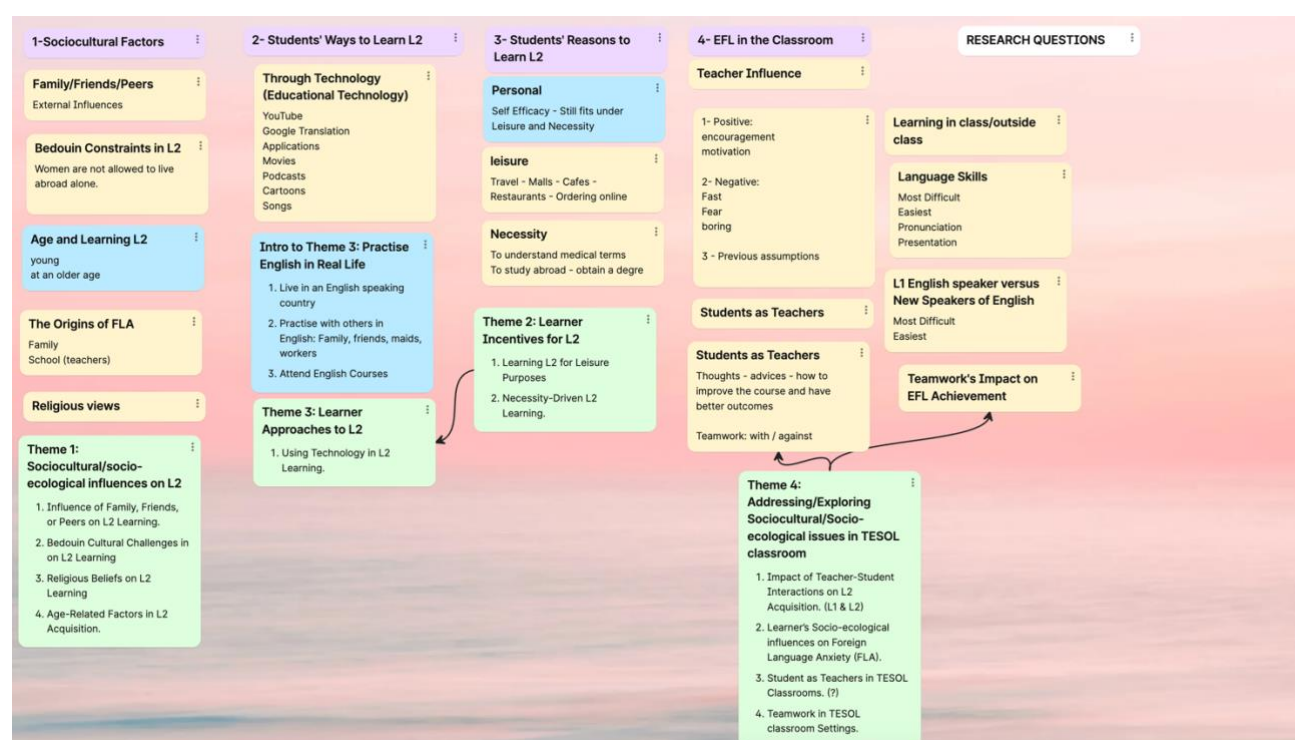
This study progressed from RTA (see [Section 5.6.1.](#)) to in-depth SSA (see Section 5.6.2), maintaining the uniqueness of each participant's narrative while contextualising their experiences within a wider socio-ecological framework. The themes identified through RTA may intersect across different participants. By applying this method, similar themes can be identified in the transcriptions of multiple participants, which allows for providing a comprehensive understanding of significant findings across participants and their relation to the broader socio-ecological influence. Thematic analysis in general requires the examination of both the participants' perspectives and the sociocultural environment relevant to the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As an overall approach, the steps required for thematic analysis involve reading and rereading the data, coding the data, discovering possible themes, evaluating and refining themes, and defining and labelling themes (Dawadi, 2021).

Therefore, the results were organised and presented based on themes and resulted key insights that include different participants' excerpts, with the possibility of students appearing in multiple key insights depending on their narratives. Accordingly, stopping at Phase 2 with the initial coding was insufficient. I proceeded to the second and third coding cycles, examining the dataset multiple times, continuously cross-referencing between the transcriptions and the recordings to generate initial themes that aligned with Phase 3 of Clarke and Braun's six-phase process.

5.6.1.4. Phase 3: Generating initial themes:

After identifying codes in Phase 2, I initiated Phase 3 by generating a visual representation to develop initial themes that emerged from the interviews and diaries. I chose this approach to enhance the level of interaction with my data. Utilising the Padlet platform **Error! Reference source not found.**), I valued the flexibility of switching codes and themes to other sections.

Because I am visually oriented, this approach enabled me to adjust the data more effectively using various colours, highlights, and notes. Furthermore, this design offered the flexibility to make revisions at any moment. The Padlet then included a variety of potential themes, each accompanied by related key insights and codes. In qualitative research, data analysis involved condensing extensive textual material into thematic categories, without this process of reduction, interpreting the data would have been nearly impossible (Howell, 2002). Having viewed the overall lists of potential themes, subthemes, and codes, I explored the potential developed themes more extensively. According to Clarke and Braun (2021), theme formation is a dynamic process where the researcher constructs themes based on the data, research questions, and their knowledge and insights. This methodology enabled me to recognise overarching patterns of relevance within the dataset. I conducted a thorough analysis of key insights that may have had a core idea which could provide an answer to my research questions.



(Figure 12) Screenshot from Padlet page created to show the key insights.

5.6.1.5. Phase 4: Developing and reviewing themes

The qualitative research process involved identifying themes from textual data and presenting them using representational tools, a method that had been widely accepted (Attride-Stirling,

2001). Following the Clarke and Braun (2013) six-phases of RTA, I revisited the entire dataset to check if the preliminary themes matched well with the data I collected. I began by verifying if my themes aligned with the codes and extracts from the transcriptions. To facilitate this process, I prepared hard copies of each participant's translated transcriptions after adding continuous line numbers made in MS Word, which greatly facilitated the identification of the location of any relevant information. Subsequently, I assessed the coherence of the themes (Clarke & Braun, 2021) and the relevance of the codes, initial themes, and subthemes in relation to the research questions. In addition, I examined whether the themes effectively emphasised the most significant patterns related to my investigation. Throughout this process, I refined and modified certain themes and subthemes for the interviews.

As for the reflective diaries, I went through two steps for the analysis. The initial step consisted of coding while reading the diary entries in preparation for the post semi-structured interviews. Following the post semi-structured interviews, I reviewed both the interview data and the diary entries to investigate possible links and determine the final themes for the entire dataset. This was done because of the apparent connection between the two in terms of their collection objectives, and the fact that they were collected from the same participants of the interviews made it reasonable to integrate the findings from both methods to see how different or similar a response through different methods from the same participant can be. Combining themes is necessary to ensure the coherence and logical connections between the two, and the reason behind finding a logical connection is to produce novel findings by analysing the data in conjunction. Just as with semi-structured interviews, there were parts in the reflective diaries that needed to be omitted, or as Clarke and Braun (2021) remarked, “*you have to be prepared to let things go!*” (p. 89).

The reflective diaries did not undergo the SSA due to the nature of the questions in the diary template, which were not expected to produce narrative extracts. Instead, the diaries served as a supplementary tool to support the interviews by giving the participants the opportunity to express their thoughts in two different forms, one in the context of an interview, where there is a researcher to exchange a conversation with, and the other at their own pace, without any source of assistance or pressure. This dual approach allowed for a richer understanding of the participants' perspectives and how different contexts might affect their responses over time.

Reflective diaries enabled students to reflect on their personal beliefs, values, experiences, and assumptions that influenced their learning, while also documenting their development and progress over time (Minott, 2008). After I removed the irrelevant data, it became clearer how to relate the findings to the existing knowledge. This phase established a solid foundation, now with a meaningful finding in hand, and ensured that the data was ready for a final refinement. At this stage, a researcher is expected to combine certain themes into one, divide them into two, or dismiss others completely (Clarke & Braun, 2021). Ensuring that each subject has a clear and understandable focus is crucial. Therefore, I started connecting the topics to my theoretical underpinnings and analysing their interconnections within the wider scope of the research (Clarke & Braun, 2021).

5.6.1.6. *Phase 5: Refining, defining and naming themes*

During this phase, I refined my analysis to guarantee that every theme was clearly defined and supported by a solid concept. Following the guidelines provided by Clarke and Braun (2021), I determined the stories produced by each topic and their alignment with my overall understanding of the data. Throughout this process, I refined each theme and selected informative names for them. I maintained a flexible approach, being prepared to further enhance or even discard themes if needed (Clarke & Braun, 2021). After completing this process, I composed a brief overview of each theme as recommended by Clarke and Braun. I clarified the meaning conveyed by each theme and ensured that the suggested name was informative and coherent. I created a table that included every theme and a concise explanation outlining what one might anticipate from each theme.

Similarly, the dataset started to take on a refined form in the reflective diaries. While most of the themes came from the interviews, during the process of refining themes, some themes were generated exclusively to the diary's entries. Although the diaries did not provide narrative stories as mentioned earlier, they were effectively connected to the extracts from the interviews, contributing to a better understanding of the participants' perspectives. The correlation between the semi-structured interviews and the reflective diaries formed a comprehensive narrative that supported the overall investigation.

5.6.1.7. Phase 6: Writing Up

The writing phase represents a transitional stage in my analytical approach. I employed RTA as an initial framework to organise the dataset, preparing it for the more detailed investigation through SSA. This progression from thematic to narrative analysis enabled a deeper exploration of learners' experiences while maintaining their connection to the broader themes that emerged. Similar to the writing-up phase for the semi-structured interviews, the writing up for the diaries followed the same rigorous process. The main difference was in the type of information produced. Since the reflective diaries served as a supplementary tool to the semi-structured interviews, the focus was to discover the connection between the two datasets. Therefore, in this phase the aim was to integrate the themes from both the interviews and the diaries to provide a narrative. Following Clarke and Braun's (2021) guidance, the phase involved putting all the pieces together to construct an appealing story that could ultimately contribute to the field.

Note about the Reflective Diaries:

Although I applied the same six-phases of the Clarke and Braun (2021) to the interviews to the diaries, the diaries still have their own characteristics, and a few steps were treated differently. Diaries and interviews are both valuable methods in qualitative research, offering unique advantages and serving different purposes within the research process. The RTA provides a flexible method for examining patterns of meaning within the dataset. Therefore, although the six phases can be systematically applied to various forms of qualitative data, the data's format and nature can greatly impact how these phases are carried out, and the differences become clear between the two datasets. While interviews allow for interactive discussions and thorough exploration of participants' stories with the help of the interviewer, diaries provide self-reflection, continuous observation, and detailed documentation of events. The process will record their thoughts over time, and in this study, with the help of the researcher's prompts (questions) provided in the reflective diary template. This longitudinal perspective that lasted for three months (the duration of the semester) reveals the developments in the participant's experience. Weekly reflective diaries started following the completion of the pre-semi-structured interviews. The pre-semi-structured interview primarily investigated the learners' previous language learning experiences and the socio-ecological factors that influenced those experiences.

Reflective diaries were then used to gain insights related to the TESOL setting and the learners' experiences within the TESOL classroom in the ENG 142 course. For that, the Clarke and Braun (2021) guidelines for RTA necessitates amendments to the diaries because of their nature of entries. Based on the diary entries, the pre-determined guiding questions for the post-semi-structured interview questions were modified. These changes were made to investigate the specific areas of interest, issues, and outcomes that learners have gained from the TESOL classroom. The revised questions aimed to encourage learners to provide more detailed explanations during the interview. By exploring these modifications, the study will show how this analytical tool can handle different qualitative datasets to enrich the analysis and understand the participants' perspectives.

5.6.1.8. *Researcher Reflexivity: A Cultural Mediator*

"The researcher's role in knowledge production is at the heart of our approach!"

(Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594)

In RTA, researchers must clearly engage with their theoretical assumptions, ensuring consistency and transparency throughout the process (Braun et al., 2016). They make deliberate analytical choices rather than following a fixed structure, maintaining awareness of the philosophical foundations shaping their work (Braun et al., 2016). In this study, Clarke and Braun's (2021) six-phase guidelines emphasised researcher reflexivity as a core element of RTA. Unlike broader thematic analysis, which often seeks to minimise researcher influence, this approach recognises that themes are actively constructed rather than simply discovered. This perspective treats the researcher's subjectivity as a valuable resource rather than as a source of bias. Given my shared background with the participants, I used RTA to act as a cultural mediator, ensuring accurate interpretation of their narratives and reducing misunderstandings. This active reflexive engagement enhanced the quality of the analysis by linking my interpretive insights with the research questions and theoretical frameworks.

It is important to note that this section on researcher reflexivity is distinct from the earlier role of the researcher (see [Section 5.4.1.](#)), which outlines my overall responsibilities and position

in the research process. Here, the focus lies specifically on the methodological significance of reflexivity within RTA, underscoring how my awareness of potential biases and my active interpretive role positively influenced the development and reporting of themes. In their explanation of researcher reflexivity, Braun and Clarke stated:

“TA practice can broadly be conceptualised in two ways: (a) a process where the researcher identifies existing-in-the-dataset patterns of meaning; (b) a process where the researcher, as a situated, subjective and skilled scholar, brings their existing knowledges to the dataset, to develop an understanding of patterned meaning in relation to the dataset.” (2021b, p. 365)

5.6.2. Short Story Analysis

The Short Story Analysis (SSA) in educational research, developed by Barkhuizen, underscores the significance of content, context, and researcher reflexivity (Barkhuizen, 2016). Unlike methods that narrowly focus on specific lines to analysis, the SSA **Error! Reference source not found.**) is a narrative approach that considers broader temporal and spatial contexts, capturing varying *scales of context* (Barkhuizen, 2016). Although Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) produces preliminary themes that offer significant analytical direction, subsequent SSA facilitates a more detailed exploration of individual narratives. This advanced analytical stage was essential for this study, since it aimed to comprehend the complex interactions between female language learners and their identities and socio-ecological contexts. While the SSA is mostly applied to teachers’ or immigrants’ narratives (see for example, Barkhuizen, 2016, 2017, 2021), the present study adapts the approach with a stronger focus on students’ perspectives and show how it reflects a broader impact from the socio-ecological perspective.

This research necessitates an extensive investigation of individual experiences to reveal how various aspects of the socio-ecological environment affect each learner's language acquisition process and identity formation, in contrast to the broader thematic approach that could result in general findings once not applied within a suitable theoretical framework (Clarke and Braun, 2013). The SSA's emphasis on content, context, and researcher reflexivity (see Section 5.6.1.8.) enhances comprehension by maintaining the diversity and uniqueness

of each participant's narrative, while clarifying the nuanced influences of their immediate and larger settings on their learning experiences.

The framework consists of three levels of narrative **Error! Reference source not found.**), known as *scales of context*. The first level, referred to as *story* (with a lowercase 's'), relates to individual internal reflections, where identity is linked to increased autonomy and influence, or what Barkhuizen refers to “as *agency and power*”. The second level, referred to as *Story* (with a capital 'S'), expands beyond immediate interpersonal situations, decreasing individual control or influence. The third level, referred to as *STORY* (in all capital letters), includes wider socio-political contexts, where identity holds even less influence over taking decisions. At the end of the analysis, the analytical approach to the short story typically concludes with researchers incorporating a reflective commentary to enhance the analysis (Barkhuizen, 2016).

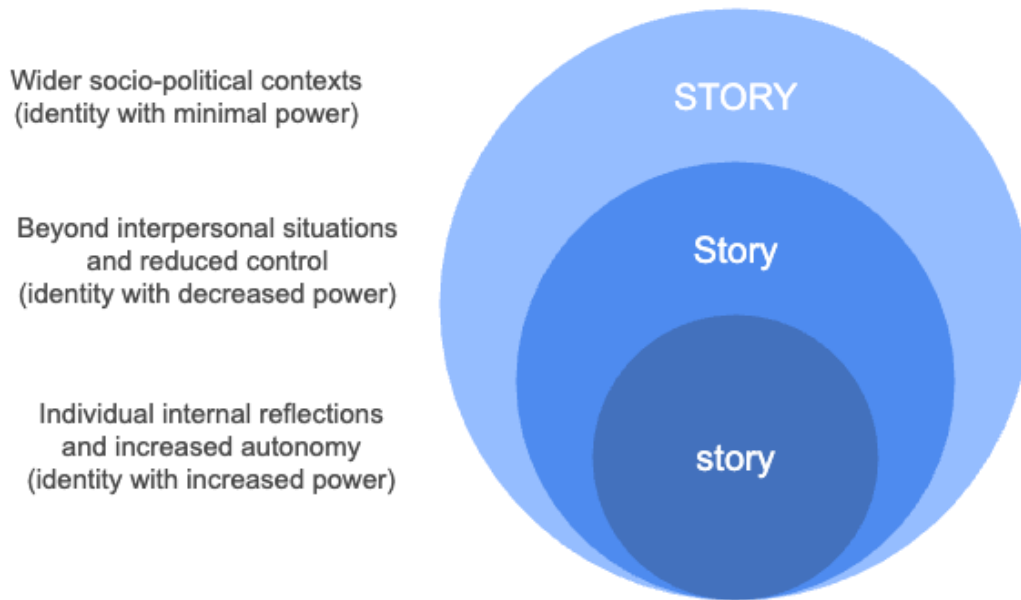
For the current study, this commentary will be integrated into the findings and discussion (see [Chapter 6](#)). This method involves raising the fundamental questions of *who* for character, *where* for setting, and *when* for plot, all drawn from extensive data sources including interviews, conversations, written narratives, and multimodal digital stories (Barkhuizen, 2016). What made this approach suitable for the current study was that Barkhuizen's short story dimensions correspond to the Douglas Fir Group's (2016) framework on second language learning and the adaptation of the ecological model by Bronfenbrenner, the main theoretical framework for the current study, which focuses on three dimensions from the ecological model such as intermediate environment (microsystem), the school and university environment (mesosystem), and societal context with social norms (macrosystem) (see [Chapter 4](#)).

In his investigation, Barkhuizen (2016) employed this methodology to explore how teacher identities are formed and expressed through narratives in which the primary focus was placed on language teachers, examining various aspects of their lives such as their professional development and experiences abroad. In this study, the analytical framework examines the narratives of Kuwaiti female English language learners at Kuwait University, employing Short Story Analysis (SSA) to explore individual experiences within the thematic categories that

emerge from the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). This approach can generate useful data with respect to the theoretical underpinning of the study. By applying the short story approach, the study explored the socio-ecological background of participants by investigating the individuals who influenced the learners' acquisition of language at different scales of contexts, the locations where this influence occurred during their timeline, and the time periods during which it happened.

Analysing these narratives can reveal similarities or differences among learners' stories in learning a foreign language, providing a more profound comprehension of the various approaches through which female learners acquire the English language and the factors that impact these processes and why. This approach offers the potential to uncover detailed understandings of the learners' experiences, ultimately making a valuable contribution to the wider area of language acquisition research. By understanding the possibilities and circumstances that learners might encounter, researchers can identify issues or note interesting findings that initiate further exploration. In the end, the SSA considers the perspectives of both the learner and the researcher. Yet still, the researcher plays a crucial role in connecting these *scales of context*, linking the personal, interpersonal, and sociopolitical dimensions of the narratives (Barkhuizen, 2016). This comprehensive approach facilitates a deeper understanding of learners' experiences, offering valuable insights into their language acquisition processes and the various influences that shape them. The following is a diagram **Error! Reference source not found.**) that explains the Short Story Analysis (SSA) process.

Short Story Analysis [Stage 2]



(Figure 13) Stage 2: Visual Representation for Short Story Analysis (SSA) – Developed by the researcher.

5.7. Integrating Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Short Story Analysis

Although RTA and SSA follow different analytical paths, using both in this study did not compromise coherence, rather, it added rigor and depth to the interpretation. RTA allowed me to build themes grounded in repeated patterns across the dataset, while SSA offered a way to preserve and examine the full narrative, including context and identity across multiple layers or environments of the language learner. Rather than working against each other, the two methods complemented each other. RTA provided a broad thematic structure, and SSA deepened the interpretation by capturing the individuality of each participant's story. Both approaches positioned me, the researcher, as an active agent in the analytical process. In RTA, I shaped meaning through reflexive engagement with the data, while in SSA, I made interpretive decisions about how stories functioned across personal and social contexts. This approach helped me ensure that the analysis remained both systematic and grounded in the lived realities of participants. The RTA helped locate where meaning clustered across participants, and

the SSA drew attention to the distinct ways these meanings were lived, shaped, or disrupted by socio-ecological conditions. To make the data analysis more transparent, the following table outlines the features of each method, their similarities or differences in relation to the study.

5.7.1.1. *Comparison of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) and Short Story Analysis (SSA)*

Feature	Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)	Short Story Analysis (SSA)	Purpose of Integration
Purpose	To generate themes from patterns of meaning across interviews and reflective diaries.	To explore individual narratives in depth and within context, using the <i>(Story/story/STORY)</i> framework.	RTA gives broad thematic structure, while SSA explores how individuals live those themes in layered contexts/ environments.
Focus	Focuses on coding repeated meanings and shared patterns across participants.	Captures personal stories yet allows for comparison of the complexities across distinct participant experiences.	RTA captures convergence and SSA preserves distinctiveness.
Data Analysis	Data is broken into smaller coded units and grouped under emerging themes.	Stories are treated holistically, analysed in full with contextual commentary.	RTA fragments the data for thematic synthesis, while SSA retains narrative integrity.
Researcher Role	Researcher reflexively interprets data while shaping themes, acts as <i>cultural mediator</i> .	Researcher makes interpretive decisions across narrative levels, linking personal and socio-ecological meaning.	Both require reflexive researcher involvement, supporting their combined use for deeper, contextual interpretation.

Output	Themes, subthemes, and visual thematic maps (e.g. Nvivo - Padlet) supported by coding references.	Narratives interpreted through reflective commentary embedded in discussion chapters.	RTA provides structure, while SSA deepens the interpretation across participants.
Analytical Process	Manual coding using NVivo and compared code frequency to identify emerged themes.	Narrative units analysed as blocks tied to socio-ecological dimensions (e.g. microsystem, macrosystem).	RTA uses frequency and theme-building (roadmap), while SSA relates the narrative to the socio-ecological background and context.

5.8. Ethical Considerations

Ethical concerns in educational research are one of the most important factors for maintaining integrity and transparency. Ethics plays a crucial role in qualitative research by guiding decisions throughout the entire research process, from data collection to sharing findings, ensuring integrity and transparency (Mirza et al., 2023). It requires researchers to follow established guidelines to uphold good research practices and to act responsibly towards participants, society, and the academic community (Mirza et al., 2023). By addressing moral issues and navigating complex decisions, ethical considerations maintain trust and credibility in research, especially when working with human participants (Mirza et al., 2023). In the case of the current investigation and in most of the studies in the field of education, the subjects of study are individuals whose rights must be carefully protected. While the participants faced no potential risks or dangers from their involvement in the study, it was still important to consider certain factors before, during, and after the data collection process.

As a doctorate researcher at the University of Strathclyde, I obtained formal ethical permission from the Institute of Education before initiating my data collection phase, ensuring that the research fulfilled the institution's ethical guidelines. Prior to volunteering to take part in the study, individuals were given a participant information sheet (PIS) and a consent form, which were provided in English and in Arabic, the participants' first language. All forms were translated to ensure meaning accuracy and verified with the original version.

Furthermore, all interviews were conducted in the participants' first language (Arabic), specifically in the Kuwaiti dialect. This approach was adopted to ensure that participants could openly share their perspectives without language being a hindrance. Conducting interviews in the participants' first language, facilitated by a bilingual researcher, enhances the accuracy of data collection and preserves the true meaning behind participants' narratives (Smith et al., 2008). Sharing the same language, cultural background and societal context enabled me to fully grasp the nuanced meanings behind their stories, ensuring that their experiences were accurately understood and represented. This cultural and linguistic alignment minimised the risk of misinterpretation, preserving the authenticity of their narratives and enriching the depth of the collected data. Subsequently, following data collection, I completed the translation and transcription of all pre- and post-intervention interviews, alongside participant diaries, from the original language (Arabic) into English. This process facilitated the analysis of the qualitative data collected in the study. To ensure accuracy, I requested the assistance of a colleague from Kuwait University (English Language Unit) who was skilled in both languages to review the translation of the interview questions and the consent forms. This step ensured that key concepts were translated with accuracy and checked for consistency in the topics discussed across two different languages.

5.9. Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the methodological approach taken to explore the socio-ecological factors influencing English language acquisition among female students at Kuwait University. It detailed the narrative research design, the researcher's dual role, and the use of semi-structured interviews and reflective diaries as the data collection tools. The chapter also discussed key steps taken to ensure credibility, including translation accuracy and researcher reflexive journaling.

The data analysis process was presented through a sequential order that started with the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), and then the Short Story Analysis (SSA), both of which enabled a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences within their socio-ecological contexts. A comparative table has been included to clarify how the two methods

complemented each other without compromising coherence. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were also carefully addressed to maintain research integrity. To enhance the study's validity and reliability, triangulation was employed by drawing on multiple analytical approaches and cross-checking findings across data set and themes.

Together, these methodological choices provided a well-grounded and flexible framework for investigating learners' identities and experiences. The next chapter presents the findings and discussion, drawing on the participants' narratives to explore key themes and connect them to the broader theoretical framework.

6. Chapter 6: Findings and Discussion

6.1. Overview

This chapter presents the findings and discussion, integrating raw data with interpretative insights drawn from the theoretical framework and relevant literature. The decision to merge these sections reflects the interconnected themes identified during analysis, where participants' narratives, experiences, and theoretical perspectives required a unified approach.

By combining findings and discussion, the chapter not only explores female learners' narratives but also examines how they align with or extend existing knowledge. It begins with a brief participant overview (Faces Behind the Data) ([6.2.](#)), followed by Stage 1 ([6.3.](#)), which introduces the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to show the key themes emerging from the dataset as an initial exploratory phase. Stage 2 ([6.4.](#)) applies Short Story Analysis (SSA), offering a detailed evaluation of the findings through selected participant excerpts. The two-stage approach ensures both thematic coherence and recognition of individual complexity. Following this, each main theme is presented alongside its key insights, integrating findings with their corresponding discussions (see [Section 6.5.](#) to [6.8.](#)). This analytical framework uncovers deeper insights, highlighting how socio-ecological factors shape individual narratives while contributing to broader thematic patterns.

6.2. Faces Behind the Data

Before I introduce the themes and the process of the analysis, a table will be provided as an overview of the participants' profiles. It will serve as a contextual foundation before an analysis of their excerpts. By providing a glimpse into their background information, using pseudonyms and without explicitly revealing their identity, I intend to offer an addition to the context to enhance their stories' understanding and contribute to a meaningful discussion. As physical appearance and dress is important to note for each participant, as they may reveal participants' religiosity and degree of conservatism, it is challenging to grasp the identity of the participants based solely on these descriptions alone. Giving the descriptions followed by the unique viewpoints they bring during their interviews is crucial for appreciating the depth and nuance of the dataset being analysed. This preliminary overview in the table ensures that the reader is well-equipped to relate to and engage with the participants' experiences, allowing for a more comprehensive interpretation. This diversity among participants provided valuable opportunity to explore their differences and similarities and where their key insights intersect. Some participants will be featured in a single excerpt, while others may appear in multiple excerpts, depending on the content of their interviews and the insights revealed by the findings. A full description of the participants and the pseudonyms for interviews are included below (Table 4) and ([Appendix 2](#)).

(Table 4) *Faces Behind the Data (A brief description)*

Name	<i>Faces Behind the Data (A brief description)</i>
1. <i>Munirah</i>	Munirah, a 21-year-old Primary Education (Science) major student at the College of Education, demonstrates resilience and independence. Initially drawn to engineering, she shifted to education due to socio-ecological factors, including her marriage and the restrictive marriage rules within her Bedouin family. Her journey with English was shaped by mixed feelings about her mother, who played a strict yet pivotal role. While her mother's firmness made English feel like a phobia, she also instilled in Munirah the strength and independence she values today. Religious beliefs helped Munirah find calm and justify situations that conflicted with her desires. Now aspiring to become a teacher, she hopes to create a supportive and motivating environment for her students, drawing on her own experiences.
2. <i>Rawya</i>	Rawan, a resilient and self-reflective student at the age of 23, majoring in Arabic at the College of Education, navigates challenges shaped by her multicultural background and strong religious identity. She believes that she is often excluded in her TESOL classroom due to her appearance (<i>wearing a veil and abbaya</i>) and cultural stereotypes, Rawan faces these difficulties with determination. She views mastering English as both a personal challenge and a key to improving social interactions. Her persistence and active engagement have helped her develop a deep understanding of her educational environment. A promising

	<p>novelist, Rawan writes her own Arabic stories and is working toward publishing her first novel with the support of her family, especially her father whom she describes as a religious man. She advocates for encouraging intercultural teaching methods that address the diverse needs of students.</p>
3. <i>Lamya</i>	<p>Lamya, a twenty-year-old student pursuing a degree in Islamic Studies at the College of Education, is known for her determined approach to learning. Initially anxious about her English proficiency, she often felt confused in structured settings where she perceived the teachers's lack of organisation to undermine her confidence. Over time, Lamya found strength through self-reflection and began trusting her progress. A key turning point came when she recognised that her fear of being judged was a greater obstacle than her actual abilities. As her confidence grew, particularly through classroom activities like presentations, Lamya embraced challenging assignments and learned to rely on her inner strengths to achieve success.</p>
4. <i>Sarah</i>	<p>Sarah, a 23-year-old student with a major in Social Studies, shares a unique language learning experience shaped by her Filipino housemaid. Growing up in a Bedouin household with little exposure to English, Sarah learned the language through daily interactions with the housemaid over six years. This informal learning approach significantly improved her English skills, allowing her to excel academically without the need for placement tests that were required for her university enrolment. Sarah's story highlights how motivation and unconventional learning environments can play a vital role in language acquisition. Her narrative also showcases her innovative and nontraditional approach to learning English.</p>

5. <i>Dalal</i>	<p>Dalal, a 22-year-old English Literature major, developed her English skills through her childhood fascination with Barbie movies.</p> <p>Despite growing up in a family where no one was fluent in English, she relied on her own efforts to learn the language. Her mother unknowingly supported her language learning by buying Barbie CDs and dolls, which provided her with regular exposure to English.</p> <p>Watching and replaying these movies helped Dalal improve her proficiency without any formal instruction or external help. Notably, Dalal was the only participant in the study who preferred to conduct her interview in English, highlighting her confidence with and love for the English language.</p>
6. <i>Athari</i>	<p>Athari, a 22-year-old Mathematics major, shared that her English learning experience was heavily influenced by her father, an engineer who is passionate about the English language. He enforced strict practice at home, often using copying English vocabulary as a punishment to help her memorise meanings and spellings, which he believed were essential for sentence construction. While this method initially made Athari dislike English, failing the subject in sixth grade was her turning point to improve. Through self-driven efforts, she overcame her struggles and eventually enhanced her English, despite not facing challenges in other school subjects. Some of her words were: <i>"I said, 'No. I have to improve myself,' and I learned."</i></p>
7. <i>Awrad</i>	<p>Awrad, a 22-year-old Kindergarten (Early Childhood Education) major, emphasises the everyday importance of English. She sees it as a practical tool for managing daily interactions in places like university cafeterias, restaurants, salons, and movies, where English often the mean of communication with expatriates. For Awrad, English extends beyond academics, becoming essential for daily life</p>

	<p>and international travel. Her experiences with teamwork highlight a journey of development. Initially, Awrad felt discomfort and anxiety when randomly assigned to new group members, struggling to adapt. However, as relationships formed, she experienced the benefits of collaboration and support within the group.</p>
8. <i>Farah</i>	<p>Farah, a 20-year-old History major, shared that her language learning journey was influenced by both her parents but in different ways. While her father was very good in English and encouraged her to practice daily, Farah highlighted that her mother played a more significant role in encouraging her to learn. Her mother would frequently tell her, "<i>You must learn English</i>," emphasising the language's importance. Farah also noted that her believed that once she got married, it would be expected for her to rely on her future husband for language-related matters. Her father's limited involvement stemmed from their Bedouin background, where men traditionally hold higher authority.</p>
9. <i>Wadha</i>	<p>Wadha, a 37-year-old Arabic Studies major, says that her main reason for learning English is because it is crucial in today's world, "The time forced us to study English," she joked. Also, she learned English through her husband's determination to study the language. Although he never completed secondary school, he collected English learning books and studied them in his free time. He believed that knowing basic English was essential for everyday situations. Over time, he involved Wadha in his learning by asking her to write for him and helping him understand words from movies. His passion for travelling and managing daily affairs pushed him to become more independent, shifting from relying on Wadha to wanting to take the lead in English communication.</p>

10. <i>Maha</i>	<p>Maha, a 22-year-old Kindergarten (Early Childhood Education) major, improved her English after struggling with low confidence in primary school. She used to avoid participating in class because she feared making mistakes. In the tenth grade, her teacher's encouragement changed her view of English. She gained confidence, understood grammar and vocabulary better, and started to enjoy the English language learning. Despite her progress, she still feels anxious speaking publicly in class, especially when her classmates are more fluent. She worries about giving wrong answers and blames herself when she does. Maha's experience is a great example of how a supportive teacher can help students overcome fear and improve their learning.</p>
11. <i>Noura</i>	<p>Noura, a 21-year-old Mathematics major at the College of Education, is a confident and responsible learner. Her academic journey reflects a strong commitment to improving her English skills, despite initial anxieties about participating in the TESOL classroom. Noura excels in teamwork in the classroom and often takes on a leadership role to ensure tasks are completed to a high standard. As she explained, her language proficiency has been shaped by influences from her household, including a housemaid with a background in teaching English and her father's encouragement. Noura's progress highlights her ability to overcome self-doubt and embrace opportunities for academic accomplishments.</p>
12. <i>Shaikha</i>	<p>Shaikha, a 22-year-old Arabic Language Studies student, embodies self-reliance and curiosity in her English language journey. Unlike others influenced by formal instruction, her motivation stemmed from personal determination to improve and prove her capabilities. Interactions with her housemaid sparked her interest in expanding her vocabulary, while English songs and self-</p>

	<p>directed learning through technology reflect her individualist approach to language development. Despite challenges in translation and limited family support for language practice, Shaikha's consistent efforts helped her develop strong communication skills through her own initiative and dedication.</p>
13. Soad	<p>Soad is a 32-year-old Kindergarten (Early Childhood Education) major, views English as essential for everyday interactions in Kuwait. Experiencing hesitation in social settings due to language barriers, she became encouraged to improve her skills, exploring conversation-based applications to enhance her fluency. During her English class at KU, she found that group work played a key role in her learning, providing reassurance and helping her build confidence. Through collaboration, she embraced mistakes as part of the learning process, using them to strengthen her communication skills.</p>
14. Dana	<p>Dana, a 19-year-old English major, engages with the language through informal learning, using TikTok and content on the internet to investigate new vocabulary and expressions driven by curiosity. Dana prioritises an all-English classroom setting, deeming it crucial for fluency and affirming her dedication to enhancing her language skills independently. Although she initially prefers Kuwaiti instructors, she recognises that immersion with English speakers might be more advantageous for language acquisition. She prefers individual work and finds collaborative efforts irritating when efforts are unequal among her peers.</p>
15. Hussah	<p>Hussah, a 21-year-old Psychology major student, sees learning English as a mix of technology and personal connections. While she turns to Google Translate for quick answers, she trusts her friends more, especially those fluent in English, finding their support</p>

	<p>easier and more reliable. Group work is a double-edged sword for her, she enjoys the collaboration but struggles when placed with unfamiliar classmates, unsure if they'll contribute equally. She believes choosing her own group would make teamwork more effective.</p>
16. Anfal	<p>Anfal, a 20-year-old Kindergarten (Early Childhood Education) major, approaches English with hesitation, feeling more anxious around peers than teachers. While she sees herself at the same level as her peers, she believes they have more courage to speak up, so she fears being judged and often holds back. Her reluctance to participate seems rooted in an early experience with a strict teacher, whose harshness made English feel intimidating rather than inviting. Though she wants to improve, the fear of making mistakes still lingers, making her learning journey a quiet internal struggle.</p>

6.3. Introducing Themes [Stage 1]:

Three main themes out of the six phases of the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) ([see Section 6.3.1.](#)) emerged after the analysis of the data set. The three main themes included the (1) Household Environment: Socio-ecological Influences on Language Learning, (2) Learner Incentives for English Language Learning, and (3) the Socio-ecological Variables in TESOL Settings. By analysing the full transcription while going through the six phases of the RTA, I was able to identify and refine the themes, ensuring through [Stage 1] that they were supported with relevant evidence. The RTA is considered the first stage [Stage 1], serving as an anchor for guiding the analysis into [Stage 2] where (SSA) is introduced in the discussion. The approach helped in offering a comprehensive analysis and understanding of the Kuwait female language learners' experiences and perspectives toward language learning. It recognised the importance of the unique context of Kuwait and the subjective experiences of the female learners at Kuwait University.

Every theme is structured to address a specific research question rather than organising the categories based on each participant. Also, the process of RTA corresponds with the study's theoretical underpinnings to facilitate enhanced interpretation of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021a; Byrne, 2022). In the case of the current study, the RTA complements the approach followed in my research where I began with a theoretical perspective (e.g., the socio-ecological influences on the female language learner) and then reflected on these perspectives to contribute to the themes. The flexibility of RTA allowed me to balance a structured theoretical framework with an openness to emergent themes. This integrated approach enabled me to integrate critical theoretical perspectives while remaining receptive to new patterns in the data set, thereby enhancing the overall depth of the analysis.

6.3.1. Main Themes and Key Insights

(Table 5) Theme 1: Household Environment: Socio-ecological Influences on Language Learning

Key Insights	Number of Stories
1. Parental Influence as a Determining Factor in Language Learning	9
2. Bedouin Cultural Beliefs and Their Role in Language Learning	2
3. Domestic Workers as Contributors to English Language Acquisition in the Kuwaiti Context	3
4. Religious Beliefs and L2 Learning	1

(Table 6) Theme 2: Learner Incentives for English Language Learning

Key Insights	Number of Stories
1. English Language Dominance in the Kuwaiti Society	3
2. Intercultural Communication and English Learning Between Necessity and Cultural Interest	2
3. Integration of Technology in Autonomous L2 Learning Practices	7

(Table 7) Theme 3: Socio-ecological Variables in TESOL Settings

Key Insights	Number of Stories
1. The Influence of Teacher-Student Interaction on Language Learning in TESOL Settings	2
2. The Role of L1 and L2 in TESOL settings	3
3. Peer Judgement and Foreign Language Anxiety	3
4. Teamwork in TESOL setting Through the Individualist and Collectivist Lenses	4

6.4. The Application of Short Story Analysis (SSA) in the discussion [Stage 2]

Following that is Stage 2, where I applied the Short Story Analysis (SSA) which represents the methodology that aligns with the socio-ecological framework followed in this study (see [Chapter 4](#)). I used excerpts from longer interview transcriptions that provided personal reflections of learners' language learning experiences (for example, see Appendix 3). These excerpts provide valuable perspectives and reflections directly from the participants, enriching the breadth and depth of the analysis. By incorporating participants' narratives from the transcriptions, I aimed to provide authentic and informative insights derived directly from the participant into the themes and key insights investigated in the study. It is possible for themes and the *scales of context* (see Section 5.6.2.) to overlap in certain narratives. Based on the interviews, it was evident that certain themes in a participant's story can vary based on the narrator's perspective and what they choose to focus on or where they would position themselves in the story. Although the discussion follows Barkhuizen's fundamental approach of the SSA, this current study expands the SSA to incorporate larger dataset of forty short stories from sixteen participants, as opposed to Barkhuizen's focused analysis of smaller dataset of narratives. This adaptation developed from the necessity to analyse the narratives while maintaining the perspectives often provided by SSA.

In the coming section, I will discuss the study's key findings in relation to the themes, research questions and the theoretical underpinnings of the current investigation within the dimensions of the Short Story Analysis (SSA). Key insights will be presented in various excerpt from the participants' narratives. These excerpts are not presented as complete stories but are instead crafted as short stories to illustrate and support the themes discussed earlier in this chapter. Each section focuses on noteworthy findings by initially addressing the *scales of context* (*story*, *Story*, and *STORY*) alongside the questions of *who*, *when*, and *where*. This structure, within the discussion section, provides a comprehensive overview of all participants' perspectives related to each key insight. It allows for a detailed exploration of the most significant insights derived from the participants' narratives. Therefore, rather than working with individual narratives, I started the analysis by grouping the narratives that shared common key themes and applying the SSA to the discussion of the collective narratives. This rather

novel application reveals the nature of the multilayered socio-ecological influences among female learners' experiences in language learning, allowing the similarities and differences patterns to be highlighted and discussed. The analysis of multiple narratives within each theme strengthened the analytical framework and offered a deeper insight into how similar factors are expressed and looked at differently across participants' experiences.

The subsequent discussion shows these factors, moving freely between comparison, contrast, and intersection of unique findings. The findings of the study also contributed to the existing literature while adding novel understandings that either extend or challenge the current frameworks and approaches. As a result, this methodological adaptation enhanced the analytical depth, allowing for more comprehension to the impact of the socio-ecological factors on female learners at Kuwait University and the interplay between the individual experience and the broader socio-ecological setting. Additionally, there was a recurrence of participants' narratives across various themes which was not intended but arose naturally from their preference to engage more with particular aspects of their language learning experience. This variety in narrative presence and thematic intersection exemplifies the genuine character of qualitative research, wherein participants' contributions naturally vary in emphasis and detail.

Throughout this chapter, the findings and discussion are framed by the socio-ecological approach (see [Chapter 4](#)), which reveals the multilayered influences affecting language learners, from the individual (female learner) and interpersonal relationships to broader societal factors. The subsequent section begins by carefully selecting and naming the emergent themes that accurately represent the data, then moves on to present the selected stories that mirror the bioecological systems at different levels. In addition, the SSA underscores the importance of learner identities, researcher reflexivity, and the various levels within the Bio-ecological Model. Together, these elements create a cohesive narrative that reflects the study's aim, with each story followed by a reflective analysis to ensure a seamless transition between narratives, leading to a collective discussion of the narratives within each theme.

6.5. Theme 1- Household Environment: Socio-ecological Influences on Language Learning

Theme 1 aims to answer the research question (1): *How do past language learning experiences from the household influence Kuwaiti female language learners' perspectives and in constructing their identities within TESOL setting?* The data analysis found that the acquisition of L2 appears to be a complex process that extends beyond the cognitive and linguistic aspects. This aligns with Freeman and Cameron (2008) in their study on applied linguistics from a complex system perspective. They state that “*A complex system is one that emerges from the interactions of its components. The components can be agents or elements*” (Freeman & Cameron, 2008, p. 200). They maintained that language learning is complex and reflects the nature of the ecological approaches, drawing comparisons between the dynamic processes of ecological systems and those of human language learning.

Household socio-ecological influences refer to the cultural norms, social practices, and societal interactions that impact how individuals perceive and participate in language learning within the household. These influences not only shape the opportunities that learners are exposed to the household but also impact their attitudes towards the learning process. From the socio-ecological perspective, the influences further expand into considering a broader environmental context that impact L2 acquisition (see [Chapter 4](#)). The interplay between these influences can affect language learning outcomes.

Therefore, in theme 1, we explore how these socio-ecological factors evolving from the household shape the experience of the Kuwaiti female learners. This theme also aims to uncover the challenges and opportunities that arise from these factors.

The theme's key insights of the following excerpts were used as they showed the significant impact on the learner's choices and attitudes towards language learning. I will present stories relevant to theme 1, and its four key insights (key insights), followed by the Short Story Analysis (SSA). I decided that this would be the primary theme since it was consistently addressed by all participants at various narrative levels, where most students referred to it explicitly. Theme 1 includes the following four key insights: (1) Parental Influence as a Determining Factor in Language Learning, (2) Bedouin Cultural Beliefs and Their Role in

Language Learning, (3) Domestic Workers as Contributors to English Language Acquisition in the Kuwaiti Context, (4) Religious Beliefs on L2 Learning; all of which evolve from Theme (1) and are interconnected with the research question (1).

6.5.1. Theme 1 - Key Insight 1: Parental Influence as a Determining Factor in Language Learning (*nine short stories*)

The first key insight is drawn from Theme 1 (see [Section 6.3.](#)), and therefore all the coming narratives will explore one of the main household influences in the participants' narratives, the influence of parents. Parents played different roles in their children's acquisition of the English language (see [Section 3.3.](#)). Daniel et al. (2018) highlighted the term “motivational intensity” to describe how parental encouragement enhances language learning and called for further research on how cognitive, linguistic, social, cultural, and instructional factors shape literacy development (Daniel et al., 2018).

In these narratives, certain parents adopted an active approach by encouraging their children and setting up educational activities for English language learning, whereas others had more indirect influences via their family traditions and household regulations. The following nine personal narratives illustrate the interplay of family relationships, cultural background, and the household environment in influencing language acquisition. They highlight that households are not only places for fundamental learning in general; they are complex environments that significantly impact the development of children's linguistic skills. This key insight includes the excerpts of six participants and a total of nine short stories related to Theme 1. The excerpts in this section are deliberately extensive, mirroring the narrative approach employed in the research. Including rich excerpts enhances the clarity of the findings and establishes a solid basis for the discussion and a coherent flow, enabling a deeper understanding and significant interpretation of the data.

The short stories:

6.5.1.1. Short story 1: Munira

In the following story of Munira (Table 4), the emphasis transitioned during the interviews to questions regarding the participants' early experiences and their memories of being introduced to the English language. She recounts her initial experiences with learning English throughout her childhood, in which her mother, despite having limited proficiency in the English language, tried to teach Munira the alphabet. In response, Munira shared the following:

Munira: “I don’t want to learn, I don’t want to study!”

“Researcher: So, tell me a bit about English.

Munira: (long silence) uh ... mmmmm oh Miss... It's like you're asking me about my phobia (laughing)”

Munira: Since I was a kid, almost since the first grade, honestly, in our generation, I mean, I'm 21 years old, my mother used to beat me up if I don't study... That's what all mothers do. I used to say, I ... well it's not just beating like beating...it's like psychological ...I mean... this is what brought me to this stage. When I remember that day, I was in the first grade, when she taught me the English alphabet, I used to cry and say, “I don't want to learn, I don't want to study.”

Researcher: Your mother used to teach you the alphabet.

Munira: yes, my mother used to teach me alphabet..., but my mother was not good in English.

Researcher: Why?

Munira: (Long silence) ...ummm ...My mother dropped school. My mother got married when she was in the 9th grade ...her age was 16 years old.

Researcher: Oh ok

Munira: she was married, and she was 16 years old... umm... so she stopped her study because her father, she said, didn't approve her to continue ...I even encouraged her to continue now, but she said she doesn't want to ...[that's it ... I don't want to]

Researcher: Okay”

Munira's narrative highlights the powerful role of early language learning experience and parental influence. She vividly recalls learning English as her phobia. Despite the harsh method used by her mother, these moments shaped her response to her feelings towards

learning English. Munira's narrative shows how challenges experienced at a younger age can have a long-lasting impact on one's educational journey.

6.5.1.2. Short story 2: Munira

Following a discussion on childhood and English language acquisition, Munira provided an example of her mother's methods for teaching her English at home, along with her own negative reactions to her mother's instruction and her way of dealing with the incident. Her short story reflects on her mother strategy and how that shaped her language learning experience:

Munira: "I created a movie on my mind and remembered everything"

Researcher: The question I wanted to ask you... Does the method you learned when you were young still affect you today?

Munira: Yes, it still has a great impact on me.

Researcher: What did you gain from it when you were young?

Munira: I still use it because my mother... she had movies. She would only show us a specific movie. It was about... [long silence] ...Sinbad, but it was in both Arabic and English. She would tell us, "You want to watch movies? Okay, okay..." but she wouldn't let us watch television. She didn't allow us to watch TV. She'd say, "I don't want you to make the same mistakes I did." She would turn on the movie and encourage us, saying, "Watch and listen." I would tell her, "I don't understand anything," but she'd reply, "From the situations, from all of these situations, they will stick in your mind."

Munira: So I created a movie in my mind and remembered everything — even the word 'water'... silly things like that. This method is very practical. Even now, when I watch Netflix, I try to learn.

Researcher: So, this is something you gained from your mother?

Munira: Yes, this is what I gained from her.

Researcher: Okay.

Munira: And she left me on that path. She didn't get me out of it. In the fourth grade, she would lock me in the room and not let me out until 10:00 PM.

Researcher: Aha!

Munira: She loves studying. I used to cry and say, "Umbaih" (oh no!), and she would say, "There is nothing called emotional... No one will help you except your studies and your degree." As I got older, I told her, "You told me when I was young that no one will help you but your degree" (laughing).

Researcher: (laughing)

Munira: No... no... my mother was strict (laughing).

Munira's narrative illustrates how her mother used to teach them English through films. Her mother clearly left a lasting impact *"yes, this is what I gained from her"*. It shaped her practical approach to learning, enabling her to recall even basic words. The narrative also shows how Munira keeps justifying her mother's harsh actions *"I don't want you to make the same mistakes I did"*,

6.5.1.3. Short story 3: Farah

Farah (Table 4), a participant who possesses a roughly comparable background to Munira due to their mutual Bedouin roots, narrates her story from a different perspective, emphasising her mother's positive impact on her English language acquisition despite the disparities in opportunities that she faced in comparison to her brothers, who were permitted to study abroad for English without any constraints. Not only do Farah and Munira share a similar family name and cultural background, but they also focused on the role of their mothers in the language learning process. Although Farah's short story also intersects with key insight 2 (see [Section 6.5.3.](#)) in the discussion, the focus of the following short story still presents the first research questions of the current study, and therefore it is more appropriate to be included under the current key insight.

Farah: "I want you to be able to speak English. I don't want you to be like me"

"Researcher: Did anyone have an impact on you?"

Farah: My mother.

Researcher.: Okay!

Farah: Mum always wanted us to learn English, although her English is a little bit weak. So she used to say 'I want you to be able to speak English... I don't want you to be like me.' because she... she used to say 'I was traveling with your dad...your dad used to know English, but I didn't'. she used to say 'especially girls' I mean, she really focused on this bit.

Researcher.: Why girls?

Farah: because she used to say 'because boys can manage to develop their language, and I don't want you not knowing anything, and then you travel with strangers [refers to husbands]... They control your life based on their desires (laughing).

Researcher.: Aha!

Farah: 'When you have knowledge, you can act.'

Researcher.: Why do you think that boys were better?

Farah: Because boys in our family were going abroad. I believe that if I'd like to learn English, I should travel abroad, because of the environment. Everyone speaks English. Here it's the opposite. Even though I tried to learn, I am a little bit weak in English. I am not weak, but somehow, I manage my affairs with very simple words. I can't use difficult words.

Researcher: (code-switch) Okay!

Farah: I have two brothers; one is older while the other is younger. Both of them learned English in America. They went in a group of exchange students abroad. They learned abroad, but for us [women], we have limited opportunities"

Farah's narrative underscores her mother's encouraging approach to learning English, a clear contrast to the harsher methods described by Munira. Even with fewer opportunities than her brothers, who studied abroad, Farah's mother instilled in her the belief that knowledge empowers action. Farah's narrative reflects the influence of a supportive mother in shaping her language learning perspective.

6.5.1.4. Short story 4: Farah

Once again, unlike Munira, whose narrative was constrained by traditional Bedouin norms, Farah presents a different and rather positive viewpoint despite their similar cultural background. Her narrative underscores the powerful influence of an understanding mother who encouraged learning through errors, establishing resilience and confidence in Farah's English language acquisition. Farah's household environment played an important role in shaping her experience within the cultural influences.

Farah: "as my mother pointed out, 'If you don't make mistakes, you won't learn."

Farah: Mum was always telling me, 'You have to make mistakes to learn'.

Researcher: (code-switch) Okay!

Farah: 'No learning without making mistakes'.

Mod.: (code-switch) Okay! Okay!

Farah: 'You have to make mistakes one or two times to learn how to speak.'

Researcher: Good. To what extent did this encourage you to participate in the class where you may make mistakes?

Farah: It encouraged me a lot. It's okay to make mistakes, but the most important thing is to be aware, understand, and participate in class.

Researcher: Okay!

Farah: Even my colleague was telling me, 'You are unable to read well, so why do you participate?' I have to participate. This happened in this (code-switch) course.

Researcher: Aha! In this (code-switch) course.

Farah: Yes, I said, 'It's okay. I must participate'. There are words ... I am still ... I expressed that to Dr [name removed], because I couldn't read the long difficult words since we started the semester. She told me, 'It's okay'.

Researcher: Did you listen to your colleague?

Farah: No.

Researcher: (code-switch) Okay! So, you insisted on participating?

Farah: Yes, I should participate.

Researcher: In your opinion, why do you insist on doing so?

Farah: I must learn from my mistakes. If I didn't make any mistakes ... as my mother pointed out, "If you don't make mistakes, you won't learn."

Farah's narrative highlights how her mother's support, "if you don't make mistakes, you won't learn", encouraged her to engage in class despite criticism. Her mother's supportive approach helped Farah acknowledge and accept her challenges, yet it did not stop her from practising and taking part actively. This attitude built her resilience and demonstrated how learning from errors positively shaped her English language journey.

6.5.1.5. Short Story 5: Farah

Continuing with the same participant, in the subsequent two excerpts, Farah responds to one of the questions that were asked later during the interview. The story highlights insights into how her family environment, and specifically the role of her parents, influences her English language learning. The following excerpts focus on the practical strategies used by her father

to enhance the English proficiency, such as communicating with the housemaids, and her opinion about her parents' different perspectives. Despite her father's involvement in the language acquisition process, similar to Munira, Farah considers her mother as having a greater impact on her language learning experience.

Farah: "Mum kept telling me 'You must learn English'. Dad wasn't encouraging me a lot."

Farah: My dad is very good in English.

Researcher: Oh! That's Allah's will. Did he specialise in English?

Farah: No, but because of practising it a lot.

Researcher: (code-switch) Okay!

Farah: My dad always talks with our housemaids in English.

Researcher: What's his role?

Farah: (pause) He encourages me, and says, 'You should practise English daily...that's it.'

After Farah was asked about the reason why she focused on her mother rather than her father when asked about who had an influence on her language proficiency, she said:

Farah: My mum encourages me more.

Farah: Mum kept telling me 'you must learn English.' Dad wasn't encouraging me a lot, because he sees that I will probably count on others [as husband] (laughing).

Farah: Because he was telling me, 'your mother counts on me. So, if you get married,' that I will count on my husband when it comes to speaking English (laughing).

Continuing with her narrative, Farah explained that her father's English proficiency, evidenced by his daily practice through conversations with housemaids, contributed to her language exposure. However, she emphasised that her mother's consistent encouragement played a far greater role in shaping her English language learning. Farah noted that while her father advised daily practice, he was less assertive. In contrast, her mother's insistence that she learn English left a more lasting impact, illustrating the distinct practical strategies within her family environment that influenced her language acquisition.

6.5.1.6. Short Story 6: Dalal

Dalal, while also Bedouin (Table 4), belongs to a different surname and tribe compared to Munira and Farah. Despite this difference, her narrative underscores a common societal focus on parental impact. Dalal's narrative varies in specifics but continuously emphasises her belief that her mother's role was central in influencing her language acquisition experience. It is worth mentioning that Dalal's major is English in the College of Education (CoE), and she is the only participant who preferred to conduct the interview in English. This highlights her strong personal desire to acquire the English language. In the following excerpt, Dalal shares her narrative by recalling her journey from childhood, remembering her English learning passion that was driven primarily by her love for Barbie movies. Dalal's narrative was lengthy due to her obvious passion to speak in English and elaborate more on her childhood memories. Like Munira and Farah's family, hers was also a non-English speaking household; yet they gave her whatever she required, which she asserted unintentionally facilitated her English language acquisition.

Dalal: "She thought that I was just watching Barbie movies."

Researcher: So, we're going to take you back to your childhood.

Dalal: (smile) it was all about Barbie movies! (laughs).

Researcher: Barbie movies!? Oh, interesting! So, tell me more about that.

Dalal: Okay, to begin with, none of my family members speak English.

Researcher: None of them?

Dalal: None.

Researcher: Interesting! Okay.

Dalal: Only like, you know, they're not fluent, but they know some words. But then I came. I was obsessed with Barbie movies... The time when there were CDs, you know... I always buy them.

Researcher: Do you have sisters and brothers or siblings?

Dalal: Yes.

Researcher: Okay, and any of them is interested in English as well?

Dalal: None of them.

Researcher: So it's just you?

Dalal: Yes.

Researcher: Oh, that's interesting! Okay.

Dalal: They want to learn English, but you know, it's difficult because they're all adults now. I'm the youngest in the family, only my brother is younger than me. So, I used to watch Barbie movies...

I like to play them every day, not every day, but you know... like every time a new movie is launched, I'll watch it definitely. So I don't really know the reason why or how I learned English because I was young. So I don't recall.

Researcher: Okay. Did anyone help you learn English? Anyone in the family? In one way or another? I don't know. Like, who used to buy the CDs for you?

Dalal: My mom.

Researcher: Your mom. So what did she think of the fact that you're enjoying this and you're learning English?

Dalal: Actually, I think that she didn't know that I'm learning. She thought that I was just watching Barbie movies. She knows that I'm obsessed with it, so she buys me... buys me movies, dolls, whatever. So I think that helped me.

Researcher: Do you think that there was a point where they actually realised that you're learning English?

Dalal: Yes! (laughing).

Researcher: Okay, how did they... tell me about that, like how did they react?

Dalal: (overlapping) (code-switch) Shofoo Dalal itsolif (laughs) [Look at Dalal, she's talking in English].

Researcher: Really! (laughs).

Dalal: (laughs) So I felt like she's encouraging me [her mother].

Researcher: Okay, so she was proud that you're learning English.

Dalal: Yes! Definitely!

Researcher: Does she know English?

Dalal: No.

Researcher: No. Okay. So (code-switch) ente el bint el momayaza [you're the special girl].

Dalal: (laughs) Yes.

Researcher: (laughs) Okay, that's interesting. Did they help you? Like other than watching Barbie movies? Did they, for example, enrol you in some English courses?

Dalal: Nope!

Researcher: Or did you practice your English elsewhere?

Dalal: No, it was all self-improvement. No, it was only me.

Dalal's narrative reveals that, although her parents did not actively provide formal educational support because they did not speak English, they inadvertently supplied her with the resources she needed, such as purchasing Barbie movies, which sparked her passion for English. This unintentional parental support enabled her to engage in self-directed learning, underscoring how personal interests can drive language acquisition even when parental guidance is limited.

6.5.1.7. Short Story 7: Athari

Transitioning from the narratives of the three Bedouin participants with the same surname who highlighted the significant influence of their mothers in their English language acquisition in the previous six short stories, two additional participants (Athari and Wadha), also from Bedouin families but holding different surnames, recalled experiences centred on their fathers. In the first short story, Athari (Table 4) highlights the significant impact of her father on her English language learning experiences. Her father, an engineer with a deep affection for the English language, played a crucial part in her education by using strict strategies such as vocabulary copying as a disciplinary measure. Even though this method was meant to help her with her language abilities, Athari's relationship with English became complicated. She eventually developed a deep dislike for it during her early education. Despite the discouragement, Athari continues to improve her language skills.

Athari: "I hated the English course because he used to punish me..."

Athari: I failed in English, and I said, 'Impossible!' I mean, all girls were leaving, but I was continuing to fail until the ninth grade because of English! (laughing).

Researcher: (laughing) Okay!

Athari: So, my dad was an engineer.

Researcher: Mm! [listening]

Athari: He's crazy about English.

Researcher: Aha!

Athari: I mean really! He likes English so much!

Researcher: (code-switch) Okay!

Athari: So much!! It was our main obstacle because he used to always make us write and write and write!! (laughing).

Researcher: Write what?

Athari: We copy the words more than a page. It's a punishment. If he wants to punish us... 'copy the words' like that... (laughing) just like that.

Researcher: What do you think he saw as valuable in copying words?

Athari: To memorise the meanings and memorise the way it's written... mmm... He has a rule. 'If you know how to write the words, you can create a sentence.' He considered grammar rules easy but found vocabulary difficult because English words can be complex.... mmm... I even remember him saying, 'One word has different meanings. So, if you know how to write it and its meaning, you will know how to write.'

Researcher: Mm! He told you this information?

Athari: Mmm[(in agreement)] (laughing)

Researcher: How old were you when he was forcing you to copy words?

Athari: Since primary to (pause) [thinking] all our life (laughing). I mean, even now... my brother is in high school... he still copies (laughing). If he wants to punish us, 'yallah!... copy the English vocabulary you have... unit 1... unit 2,' like that (laughing).

Athari: Ah! So [started to talk serious]), I didn't like the fact that he punishes me. So, you know, I'm like, I hated the English course because he used to punish me.

Athari: Then, when I told you, I failed in the sixth grade, I was sad. I said, 'No. I have to improve myself. In the other courses, I don't fail.' So I tried, and I learned.

Researcher: (interrupting) Your level in general, how was it in the other subjects?

Athari: It's okay. I mean, very good.

Researcher: (code-switch) Okay! Okay!

Athari: Got it?! I wasn't facing difficulties in any other subject, you know. I used to understand everything, but English was a main obstacle (laughing).

Athari's narrative reveals how her father's strict disciplinary methods, such as forcing repetitive vocabulary copying, created significant challenges in her early English learning and evoked negative emotions towards the language. Just like Munira (see [Section 6.2.](#)), Athari

recounted her father's strictness with laughter, using humour to cope with the memories. Despite these challenges, she improved her language skills.

6.5.1.8. Short Story 8: Wadha

Wadha, the oldest participant in the current study, shares her narrative with passion. Wadha started the narrative by talking about herself before recounting about her father, who plays a crucial role in her language learning. Wadha, who also comes from a Bedouin family but has a different surname from Munira, Farah, Dalal, and Athari expressed her happiness during childhood whenever she looked at her father's travel documents, which were written in English. She started the following story by focusing on her being from an older generation.

Wadha: "he was talking with us in English when we were children"

Wadha: Yeah! My father.

Researcher: OK, was he an engineer? He was at KOC [Kuwait Oil Company]?

Wadha: No, he was an employee working in the field or something.

Researcher: Why did he like to talk to you in English?

Wadha: Just like that... I mean, he likes mmm... by the way, my dad always travels. He was traveling for attending courses abroad.

Researcher: Good.

Wadha: So we used to feel happy when we get into his room, we'd find copies of travel tickets in English. We'd see cheques. It's like, "my dad has a language, and he knows," and stuff like that (laughs).

Researcher: How did that affect you?

Wadha: I don't know. I liked it...

Researcher: Did you think of developing your language?

Wadha: Yeah... I mean, when we sit with dad, he was talking with us in English. When we were children, he was talking with us in very simple words.

Wadha recalls how her father's travel documents written in English sparked a sense of wonder, even though this is a simpler story compared to the others. This narrative demonstrates that even small household memories, particularly those involving parents, can have a lasting impact on one's language learning journey. Such narratives are essential, as they

highlight the subtle yet powerful influence of early familial experiences on language acquisition.

6.5.1.9. Short Story 9: Rawya

Making the shift from the experiences of Bedouin participants, Rawya, a participant of a *Hadhar* family (Table 4), shares her unique story that further examines the impact of parental influence on language acquisition, informed by her specific socio-ecological context. Rawya, as reported in the Faces Behind the Data table (Table 4), comes from a strong a religious background and was interviewed in her veil and abbaya (a black robe-like dress). This distinctive blend illustrates how unique her experience is with language learning and how it impacted her own perspective, as noted in more recent studies examine identity construction through multimodal analysis, which considers body movements, gaze, clothing, and space (Block, 2007). Rawya shares a unique perspective on parental influence both in relation to her mother and father.

Rawya: “My grandmother is not an Arab.”

Rawya: We used English a lot since childhood.

Researcher: Since childhood, you mean your family?

Rawya: It’s like when we say “different culture.”

Researcher: Okay! Tell me how?

Rawya: My grandmother is not an Arab.

Researcher: Mm! Interesting. Okay.

Rawya: It was something important.

Researcher: May I know her nationality?

Rawya: She’s French, but we didn’t learn French.

Researcher: Mm!

Rawya: We had to communicate with her, I mean, with little English at first.

Researcher: So, can we say that since childhood you were able to speak English?

Rawya: A little.

Researcher: Who contributed to teach you English?

Rawya: My mom was keen to teach us English every summer.

Researcher: Okay!

Rawya: She was buying us pictures. The first lesson I learned was “k-u-w-a-i-t” [singing a famous national Arabic song about Kuwait that includes pronouncing the letters of the word Kuwait in English].

Researcher: “a-i-t” (singing - laughing).

Rawya: So my mother used sticky notes board to refer to each one and which book we preferred. She would stick it at the back.

Researcher: Okay.

Rawya: Once finished. ‘What are the things you liked in the story? Tell me, in English, what can you translate in English even not literally’ [referring to mother]. For example, if you liked the main character. The main character, for example, was a duck. ‘Write a duck in English.’ Those stories were with pictures.

Researcher: I see.

Rawya: So, every weekend, we were doing the same thing.

Rawya: My mom is a Quran teacher.

Researcher: Okay!

Rawya: But my mom is very keen.

Researcher: Does that mean it’s mainly her profession? She didn’t work at any other place?

Rawya: Yeah! She just worked for 4 years, then retired and dedicated herself to the house.

Researcher: Okay. Then, she dedicated herself to this matter.

Rawya: She was teaching us everything. We recited the whole Quran.

Researcher: Oh! Allah has willed it!

Rawya: Aaah! She got my sisters enrolled in the Pakistani (a Pakistani private school in Kuwait) to be good at English. For my mum, she must learn everything; this is her culture.

Rawya: My mother created a room for us in the house, she put cabinets in it, just like this [aiming at the library room we’re in during the interview], and she put our names. And each one of us who reads a book should leave it there, and the one who reads books the most will get (code-switch) a gift.

Researcher: Ah! She is really a teacher ha!?! (overlapping).

Rawya: When you come to our house, you can find our library is the largest thing at home (laughing).

Researcher: Nice. That's really interesting.

Together, these narratives offer a comprehensive indicator of parental influence in the English language learning process. Munira's narrative highlights how strict, traditional methods, although emotionally challenging, left a lasting imprint on her language journey. In contrast, in Farah's story, while her father engaged in language practice, it was her mother's consistent encouragement that proved a drive for self-improvement. Dalal's narrative adds another layer by showing that even without formal educational support, her inherent passion, with simple family practices like watching Barbie movies, fostered her English acquisition. Athari's story revealed the impact of her father's strict methods, which, although inducing frustration, drove her determination to master English. In contrast, Wadha's narrative showed how her father's casual use of English, evidenced by his travel documents, instilled a sense of curiosity. Finally, Rawya's narrative recalls her mother's creative and indirect support that facilitated her language acquisition. Drawing from a distinct socio-ecological context, she offers another perspective by emphasising her French mother's crucial role in learning English through her use of sticky notes and providing rewards.

Collectively, these narratives emphasise that parental influence, whether via strict discipline, gentle encouragement, or innovative support, played a fundamental role in defining each learner's own language journey within their cultural and socio-ecological contexts.

6.5.2. Discussion

Research has investigated the impact of various factors on L2, such as gender, age, and cognitive ability (e.g., Derakhshan et al., 2024; Kormos, 2023). while little focus on the sociological and psychological effects and their connection to second language (L2) acquisition. In the case of the current study, the six participants provided narratives that shared some similarities, differences and intersections, providing a spectrum of parental influences on English language learning. All narratives recalled their childhood (*when*) a short story from their home (*where*), and in these, there was a clear focus from all participants on mothers, and only two on fathers (*who*), in fostering their language learning acquisition.

Across stories 1- 7 and story 9, mothers emerged as an important influence in their experiences, applying different strategies that ranged from direct instructions to creative instructions when participants were younger. As outlined in Barkhuizen's *scales of context* **Error! Reference source not found.**) (*story*, *Story*, *STORY*), it became evident that the scales were apparent in the participants' short stories. For example, the (*story*) became evident in narratives where participants recalled personal experiences, emotions, and detailed familial interactions, particularly involving their parents, that had direct internal reflections. The (*Story*) scale was evident in situation that were beyond their interpersonal situations and therefore decreased their agency or power (Barkhuizen, 2016). Other narratives focused on the (*STORY*), highlighting the broader cultural norms and expectations within their household where they had less power and influence.

When considering Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework, the micro and meso systems appeared in the narratives where they encompassed interactions with parents, students, friends, and other student affairs professionals (Zhang, 2018). While one participant briefly mentions her in-class experience (Farah), this narrative remains supplementary to the primary key insight of parental influences. This could be as a result of the nature of the question, which limited the answer to the household environment but was still guided by parental influences that were deeply linked to their cultural and social contexts.

At the immediate environment (*story*), each participant shared her short story from her own unique and individual perspective, giving details that varied from the other participants. At this micro level (*story*), the participants consistently highlight the influence of either individual characteristics or familial relationships (Allen et al., 2016), particularly with their parents. Each narrative emphasises the micro level (*story*) within the home in influencing their language acquisition experience in an indirect way that reflected their identity. For example, Munira's description of her mother's strict and disciplined approach contrasts with Dalal's narrative where she highlighted her mother's unintentional encouragement to language learning. Dalal's narrative is noteworthy for its uniqueness, as it centres on a microsystem with a primary emphasis on personal and immediate influence despite mentioning interpersonal interaction with her mother. Munira's first struggle and reflection on her mother's

strictness also show both resistance and acceptance of her cultural identity on a (*story*) level, influenced by the cultural norms (*STORY*) within her household environment.

Wadha, on the other hand, mentioned her father as a significant influence on her English language learning during childhood. Her narrative offers a clear example of *imagined identity*, as reflected in her statement: “*We used to feel happy when we got into his room, we’d find copies of travel tickets in English, we’d see cheques. It’s like, ‘my dad has a language, and he knows,’ and stuff like that*” (laughs). Although Wadha did not directly experience her father’s journeys, these symbolic artefacts sparked her excitement and inspired an early sense of investment in learning English. Her feelings of happiness upon encountering those items reflect how imagined identities can be emotionally rooted in shaping language learning trajectories.

From a different perspective, Dalal clearly expressed her imagined identity ([see Section 3.2](#)) through her immersive engagement with Barbie movies at a younger age, which she watched almost daily. This imaginative world appeared to shape her future identity (*story*), as evidenced by her decision to major in English. Notably, she was the only participant who insisted on conducting the interview in English, reflecting her strong desire to practise and immerse herself in the language. This finding also illustrates how socioeconomic status (SES) can indirectly support language learning by providing access to resources that align with the learner’s interests and developmental needs. As the participant recalled, “*She thought that I was just watching Barbie movies. She knows that I’m obsessed with it, so she buys me... buys me movies, dolls, whatever. So I think that helped me.*” This suggests that the mother’s ability to purchase English-language media contributed to her child’s early exposure to the language. Such insights align with previous research indicating that factors such as SES and parental education levels significantly influence second language (L2) acquisition (see, for example, Al-Kandari et al., 2022; Babikkoi, 2014; Laketa et al., 2023).

This study has shown that learners’ cultural backgrounds proved important, as differences in ethnicity, race, language, social status, religion, or economic conditions sometimes led to feelings of disconnection that undermined their drive to learn. Conversely, education

consistently brought about changes, and learners' cultural identities played a vital role in transmitting these values (Altugan, 2015). For example, Farah's narrative shows her mother's focus on resilience, as she encouraged her to learn from her mistakes to build confidence in learning the language. Consequently, despite Farah's belief that her proficiency is inadequate, she persists in her participation and learning. On the other hand, Athari failed her English course multiple times and attributed this to her father, whom she described as '*He is crazy about English.*' He would punish his children by forcing them to copy English words, believing he was teaching them in the process. However, this approach was ineffective. Athari's experience highlights how a parent's insistence on their child learning English, when enforced through pressure or punishment, can have long-lasting negative effects on the learner's relationship with the language. Both Farah and Munira were encouraged, though in distinct manners, by their mothers to prioritise academic achievement in order to secure better educational prospects than those they experienced. Although previous research suggests that educated parents are more likely to create supportive learning environments (Darwish, 2016), this finding challenges that assumption. Despite leaving school at sixteen due to marriage and parental restrictions, Munira's mother for example, actively encouraged her children to engage with English. She used films as a learning tool and motivated them to listen and infer meaning from context. Her approach illustrates that parental support for language learning does not depend solely on formal education levels.

In the case of Rawya's narrative, she showcased how her mother created a structured environment for language learning, making an effort to provide creative methods (reading stories during summer) and institute a rewards system, which made Rawya's experience distinct from the rest. Also, having a French grandmother resulted in a multicultural background which gave Rawya an early exposure to English. Her narrative shows a contrasting perspective, showcasing the role of cultural diversity in shaping her identity and mindset. In a study conducted in Malaysia, researchers examined how cultural diversity influenced second language acquisition among Malaysian students. The findings revealed that diverse cultural backgrounds indirectly enhanced the effectiveness of language learning, with this variation serving as a critical medium for acquiring a second language (Ramlan & Maarof, 2014).

Farah and Rawya both experienced a structured language learning environment, indicating their mothers' efforts to overcome whatever challenges they encountered, whether through learning from mistakes, as illustrated in Farah's narrative, or by reading a book and receiving a reward for their achievements, as in Rawya's narrative.

Both Munira and Athari faced psychological discomfort due to strict methods which had a negative impact in the microsystem where they mostly struggled with their internal doubts and even investment. It is important to highlight the contrast in identities between Munira and Athari. While Munira referred to her mother's strict approach and described English as her 'phobia,' Athari recalled her father's punitive methods as a means of language instruction. Despite this, Athari demonstrated resilience by persisting in her efforts to learn English and refusing to accept failure. These narratives underscore the complex interplay between individual identity and socio-ecological influences in shaping language learning experiences.

Moreover, the role of fathers is highlighted by Athari and Wadha with negative and positive impacts respectively. It is worth mentioning that Munira and Athari intersect in the balance between their parents' negative impact as they described and the long-term benefits, they believed they drew from those methods. However, Farah and Rawya's narratives intersect in their mother's keen efforts to foster independence and encouragement. Ultimately, each narrative illustrated the language acquisition process and its significant connection to the household environment and parental influence. While Al-Fadley et al. (2018) emphasised the impact of parental involvement on language development, the current study shows a different finding which proves that learner investment can surpass parental influence. For example, Athari's father wanted her to learn English but used punishment, which made her fail the English course, yet she still pursued it. Similarly, Dalal's mother was unaware she was learning English, assuming she was simply watching Barbie movies, while Dalal was intentionally using them to improve her language skills. These examples highlight that even in unsupportive or unaware home environments, learners can take initiative and invest in their own language learning.

On the macro level (*STORY*), broader cultural and societal expectations are involved such as beliefs and sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2016). In the case of the nine stories, those expectations influence the parents' approaches and the participants' perspectives of English learning. These norms were evident in the Bedouin participants' narratives, which makes these

norms intersecting with key insight 2. Farah's mother, for example highlighted the acquisition of English as a means of empowerment for her daughters, which stands in contrast with the privileges and opportunities granted to her brothers. The second part of her narrative is discussed in the upcoming key insight 2 (see [Section 6.5.3.](#)). This illustrates a wider societal conflict between gender norms and the aim of educational fairness. For example, Farah acknowledged that her family upheld a norm in which females encountered fewer opportunities. Farah's narrative also addressed her identity, revealing how the norm of limited opportunities for females became part of her self-concept. Butler (2011) argued that gender was not a fixed trait but something that people continually performed, thereby actively forming their own gender identities. Consequently, Farah's response shows that her gender identity is shaped by her household and cultural norms.

Similarly, Munira's mother's strict methods can be seen as an attempt to ensure her daughter's academic success within a context where education is viewed as primary pathway to independence for women from her culture. Darwish (2016) claims that college students may encounter external influences such as parental expectations and the fear of rejection. This becomes clear even more when Munira sees English as phobia, and when remembering certain methods on learning English such as the alphabet. Alshatti et al. (2020) observed in their study on home-based literacy practices of mothers in Kuwait that mothers showed a clear preference for certain literacy practices. They favoured teaching children alphabet letters and numbers over approaches such as storytelling or singing nursery rhymes (Alshatti et al., 2020).

Munira also explained that her mother had to stop her studies at the age of sixteen because of her marriage and the fact that her father did not approve of her continuing her education, as a way to justify her mother's strict methods. The mother's actions reflect pushing Munira towards what she herself could not achieve, emphasising education as a way of overcoming societal and familial constraints that previously limited her opportunities. Both stories clearly intersect with the second key insight (see [Section 6.5.3.](#)) that discusses those Bedouin beliefs and their contrasting outcomes.

Conversely, the macro level (*STORY*) had a different impact on Rawya's experience. The cultural diversity (French grandmother) reflected in her mother's creative strategies in the household, creating a unique environment for language learning. What is intriguing about Rawya's narrative is that it revealed her family's deep-rooted connections in Kuwaiti society through a distinctive cultural blend, largely influenced by her French grandmother. Her story underscores the close bonds between nuclear and extended family, especially with grandparents. In Kuwait and other Arab nations, the family held a central role, with the nuclear family often being socially and economically intertwined with the extended family (Hanadi et al., 2015). The previous narratives shows that household environments are deeply embedded in larger societal norms and values that align with the macro level (*STORY*).

6.5.3. Theme 1 - Key Insight 2: Bedouin Cultural Beliefs and Their Role in Language Learning (*two short stories*)

The second key insight from Theme 1 showcases the difficulties faced by Bedouin culture female learners in learning a second language (L2). It was challenging to understand the broader socio-ecological context of English language acquisition among Kuwaiti female learners at Kuwait University. It emerged during the research process that the majority of participants were from *Badu* backgrounds, which provided a natural focus on their experiences. This was particularly valuable, as the voice of *Badu* learners is new and overlooked in language learning research within the Kuwaiti context. The diversity in Kuwait ranging from the relatively conservative Bedouin communities to a more open society with emerging trends (see [Section 2.2.1.](#)) and democratic values that promote gender equality. Yet, many families maintained their own distinct rules that differed from wider societal norms. Therefore, linking language learning solely to the broader society overlooked the unique subcultural practices, such as those of the Bedouin, which shaped learners' experiences in their own way.

Therefore, this key insight is significant as it highlights the connection between cultural identity of Kuwaiti female learners and educational achievement within the Bedouin community. It offers valuable insights from learners who shared stories from this perspective about the occasional conflict between traditional values and educational requirements. The internal

diversity within the Bedouin group exemplifies the presence of many socio-cultural dynamics in Kuwaiti society. As mentioned earlier, Munira and Farah come from Bedouin backgrounds. Their stories included an intricate combination of experiences that emphasise the cultural obstacles and educational incentives, shaping how they as Bedouins acquire the English language from their different perspectives. Consequently, the subsequent findings offer useful insights from Munira and Farah regarding certain characteristics that underscores the contribution of Bedouins, who represent an important proportion of the population in Kuwait (see [Chapter 2](#)) and warrant recognition. The subsequent two short stories will exemplify these experiences further.

6.5.3.1. *Short Story 10: Farah*

The following short story provides valuable insight about the Bedouin environment and its influences on female learners. Farah's next excerpt was previously mentioned in short story 3 for a different point of discussion, the following short story sheds light on the interplay between gender roles and authority, cultural expectations, and language learning opportunities. Her short story reflects the socio-ecological impact across multiple levels and how certain privileges that emerge from a Bedouin household environment are often gendered. She highlights this by contrasting her own limited opportunities with those of her brothers. Farah clearly addressed the distinctions in opportunities between herself and her brothers, highlighting that her brothers were provided with better educational opportunities. As a result, her brothers chose to continue their education in the United States while she and her sisters stayed in Kuwait. She argued that to acquire English language skills effectively, one must immerse oneself in an English-speaking environment abroad. She believed that staying in Kuwait created obstacles. Although she tried, she felt competent in handling basic English but faced difficulties using complex terms. On the other hand, her brothers, who took part in an international exchange program in the United States, acquired a more extensive proficiency in the language. She concluded that her powers, along with her sisters', are more restrictive than those of her brothers.

Farah: “They learned abroad. But for us, we have limited opportunities”

Researcher.: Why girls?

Farah: because she used to say ‘because boys can manage to develop their language, and I don’t want you not knowing anything, and then you travel with strangers [refers to husband] They control your life based on their desires.

Researcher.: Aha!

Farah: ‘When you have knowledge, you can act’

Researcher: Why do you think that boys were better?

Farah: Because boys in our family were going abroad. I believe that if I’d like to learn English, I should travel abroad, because of the environment. Everyone speaks English. The opposite is here. Even though I tried to learn, I am a little bit weak in English. I am not weak, but somehow, I manage my affairs with very simple words. I am unable to use difficult words.

Researcher: (code-switch) Okay!

Farah: I have two brothers; one is older while the other is younger. Both of them learned English in America. They went in a group of exchange students abroad. They learned abroad. But for us, we have limited opportunities”

Farah’s story not only reveals the gendered educational disparities in Bedouin communities but also exposes the deeply held values that shape these inequalities. Her narrative highlights how societal and familial expectations, though contested, profoundly influence women’s educational paths. Farah’s struggle reflects the broader tension between traditional norms and emerging opportunities in the Kuwaiti society, illustrating the significant impact of cultural values on language learning and academic success.

6.5.3.2. Short Story 11: Munira

In this narrative, Munira recounted an incident in which her mother, whom she considers a source of encouragement, advised her not to join engineering because she was about to get married at that time, and that her husband would not give her permission to join this major. The mother emphasised the dominance of men and refused to let her daughter make her own choices, instead insisting that she should fully comply. Consequently, Munira joined the

College of Education at Kuwait University instead because of the male influences on women's educational choices in a Bedouin culture.

Munira: “ ... well... our family greatly venerates men”

Munira: Actually, it wasn't my first choice. My real interest was in engineering. Yes, but things changed. I was preparing for my upcoming wedding. It was my cousin...he didn't approve, who is now my husband (laughing). Yes, and then, by God's grace, it turned out to be 'kheera' [good]. Honestly, I had never prayed 'Istikhara' [a special prayer to seek guidance], you know. I always had inner certainty that Allah would write it for me. That's right.”

“Munira: In the year 2019, when I graduated, my grades were very high, 96 and 82, I don't remember exactly. I told my mother that I had struggled on my own for twelve years, even though my family didn't support me or teach me. I was completely self-reliant. But my mother used to say that men... well...our family greatly venerates men. So, I used to tell her that no! It's not my problem.”

Munira's narrative reflects how deeply ingrained cultural values in Bedouin society influenced her educational choices. Given her profound interest in engineering, her mother, whom she regarded as an important source of support, discouraged her from pursuing it, noting the anticipated authority of her future husband. Munira conformed to cultural expectations ultimately choosing to pursue her studies at the College of Education instead. Her narrative underscores how the traditionally male decision-making framework within Bedouin families constrains women's opportunities, limiting their educational and professional aspirations. It also exemplifies the internal struggle women encounter when balancing personal ambitions with societal expectations.

6.5.4. Discussion

In the previous stories (1-11) from both key insight 1 and 2, nearly all participants were Bedouin except for one (Rawya), and in every narrative, the household environment, and particularly parental influence, played a powerful role, irrespective of whether the family was *Badu* or *Hadhar*. This common thread of parental influence was evident across the narratives. However, when socio-ecological influences were considered, distinct differences emerged at

the household level, such as the Bedouin beliefs and cultural norms. It was no longer a matter of simply categorising families as Kuwaiti, *Hadhar*, or *Badu*; each household exhibited its own unique dynamics.

In key insight 2, both short stories shared experiences from their household (*where*) in where they both discussed the male (*who*) authority within their Bedouin context. As for (*when*) the time of these narratives, it was not confined to a specific period but rather represented an identity that held to cultural norms and has persisted for a long time and continues to shape their perspectives today in accepting this cultural norm (see [Section 3.2.](#)). This key insight aligns with Shin's (2017) definition of ethnic identity as a concept encompassing the behaviours, beliefs, values, and norms that connect an individual to a particular ethnic group. However, this definition cannot be universally applied, as belonging to a single social or ethnic group does not necessarily equate to holding a singular, fixed identity. Thus, the current study is not limited to one type of identity. Using Barkhuizen's SSA (see [Section 5.6.2.](#)), the two stories of Farah and Munira are explored across the three levels in the *scales of context*.

Farah's narrative starts with the socio-ecological impact of traditional Bedouin norms (*STORY*) with her realisation of the unequal opportunities between her and her brothers. At the same time, Munira reflects the individual reflections (*story*), and the reduced control when being redirected away by her mother (*Story*) from her desired engineering major due to her upcoming marriage which decreased the power of her identity. Both participants reflect an internalised acceptance of this societal expectation, in a way that reduced their power in this context where language learning opportunities were available (see [Section 3.2.](#)) by looking at the dominance of men as a natural aspect of their lives. These findings resonate with existing literature (see [Section 3.4.](#)) on the impact of traditional gender roles on language learning opportunities. As noted by Troudi et al. (2009), societal norms and expectations surrounding gender can significantly shape language practice and interaction, particularly between male and female students. As a result, such Bedouin norms can constrain meaningful language interaction and development, which is why Troudi et al., (2009) suggested to consider cultural differences when analysing findings. In addition, their experiences helped in shaping their identity, specifically with how they would see themselves in the future (future identities) (Norton, 2013).

The mesosystem takes us to a different level where the person who is the main focus of attention interacts with two or more social groups (Chong et al., 2023). In the case of the two narratives, Farah expressed how the limitation of opportunities affected her ability to acquire English proficiency. She argues that immersion in an English-speaking environment abroad was critical for her brother's success, whereas she faced difficulties in her English language competence. Her mother's encouragement that was discussed earlier in key insight 1 (see [Section 6.5.1.](#)) also showed her insistence that her daughters must learn English to avoid dependence on their future husbands. The outcome of her narrative underscores the independence perspective that is both valued and restricted for a Bedouin woman. Moreover, Munira's reflection reveals her personal struggle between her educational desire and familial expectations. Despite her self-attributed high academic achievements and resilience, Munira faced challenges imposed by Bedouin beliefs.

Even on a (*STORY*) level which reflects the macrosystem, these narratives underscore how deeply embedded cultural norms shape their perspectives, leading them to accept these constraints rather than challenge them. Munira, for example, accepted the situation as “*kheera*” (God's will) to accept the broader cultural norm under her religious belief. Her experience also shows the broader influences of Bedouin beliefs where spousal influences impact women's educational paths. In addition, Farah's narrative discusses the fundamental barriers in Bedouin culture, where males have better access to opportunities. The privilege of male autonomy in education over females mirrors a wider social dynamic. Both narratives tie closely to the research question for theme 1 and how such experiences in the household can impact and shape female learners' language learning journey.

Although both participants shared Bedouin cultural background, their parents', and specifically their mothers' approaches to language learning in dealing with challenges such as male authority and female independence, varied significantly. This variation highlights the complexity within what might appear to be a homogenous cultural group, especially after highlighting the *scales of context*. It also shows that households explore and deal with language learning in their unique ways, shaped by individual family dynamics and different

parental attitudes. Such findings encourage the understanding of the different ways that households contribute to language learning experiences.

These narratives present two distinct identities emerging from a similar cultural background. Both participants encountered the same obstacle of male authority in their Bedouin culture, however, Farah accepted her limitations and remained determined to learn, allowing both (Story and STORY) to have more impact on her identity, while still managing to focus on her ambition to learn. Munira on the other hand, as will be seen in a later narrative, developed a pronounced anxiety towards English from her phobia. Her internal reflection shaped an identity that was significantly influenced by broader socio-ecological factors beyond immediate interpersonal relationships, ultimately diminishing her sense of agency and power.

He (2002) explored cross-cultural educational experiences between China and Canada, demonstrating how individuals navigated their past, present, and future identities as they adapted to shifting cultural and linguistic environments. Wei (2023) later commented on this study, emphasising that identities are fluid, continually reshaped by changes in culture, language, and place. Importantly, our study shows that such dynamic identity formation is not confined to comparisons between countries, even in a small country like Kuwait, significant differences can emerge. Among Kuwaiti families, for example, Rawya's narrative (story 9) from a multicultural *Hadhar* household revealed greater freedom and support for English acquisition, whereas Farah's narrative from a Bedouin context highlighted how strict familial norms and gender disparities limited opportunities. Also, Dalal from story (6) is another unique story where her family is Bedouin but unintentionally helped her learn the English language. This contrast illustrates how, as in He's (2002) findings, the interplay between education and cultural tensions can profoundly influence learners' identities and their journeys in acquiring English.

Although the broader macrosystem may exert a strong influence in some contexts, here the immediate microsystem, the family, played a powerful role in shaping their identities within the impact of the macrosystem. This finding supports our argument that identity is multifaceted, with cultural, linguistic, and even religious dimensions influencing language learning outcomes (see [Section 3.2.](#)).

6.5.5. Theme 1- Key Insight 3: Domestic Workers as Contributors to English Language Acquisition in the Kuwaiti Context (*three short stories*)

Another important finding from this study addresses the influence of Filipino live-in domestic workers on the acquisition of English language skills with some participants, another key insight from Theme 1. This finding supports earlier research on language learning environments but also extends the scope to include non-traditional settings like the household. For instance, language learners might easily adapt their English interactions in non-school contexts, while from another perspective, they may find it challenging to use English effectively within a school setting (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016). The finding expands the existing knowledge of language learning environments beyond common educational settings, uncovering the possible impact of domestic workers (housemaids) on language development within the household. Also, The SCT posits that language acquisition is not solely a cognitive effort of the learner but is also intertwined with social contexts and cultural practices (Robbins, 2005), such as housemaids in the Kuwaiti household presented in the current study as contributors to English language learning (also see [Section 3.3.2.](#)).

6.5.5.1. **Short Story 12: Sarah**

The first short story by Sarah described her relationship with their housemaid, who had a crucial impact on her English language acquisition, during her fourth-grade year. In Sarah's narrative, the housemaid, a Filipino who was fluent in English, immediately began instructing Sarah as soon as she began working in their house. Sarah stated that she lacked proficiency in the English language before the arrival of the housemaid. The housemaid started to initiate lengthy chats in English with Sarah, both identifying and correcting her errors. Although the housemaid had no professional teaching experience, her instruction was outstanding, according to Sarah. She even passed the English Placement Test at Kuwait University because of the housemaid's instruction. During the six years the housemaid lived with them, she urged Sarah to watch English vlogs without subtitles to improve her comprehension of basic words.

Sarah: “she told me that she will not leave this house until I can speak English”

Sarah: Yes, I can remember in 4th grade ... the story is strange... a Filipino housemaid came into our house, and this was the first time a Filipino housemaid came to our house.

Sarah: I couldn't speak English ... I was only able to say I like... yes... no... what and ...something like that.

Researcher: Ok

Sarah: When the Filipino housemaid came to our house, she told me that she will not leave this house until I can speak English ... because she was a bit surprised by what I said. It was mostly wrong...

Researcher: OK

Sarah: Because she used to play with me a lot and talk, and sometimes I would sit with her for a whole hour, she would talk to me. She would say, "You say it like this, that's wrong... and even your accent is wrong ... you must modify it."

Researcher: Was she a teacher before or something?

Sarah: No, not at all. Even though she didn't study much at the university, she was amazing. Yes, she taught me, and now, thanks to Allah, I've passed intermediate level, and I'm always excellent in English.

Researcher: Wow

Researcher: Do you think she had an impact?

Sarah: Definitely, to the point that I didn't need to take the English Placement Test, I passed the exam from what I learned from her.

Researcher: Wow, how many years did she stay at your house?

Sarah: Almost about six years.

Researcher: Wow, masha'Allah. And throughout the six years...

Sarah: (overlap) Throughout the six years, she taught me English, and I taught her Arabic.

Researcher: Wow, very interesting...so you're saying that the way you acquired the language even affected your proficiency level...

Sarah: Yeah... Then, she made me follow vlogs, she told me "follow that vlog" this and that... I started following, and she told me don't add subtitles. The word that you... mm, for example, a long sentence... you understood the word... that's enough.

Researcher: Interesting

Sarah: 'You will understand the complete sentence', so (code-switching) 'one-by-one' ...I understood...

Researcher: And why did you feel that you accepted this from her? That you learn from her...?

Sarah: Because she used to encourage me, or she used to play. It wasn't a matter of studying. No, we used to play and do things. 'What is this', for example, we were sitting in a room, and she would ask me, 'What does (code-switching) 'closet' ...what does bed mean?'(Code-switching) "bed"... that's what she used to tell me.

Sarah's narrative uniquely highlights the impact of informal educators within the Kuwaiti cultural context. Her account shows that a Filipino housemaid, despite lacking formal teaching credentials, provided engaging, corrective, and playful English instruction that significantly improved her language proficiency. Sarah described her experience as "strange," emphasising that her primary language learning stemmed from this microsystem interaction rather than traditional parental influence. This underscores how immediate, non-traditional educational relationships can serve as powerful pathways for language acquisition within the broader Kuwaiti socio-ecological framework.

6.5.5.2. Short Story 13: Noura

Noura was the second participant who shared the same insight about Filipino housemaids. Interestingly, in her narrative, the housemaid was a former English teacher, while in the previous short story by Sarah, the housemaid had no formal teaching experience. The impact of her home environment and the unexpected contribution of her housemaid in encouraging her English acquisition created a strong commitment to English language learning. Noura's narrative centres on her interactions with their Filipino housemaid, cultivated in a nontraditional TESOL environment through frequent conversations and a mutual interest in English-language applications and various media. In addition, Noura's father's insistence on only English conversations with the housemaid demonstrates his intentional effort to establish an intensive language-learning atmosphere at home. By promoting this method, he intended to immerse his children in regular English usage, facilitating their language acquisition in a natural and engaging manner. This excerpt demonstrates the profound influence that various social interactions within the household, extending beyond immediate family, can have on the process of language acquisition. Additional details regarding these dynamics will be presented in the discussion section.

Noura: “She was an English teacher”

Noura: We also have our Filipino housemaid at home. She was an English teacher. She said that she stopped teaching her course at the university, so she came to work and stuff like that. We were chatting together, so she told me about “Cambly²”. She said that she knew it and that she was teaching through it, and there was another application where I could take courses and stuff like that. So, I always chat with her at home. Even when I watch foreign movies and series, she always asks me if I watched this or that. Of course, everything is in English. Even my father got used to the situation, so when he sees her talking with my little siblings, he would say, ‘Don’t speak with them in Arabic. (code-switch) ‘Just English, just English’ (laughing).”

Noura’s narrative illustrates how a Filipino housemaid with formal teaching experience, through friendly chats, watching movies and by introducing her to useful language applications, enriched her home language environment. Coupled with her father’s insistence on using only English, this nurturing, non-traditional educational influence strengthened her commitment to learning. This account highlights the multifaceted impact that non-traditional educators can have on language acquisition within the household. Next, the following story will further explore this key insight by revealing another dimension of how housemaids shape English proficiency.

6.5.5.3. Short story 14: Shaikha

Shaikha's experience provides a different perspective on the various ways housemaids have impacted English language acquisition. In contrast to the earlier narratives that highlight a teaching-and-learning dynamic, Shaikha's narrative focuses on self-improvement and an intrinsic motivation to succeed. Her engagements with her housemaid inspired her to prove her competence, prompting her to enhance her vocabulary and improve her communication skills. This narrative underscores how a desire to showcase one's capabilities can serve as an important incentive for language development.

² Cambly is an online platform that offers on-demand, one-on-one English tutoring with native speakers via video chat.

Shaikha: “I feel like I want to show her the best I have”

Shaikha: Now, hmm, our housemaid is the person with whom I speak English the most. She sometimes says words that I don't know. Or sometimes there is a word in Arabic that I can't explain to her in English. So, I keep thinking...and I say 'what's the best synonym for this word?' I don't know! My mind doesn't have like...(code-switch) background for this word I search ...search until I find it. Then, I try to explain it using similar words, but I still face difficulty, and I have a feeling that she didn't understand me well. So, maybe, she was the reason behind my communication, because I feel like I want to show her the best I have.

Shaikha's narrative underscores Norton's concept of investment in language learning (see [Section 3.2.2](#)). Her interactions with her housemaid, which provided practical opportunities to enhance vocabulary and communication skills, also reflected her active investment in building her linguistic identity. By persistently seeking the best expressions to convey her thoughts, she demonstrated that language acquisition stemmed not only from external instruction but also from a deep commitment to proving her competence.

6.5.6. Discussion

Applying Barkhuizen's Short Story Analysis (SSA) framework on the narratives uncovers the complex dynamics of language acquisition at the micro (*story*), meso (*Story*), and macro (*STORY*) levels, in line with Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model. The participants shared narratives about their interaction with their housemaids (*who*) in the house (*where*) at different periods from childhood to adulthood (*when*).

At the micro level, Sarah's narrative exemplifies her direct, close relationship with her housemaid, who taught her English through playful engagement, error correction, and continuous encouragement. This intimate and engaging relationship set the foundation for Sarah's development of language inside the household context. It also showed the (*Story*) level where Sarah's decreased power of identity was due to the control of the housemaid in teaching her English when she stated, “*she told me that she will not leave this house until I can speak English*” Additionally, the housemaid enhanced Sarah's engagement with diverse cultural contexts by her suggestion to watch English vlogs. These means of communication

encouraged Sarah to participate in real language usage and cultural interchange beyond her immediate surroundings, which also helped in the reformation of her identity, and investment. Being exposed to other cultures, such as through English vlogs, can create an imagined identity which helped her invest in her language learning, giving that children's linguistic development is influenced by the amount of interaction they experience with their caregivers (Dickinson & Tabors, 1991).

Noura's account similarly reflects micro-level interactions, especially with her father, who urged her to practise English with the housemaid. Her narrative shifts to the mesosystem as the housemaid included formal educational resources, such as the application Cambly, a language-learning platform where the learner meets real people with whom to speak English. The combination of informal dialogue and targeted instruction enhanced Noura's educational experience, fostering a suitable atmosphere that emphasised English proficiency. The housemaid's background as a former English language teacher likely played a pivotal role in this process. Indeed, earlier research has shown that the educational background and age of domestic workers are significantly associated with improvements in children's English language skills (Tang & Yung, 2016). Moreover, Noura's narrative illustrates overarching cultural pressures to achieve English fluency, since her father's insistence on an English-only atmosphere corresponds with societal expectations. Noura highlighted the housemaid's role as the principal influence. However, this complex perspective illustrates how the interplay between personal connections and societal expectations affected her educational experience.

Shaikha's narrative offers a distinct point of view, emphasising her intrinsic goal to validate herself (*story*) rather than the teaching-learning interaction. Her narrative stayed at the micro level, where her attempt to impress the housemaid significantly influenced her language development through interaction. In contrast to Sarah and Noura, Shaikha's experience was self-driven, with the housemaid acting as an indirect motivator rather than a direct instructor. This finding stands in contrast to Dhal's (2011) study in Dubai (see [Section 3.3.2.](#)), which reported that children who spent more time with their nannies than with their parents often experienced language delays due to limited interaction. In Shaikha's case, however, the presence of the housemaid appears to have facilitated, rather than hindered, her interaction,

specifically in English language development. This research indicates that Shaikha clearly demonstrates her enhanced autonomy (*story*), even with the assistance of the housemaids (*Story*). Moreover, Norton's concept of investment (see [Section 3.2.2.](#)) offered a nuanced view that focused on how learners' identities, social interactions, and power dynamics shaped their engagement with the target language rather than merely labelling them as motivated or unmotivated (Norton & Toohey, 2011). This particular dynamic underscores the importance of individual action in language acquisition, illustrating how intrinsic objectives can enhance external factors.

A notable pattern in all narratives is the role of English as a lingua franca within the household environment (see [Section 2.2.2.1.](#)), since all Filipino housemaids, regardless of their educational background, decided to communicate in English instead of Arabic. This decision highlights the widespread use of English in Kuwaiti homes, mirroring wider socioeconomic patterns. Tang and Yung (2016) found that primary school children cared for by Filipino Foreign Domestic Workers (FDW) achieved significantly higher English scores than those cared for by Indonesian FDWs or those without any FDW. This finding suggests that FDWs, being more educated and experienced, played a crucial role in enhancing English performance among the children under their care.

At the macro level (*STORY*), the participants' personal experiences underscore the societal importance of English competence in Kuwait, where housemaids unintentionally facilitate language acquisition in a multilingual environment. The existence of English-speaking housemaids signifies a wider trend shaped by globalisation and domestic dynamics in Kuwait. It is important to emphasise that these narratives stem from participants with Bedouin backgrounds. The literature review indicated that the historical differences between *Hadhar* and *Badu* groups in Kuwait have diminished over time (see [Chapter 3](#)). Nowadays, equal socioeconomic possibilities (see [Chapter 2](#)) have created a common cultural environment (employing a living-in foreign domestic worker) in which English language acquisition is normalised in Kuwaiti society. The intersection of sociocultural variables is apparent in the participants' narratives, wherein their interactions with housemaids and the wider household context influenced their language learning experiences.

Applying the socio-ecological framework, these narratives demonstrate how different layers, ranging from individual interactions to societal norms, intersect to shape unique language acquisition experiences for each participant. The narratives' findings align with Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model as detailed in Chapter 4. They illustrate how immediate interactions (microsystem) and broader cultural norms (mesosystem and macrosystem) converged to shape each learner's English language acquisition experience in Kuwait.

6.5.7. Theme 1- Key Insight 4: Religious Beliefs and L2 Learning (*one short story*)

An important key insight that emerged from Theme 1 is the correlation between religious beliefs and L2 learning. This single narrative shows the complex interplay between religious beliefs, cultural norms, and educational achievements, shedding light on the challenges faced by students like Rawya, who come from *Hadhar* backgrounds, in L2 learning. When describing her father, she referred to him as "*Mutawaa*", a term used for religious men in Kuwait. Rawya was comfortable discussing her father's story to underscore her points about the religious beliefs influencing her language learning journey and how this influenced her experience with her two language instructors at Kuwait University.

In the following section, I will include a more extended narrative compared to the previous excerpts, sharing four different short stories from Rawya's narrative, including different characters in each story to illustrate her point of view about the religious beliefs and L2 learning. This SSA offers a more thorough and detailed perspective because the participant gave more than one example, and therefore a short story, to tell her experience.

6.5.7.1. **Short Story 15: Rawya**

In the following section, Rawya tells a more extended narrative compared to the previous excerpts, sharing four different short stories, including different characters in each story to illustrate her point of view about the religious beliefs and L2 learning. This SSA offers a more thorough and detailed perspective because the participant gave more than one example, and therefore a short story, to tell her experience.

Rawya: “Appearance reflects a lot on the way of thinking in our society”

Rawya: So, this is what happened. I said since I am Arabic [referring to Arabic major], I’m not supposed to take it as a disadvantage that if I don’t know English, it’s because my major is Arabic. No. Especially that I face a lot of problems in proving myself.

Researcher: Why?

Rawya: (sobbing) Based on the faculty I chose. It’s like, ‘You’re here for the payroll,’ ‘You’re here because they are all Bedouins (smiles) or something, for example.’ Or, for example, if you read in the diary, I used to face a problem that has to do with these clothes [wearing niqab and Abaya] and in this way, but not with this way of thinking [referring to her niqab and Abaya]. Appearance reflects a lot on the way of thinking in our society.

Researcher: Are these clothes of your choice?

Rawya: One hundred percent.

Researcher: Okay. Good.

Rawya: I want to prove that I was raised in a house that is extremely without restrictions. Although all our clothes are of our choice. Because my dad used to say that religion is a belief, not an obligation. So... They always see that my dad is a Mutawa’a (a religious man). All my friends like my dad. Why? Because he is the most (code-switch) friendly person, listens to their problems, and chats with them. For him, everything is Halal [permitted], except things that are forbidden in the text [refers to the Qur’an], not the other way around. So, since I am in this appearance, it’s impossible that I can convince people.

Researcher: Do you think it’s impossible?

Rawya: I mean... They must give you a chance. If they didn’t give you the chance, it would be impossible. Can I state names, or?

Researcher: It’s up to you. I am the one who will listen.

Rawya: Dr [name removed], at the beginning, he wasn’t... I mean, he wasn’t getting that impression. It’s like, ‘What is your major looking like this?’ Then, when we started with him, and he saw how I negotiate with him from my understanding. I talk. I like to learn. ‘What are we taking tomorrow?’ This point is really important to me, that the instructor knows the schedule for the whole year. Not like, ‘I don’t know...mm... grammar... let’s see.’ He had this answer. So, when he saw that I prepare and attend the class... When he

saw this, he was like, “You’re Arabic!” [Arabic major]. It’s like it’s strange...and then, now go and ask Dr. [name removed] (smiles), he told me, ‘I won’t forget you.’

Researcher: Nice.

Rawya: This gave me the chance...but for the past few weeks, I felt disappointed.

Researcher: Yeah, I read that.

Rawya: Till now, I’m not getting the opportunity. Particularly, also Ms. [name removed] has (pause) (code-switch) connect (refer to contact) visual. So, (laughing) she can’t see my mouth moving. She can never take an answer from me you know?

Researcher: Yeah.

Rawya: So, I must prove myself. You know when did I prove myself to Dr. [name removed]? Three quizzes; ten... ten... ten [as in full mark in all three quizzes]. The mid-term is fifty. The final is fifty. At this point, he understood.

6.5.8. Discussion

While this narrative may correspond with several key viewpoints collected in Theme 3 in relation to TESOL settings, Rawya's distinctive story is more relevant to Theme 1 due to its representation of the household environment (*where*) as her primary influence. Despite the obstacles she encountered in educational and societal contexts, the basic impact of her childhood (*when*) significantly shaped her determination, identity, ideology, and approach to language acquisition. Rawya's experience in the EFL classroom confirmed AlMubarakah & Prasetya's (2020) assertion that learner identity influenced her self-perception and is continuously reshaped by the experiences she encountered.

Rawya's (*who*) narrative emphasises her challenge of proving oneself in a society where appearance strongly impacts perceptions. She started by emphasising cultural assumptions in Kuwait and that her enrolment in the College of Education was motivated exclusively by the pursuit of improved financial opportunities. This illustrates a wider societal habit in which individuals frequently feel obligated to pursue academic paths that correspond to societal standards rather than personal preferences. Such selections may result in disciplines where English is not emphasised, especially in Kuwaiti governmental areas that do not necessitate English, thereby decreasing students' willingness to acquire the language. A comparable occurrence was noted in Ethiopia, as stated by Mulisa (2019), although in a different setting and with different needs. Mulisa observed that students in Ethiopia frequently choose

academic paths based on societal prestige rather than personal career ambitions. For example, graduates from preparatory schools with substantial academic backgrounds would primarily select medical sciences when given the opportunity, due to their superior socioeconomic worth. Due to the difficulty of controlling career preferences, the Ministry of Education often assigns students to programs unrelated to their interests. This underscores how external influences within bioecological systems impact educational paths, frequently misaligning them with personal objectives.

Rawya's narrative then emphasises the negative impact she faced because of her choice of religious dress, including the abaya and niqab. A challenge that shows the increased power of her identity within the force of a wider socio-ecological context (*story/ STORY*). While the story takes place in the College of Education (*where*), involving her interactions with language instructors (*who*) during her years of study at Kuwait University (*when*), it necessitates a separate discussion in the current theme due to its remarkable insight, which is the experiences of a Muslim student struggling with societal misconceptions in a Muslim nation. Al-Dhaif et. al., (2021) in their study on adult Syrian Muslim refugees in the UK, argued that language educators who are well-informed about religion and religious identity can transform classrooms into spaces that not only foster language learning but also enable learners to adopt more empowering identities. This approach allows students to express their concerns and vulnerabilities, feel a greater sense of belonging within their host communities, and ultimately increase their investment in language learning. The approach is particularly relevant for refugees, as it addresses their unique circumstances by enabling them to adopt empowering identities. In Kuwait, where Islam is central, previous studies have noted parental resistance to teaching English to preserve Arabic and Islamic values (e.g., Al-Nouri, 2019; Almutairi, 2020). Yet, Rawya's narrative stands out since it revealed a religious identity that invested in learning English, while her challenge stemmed from being perceived as a conservative Muslim woman in a predominantly Muslim society, a scenario that one might not typically expect. This finding reveals part of the socio-ecological system in Kuwait, specifically concerning language instructors, and indicates their socio-ecological origins may affect classroom interactions, causing a real conflict between internal reflections (*story*) and socio-ecological contexts (*STORY*) a concept requiring more attention.

Rawya's narrative encompasses multiple short stories, beginning with her assertion that she had to prove herself, reflecting the micro (*story*) level. This was a deeply personal experience tied to her individual identity and struggles. From this foundation, her narrative transitions to the meso and macro levels (*Story* and *STORY*) by addressing her college (College of Education) as an educational institution and her interactions with instructors, representing the meso level. She further moves into the macro level by highlighting broader societal misconceptions from students in her college and the overarching perception that appearance reflects thinking and judgment in Kuwaiti society.

At the micro level, Rawya stated that her selection of clothing was solely her own, regardless of her father being a '*mutawaa*' (a religious figure). Regarding the dress, she firmly declared, "*one hundred percent*," emphasising her autonomy of choice. Her father's perspective that "*religion is a belief, not an obligation*" established a basis for her confidence and open-mindedness. The interaction of identity, ideology, and self-determination influenced Rawya's approach to learning and her handling of societal expectations. This narrative clearly illustrates both the process of identity formation and the robust influence of the microsystem, her upbringing, marked by a Quran-teaching mother and a religious father, afforded her significant freedom of choice. This unique socio-ecological setting demonstrates the multifaceted nature of identity and the powerful impact of the bioecological system on human development.

Rawya's language acquisition process was significantly shaped by the macrosystem or *STORY* level within Barkhuizen's framework. Her challenge resulted from societal misconceptions, which she expressed through comments such as, "*They are here for the payroll*," and "*They are Bedouins*," despite her being from a *Hadhar* family. She noted that "*appearance reflects a lot on the way of thinking in our society*", underlining the ongoing impact of social norms on individual's choices. These comments highlight the sociocultural obstacles Rawya encountered, which decreased her investment in the TESOL classroom.

The parental impact is evident in Rawya's narrative, continuing from the first key insight of Theme 1. Rawya's narrative stresses her household environment as a source of resilience and fundamental values. Her father's ideology fostered critical thinking and autonomy, while her mother's profession as a Qur'an teacher who encouraged them to learn English inspired her

desire to develop her language proficiency as indicated in her prior narrative. Nonetheless, despite this encouraging environment, Rawya was not invested in the TESOL classroom because of two negative experiences with her language instructors. One instructor questioned her abilities to succeed in English due to her looks, while another neglected to interact with her during talks, claiming the niqab obstructed the ability to interpret facial emotions and “connect”. These incidents demonstrate how socio-ecological issues, especially at the meso and macro levels, hindered Rawya's language acquisition and limited her classroom engagement.

Despite these obstacles, Rawya's love for knowledge, shaped by her household environment, drove her to prove her proficiency and achieve academic excellence. Her determination to achieve excellent grades and engage fully in class happened despite her instructors' preconceptions, showing her resilience against cultural biases. Her frequent use of expressions such as “*proving myself*,” “*I used to face a problem*,” “*since I’m in this appearance*,” “*it’s impossible that I can convince people*,” “*I felt disappointed*,” “*I’m not getting the opportunity*,” and “*I must prove myself*” highlights the degree to which socio-ecological factors held back her investment and decreased her participation. The findings align with the assertions Darwin and Norton (2023) that while motivation centres on cognitive and emotional factors to explain differences among learners, investment turns attention to aspects of identity and power.

After all, through the socio-ecological lens, Rawya's story reveals the intersecting layers of influence on her language learning journey. Through a socio-ecological framework, the narrative shows the interconnected factors impacting her language acquisition experience. At the micro level, her household environment encouraged resilience and an aim of language learning within foundational religious perspectives. At the meso level, where it intersects with Theme 3, her encounters with instructors demonstrated the dual capacity of interpersonal ties between teachers and learners to either reinforce or contest biases. At the macro level, Rawya's narrative illustrates the widespread influence of societal norms and biases on educational and future possibilities, especially for women who wear religious clothing.

6.6. Theme 2 - Learner Incentives for English Language Learning

Theme 2 aims to answer the second research question (2): *What socio-ecological factors influence female language learners' investment in acquiring English beyond the classroom?* It is critical for TESOL educators and researchers to know why learners pursue a second language (L2) so that they can address these factors in their teaching. Their incentives could vary due to many factors. This knowledge can help them support and improve the language acquisition process. This theme explores the reasons that drive learners to acquire English as a second language. It highlights the complex and diverse nature of their motivations. Theme 2 explores three key insights related to L2 learning: (1) English Language Dominance in the Kuwaiti Society, (2) Intercultural Communication and English Learning Between Necessity and Cultural Interest. (3) Integration of Technology in Autonomous L2 Learning Practices. Through a careful analysis of these motives, we can gain a greater understanding of how to customise language education to respond to each learner's individual needs and objectives, ultimately developing a more efficient L2 learning atmosphere.

6.6.1. Theme 2- Key Insight 1: English Language Dominance in the Kuwaiti Society (*three short stories*)

Theme 2 revealed that English dominance in Kuwaiti society is viewed not only as a means of communication or academic achievement but also as an indicator of social status and identity. The participants' narratives indicated an intricate awareness of how English has been embedded in societal norms, influencing individuals' incentives to acquire the language as well as their feelings of belonging and self-esteem within various social circumstances. For example, according to Alshatti and Jamali (2023), Arabic-English code-switching in Kuwaiti society is often not perceived negatively. The majority of society perceives code-switching as more appealing than its avoidance, indicating that the use of English in social circumstances is frequently linked to prestige and modernity, a phenomenon previously noted in the literature (e.g., al-Qenaie & Naser, 2023; Alshatti & Jamali, 2023; Dashti, 2018).

The following three narratives explore the participants' experiences with these dynamics, including the perception of English as a “*fancy*” or “*high-class*” language, the judgmental view

of individuals lacking proficiency, and the resulting impact on learners' confidence and incentives. Together, these narratives provide a crucial viewpoint on the socio-cultural factors influencing English language acquisition in Kuwait, highlighting the transition of the language's dominance beyond simply a need and into a marker of social class.

6.6.1.1. Short Story 16: Rawya

Rawya's narrative highlights the cultural pressures associated with English proficiency in Kuwait, where the language is seen not just as an educational resource but as an indicator of status. She discusses the embarrassment encountered by individuals who struggle with English, characterising it as a cultural requirement rather than an educational necessity. Rawya emphasises that the cultural changes initiated by Kuwaitis who studied abroad made English an indicator of trend, transforming language acquisition into a social pursuit. The findings will be discussed along with the other narrative in the discussion section.

Rawya: "I mean really... To be fancy or high class, I should speak English. So it becomes a social class, not a subject to learn."

Researcher: If someone wants to learn English, for example, what do you expect to be the biggest obstacle for him to learn the language?

Rawya: Embarrassment.

Researcher: Mmm! (pause) How?

Rawya: (hesitant) I mean... 'not learning a language is a shame.'

Researcher: (pause) Mm!

Rawya: This is what we are facing in the society... Those who don't know English are ashamed. It's shunned upon in our society, not being able to speak English... you know?

Researcher: (code-switch) Okay!

Rawya: I mean (sobbing). They are quite focused on the fact that language is not so much an educational matter as it is a fancy one.

Researcher: Mm!

Rawya: I mean really... To be fancy or (code-switch) high class, I should speak English. So it becomes a social class, not a subject to learn.

Researcher: Oh, so you think there is a social relationship?

Rawya: Yes, a very strong relationship! Yeah, I mean a girl who is still studying at the university, why is she embarrassed? Not because of making an error, but because they will judge her that she will feel shy 'etfashil' [she embarrasses us].

Researcher: Why will they judge her? (overlapping) Who would have such judgment?

Rawya: A certain class. I mean, for example, they bear in mind that it is something borrowed. They don't consider it as language, subject, or science. They deal with it differently. 'We are different.' 'We are speaking something different'... a trend. .and this trend continued. I mean, when we were kids, there was no such notion as English is classy. It was only a subject in school.

Researcher: In your opinion, who developed this trend?

Rawya: If we are talking about Kuwait, as a girl raised in this place, people of Aldhahiya [a Kuwaiti area characterised by wealth and social prestige] (laughs) I mean seriously!

Researcher: Mm!

Rawya: Those who went to study abroad [as the children of Aldhahiya area], when the culture of studying abroad began, they came back with a particular lifestyle. 'I walk my dog at the park.' May Allah treasure you! [a phrase said in Kuwait or the GCC countries to appreciate the human from animals] 'I wear unconservative clothes' and 'speak English'... So it started as imitating those teenagers, and then it continued.

Researcher: Got the point.

Rawya: Now, when you see, if someone doesn't know English, 'yfashil' (embarrassing)... I mean, it's not like it's a need... It's a trend... It's a fancy thing... and that I'm with everyone else. If it was not from this point of view, no one will be anxious about participating and making mistakes. Why? Because this is fulfilment a of a specific kind of a flaw in their character.

Rawya's narrative demonstrated that in Kuwait, English transcended being merely an academic subject and became a symbol of social status. She explained that those who struggled with the language faced embarrassment, as proficiency was linked to being perceived as high class, a trend set by those who studied abroad. This account reveals that English learning was intertwined with social expectations and identity negotiation. These insights underscore how cultural pressures and societal norms in Kuwait shaped learners'

self-perceptions and motivations, setting the stage for further exploration of these dynamics in the next narrative.

6.6.1.2. Short Story 17: Soad

Soad's narrative offers an honest perspective on the actual challenges caused by English dominance in daily social interactions in Kuwait. She mentioned the embarrassment and anxiety her family members experience in settings where English dominates, such as restaurants, where ordering food causes stress. An outcome that will be further discussed in the subsequent section.

Soad: “ You must learn... You must...socially...we must learn...”

Researcher: I want you to talk to me about the family. Is there anything you would like to share related to your family and English language learning... In your social environment?

Soad: Yeah...when we go to a place here [Kuwait], in most restaurants and most of the places, it is required that you speak with them in English. You must learn... You must...socially...we must learn...When you go somewhere... You get embarrassed ‘who’s going to order now?’...‘who’s the best one among us to talk’ it’s a problem...am I right?

Researcher: Correct.

Soad: I felt that it’s important, because it’s used in most places. Within my social environment, when I go somewhere I feel shy if I want to order... ‘Ok who’s going to order?’ the problem is...everyone around me is weak in English (laughing) they will be like...‘you go ahead and order’ ...I mean, my English is weak. That’s why I should learn. Nowadays, if I pursue my education, like the master’s degree, I will get worried, because I should take an English test.

Soad's perspective underscores the importance of English, not only as an ability but as a social tool essential for fundamental interactions. Her reflection includes her academic ambitions, as the necessity of an English proficiency test for pursuing a master’s degree introduces an additional layer of stress. Soad's narrative illustrates the necessity of English in both personally and academically, making it a crucial yet challenging element that exists within the Kuwaiti society.

6.6.1.3. **Short Story 18: Awrad**

Just like Soad, Awrad's narrative highlights the importance of English as a vital aspect of daily life in Kuwait. She clarifies that interactions in public spaces such as university cafeterias, movies, restaurants, and salons frequently necessitate the use of English, especially when engaging with expatriate workers who communicate in English. For Awrad, English relates less to academic obligations and more to managing everyday activities. Her view extends to international contexts, wherever English is essential for travel, underscoring its worldwide significance.

Awrad: “Those who don’t know English, will be lost, right?”

Awrad: Even if English is not required in our workplace later, I feel it’s really important, because we need to communicate with the waiters at the cafeteria. You know that the waiters at the university cafeteria don’t speak any language but English... In everything, when we go to the cinema, restaurants, salon, everyone there are Filipinos who are speaking English. So, ... I mean... It’s important at airport or when travelling. Those who don’t know English, will be lost. right? that will save time.

6.6.2. Discussion

The narratives of Rawya, Soad, and Awrad focus on the issue of English dominance in Kuwaiti society, although they present individual perspectives on how societal, personal, and practical factors intertwine to influence language acquisition experiences. Collectively, these narratives underscore the complex role of English as both a practical requirement and a representation of social class in Kuwait (see [Section 2.3.](#)). Some participants expressed their views on the significance of acquiring the English language for academic pursuits, nonetheless, the most significant aspect of the present study was the socio-ecological approach, which highlights how the dominance of English intersects with social, cultural, and environmental factors to shape learners’ experiences and identities.

According to the female learners, in the context of Kuwait, the necessity of language learning emerged from a different perspective that reflected a novel and unique socio-ecological

setting that previous studies have not addressed. From the dataset of the Kuwaiti female learners in the current study, English was not simply perceived for academic purposes but rather as a practical necessity associated with a particular sociocultural background and ideology, such as everyday leisure activities, reflecting the English dominance in the Kuwaiti society. Also, the necessity for learning English arises as a way to facilitate communication for social inclusion. As mentioned earlier in Section 2.3., Dashti (2015) has showed that English is currently used in Kuwait not only within educational settings but also widely in commercial establishments such as shops, cafes, and restaurants. However, another study on language use and language preference in Kuwait had different outcomes. This reflects the broader phenomenon of linguistic imperialism, where the dominance of English over other languages becomes embedded in personal aspirations and social capital (Lukianenko, 2024).

Fatima and Al Qenai (2021) reported that students consistently favoured their native language for everyday communication, feeling more at ease when interacting with family, friends, and strangers. They felt more secure expressing themselves in Arabic, even though English remained present in society. The study also showed that while English had existed in various societal contexts, many students resisted adopting a foreign way of life (Fatima & Al Qenai, 2021). Majhanovich and Deyrich (2017) examined language learning within the European Union, with its very different socio-ecological context, their findings contrast with the unique realities in Kuwait. This difference underscores the need to consider local cultural dynamics when investigating English language acquisition perspectives.

Each participant discusses the obstacles they face in a culture that prioritises English, revealing three dimensions of Barkhuizen's Short Story Analysis (SSA) framework. At the micro level (*story*), the experiences of Rawya, Soad, and Awrad illustrate the internalised needs associated with English proficiency. Both Rawya and Soad highlighted the embarrassment linked to a lack of English proficiency, underscoring how cultural judgements foster feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. These findings resonate with the literature. As highlighted in the literature review chapter (see [Section 3.2.2.](#)), Weedon (1996) argued that identity remains fluid and is shaped by social power relations, while Norton (2005) and Peirce (1995) emphasised that power dynamics and social interactions influence identity formation. Rawya and Soad's narratives not only reveal the embarrassment stemming from inadequate English proficiency but also demonstrate how their identities and perceived social power

shifted over time and across contexts. In situations where society demanded English, the pressure often led to feelings of inadequacy, underscoring how the interplay of power and identity evolves with changing social and historical circumstances.

Rawya also challenges the perception of English as a prestige language in Kuwait, by referring to the imitation of individuals from (*Aldahya*), an area in Kuwait, Aldahya, is well known for its families of high socio-economic status. Rawya's perspective reflects that such a connection drives individuals to follow societal norms, even when they experience feelings of weakness or anxiety. Likewise, Soad expresses her discomfort in public settings, such as restaurants, where proficiency in English is frequently necessary for essential encounters in Kuwait. Her remark, "*Who's going to order now?*" shows the weight of responsibility she experiences due to her limited English skills and the absence of assistance from others in her situation.

For Awrad, micro-level experience is linked to believing that English is crucial for daily activities. Her statement, "*Those who don't know English will be lost*" conveys the reliance on English as an essential skill, particularly in engagements with employees in the university's cafeteria who mostly converse in English. It also shows the wider influence of the socio-ecological impact, giving a minimal power space for the participant's identity (Barkhuizen, 2016). The participants' justifications to the mentioned challenges reveals a societal pressure in dealing with the English language. This corresponds with the perspective of Patnaik and Imtiaz (2006), asserting that English served not only as an associate national official language but also functioned as an inter-state (that is, between different states or regions) link language, actively promoted as the language of opportunity, higher education, prestige, and power. Moreover, the advent of computers and the internet further solidified its global influence, as newspapers, advertising agencies, and broadcast networks rapidly broadened their reach (Patnaik & Hasnain, 2006).

In research examining attitudes and prestige associated with the English language in Kuwait, Dashti (2018) asserted that English is seen as a prestigious language in the region. Additional research indicated that Kuwaitis consider those who frequently speak English as highly educated and socially esteemed (e.g., Al Othman & Shugair, 2013; Al-Bustan & Al-Bustan, 2009; Alenezi, 2010; Alshaar, 1997; Malallah, 2000). In contrast to the narratives by Rawya

and Soad, these studies viewed the usage of English as positive, negating the perceived impact of the participants of the current study. Moreover, Akbar (2007) examined the perceptions of persons from diverse age groups and educational backgrounds regarding the predominant spoken varieties in Kuwait, revealing significantly positive attitudes towards the use of English. Her research emphasised that Kuwaitis, especially the younger population, demonstrate confidence in English communication inside social environments including cafes, restaurants, shopping malls, and parks. Nevertheless, the results of my investigation offer a divergent viewpoint (Akbar, 2007 in Dashti, 2015). In contrast to Akbar's findings, my study demonstrates a negative impact on students' confidence in comparable social contexts. Participants specifically expressed feelings of embarrassment when using English in cafes and restaurants because of their inadequate skill in the language.

At the level (*Story*), the narratives emphasise the influence of local social contexts in maintaining the dominance of English. Rawya refers to the society as a whole, and then to the university setting, where students are seen not for the mistakes, they make in the TESOL setting, but for their inability to fit in the social image of English as a "*high-class*" language, a statement that reflects the control of what is beyond the interpersonal situations (Barkhuizen, 2016). She argues that this dynamic creates an additional layer of pressure on learners, as they experience an academic environment where English proficiency serves not merely as a skill but as an indicator of social status. Soad's narrative reflects this, as she describes how social encounters in public places in Kuwait, such as restaurants, underscore the necessity of English proficiency. Her embarrassment in these instances arises not only from her own limits but also from the assumption that a member of her group must fulfil the cultural demands of the situation.

At the (*STORY*) level, the narratives show the overarching socioeconomic and institutional reasons driving the dominance of English. Rawya explains the transformation of English from an academic topic to an indicator of class differentiation, linking this shift to cultural changes initiated by Kuwaitis who pursued education abroad and how others started imitating their actions. She defines this change as a trend in which English is linked to modernity, resulting in a dichotomy between those who adopt this norm and those who do not. Moreover, Soad and Awrad's narrative align with Rawya's observation regarding English being required to cope with

the Kuwaiti society. They describe how English is “*required*” in most public places and reflects a societal norm in daily life of the Kuwaiti context, pointing to English speaking expatriate workers such as Filipinos in Kuwait as a key factor in shaping this trend, making it a necessity to bridge between diverse linguistic communities.

Despite the participants’ shared perspective of the importance of English, they diverged in how they perceived the dominance of English. In the case of Rawya, she viewed it as a societal judgement and class distinction, making it a negative impact that puts more pressure on the learner. Soad and Awrad on the other hand, believed that it is a functional necessity for social interactions even beyond the Kuwaiti setting such as while travelling and at the airport. This intersection between narratives reflects a strong influence that created learners’ incentive or investment towards English learning (see Section 3.2.2.3) The influence of English was revealed across personal, social, and even institutional domains. In addition, all participants mentioned embarrassment and social pressure as a barrier to language learning, yet they justified these challenges from different angles. With the application of Barkhuizen’s SSA framework, the narratives provide a comprehensive view of the socio-ecological factors impacting learners’ incentives, offering valuable insights into the broader implications of English dominance in Kuwait.

6.6.3. Theme 2- Key Insight 2: Intercultural Communication and English Learning Between Necessity and Cultural Interest (*three short stories*)

The second key insight derived from Theme 2, represents intercultural communication in learning English as a second language for female learners in Kuwait. The following narratives showed that language learning plays an essential role not only in everyday life as presented in key insight 1, but as an academic pursuit. Research (see, for example, al-Qenaie & Naser, 2023; Alshatti & Jamali, 2023; Dashti, 2015) highlights that in Kuwait, English is regarded as a means for individuals to enhance their social status (as mentioned in key insight 1) and can facilitate access to better educational possibilities, thus enabling individuals to pursue goals that may otherwise be inaccessible (Dashti, 2015).

The following narratives show that English is no longer perceived only as language to acquire but as a requirement for managing modern life necessities such as travelling or accessing

higher education. The participants in the following narratives shared the belief that learning English is no longer optional but rather mandatory for achieving goals. The narratives also reflect the broader demands of globalisation, where English is positioned as a fundamental skill, shaping individuals' ability to function in an interconnected world (Patnaik & Hasnain, 2006).

6.6.3.1. Short Story 19 - Wadha

Wadha recounts how her husband's experience reflects the growing necessity of English in daily life. Despite not completing his secondary education, he took the initiative to learn English independently, recognising its importance for managing personal interests. Wadha describes how he actively studied English, even seeking her assistance in writing and understanding new words. His incentives stemmed from a need to handle interactions confidently, particularly while travelling.

Wadha: "The time forced us to study English (laughing)"

"Wadha: My husband didn't pass the secondary stage; he didn't complete it...I discovered later that he has books of learning English (pause) from which he kept studying, and when I asked him, 'Why do you want to learn English?' He said 'I have to, every place I go to, I must have at least some basics'

Wadha: The time forced us to study English (laughing)

Wadha: My experience with my husband, he was reading and learning, even when children were sleeping, he brought me the books, telling me to write for him...and if I say a word, or when we watch a movie, he catches words.

Wadha: He likes travelling. He likes managing his affairs. Before, he was counting on me, but he is accustomed that I am counting on him. (laughing)... So, he liked to appear as if he is leading"

Wadha's narrative highlights how English is increasingly perceived as a social skill rather than a mere academic subject. Her husband's experience shows a shift from reliance on others for language support to self-empowerment through English learning with the help of other members in the household. Moving from Wadha's narrative from a story that highlights learning English for socio-ecological incentives like traveling, to Rawya's narrative that calls

for bringing the socio-ecological perspective to the classroom, a shift that underscores the importance of viewing language learning through a socio-ecological lens, regardless of the context in which it is acquired.

6.6.3.2. Short Story 20 - Rawya

Rawya shares her changing perspective on learning English, particularly regarding how language instruction has evolved to incorporate real-world relevance. She initially found some English lessons disconnected from practical application, describing them as abstract and unrelatable. However, her experience with contextualised learning, where lesson topics were tied to local culture and everyday realities, transformed her engagement with the language.

Rawya: “I also felt that now...in English...they started to pay attention to linking English with reality so that the students won’t get bored and become curious”

Researcher: Did you have an impression before (code-switch) one-four-two that has now changed?

Rawya: We usually have it all of a sudden...mmm. It’s (code-switch) okay, it’s understood, but I always find it useless.

Researcher: How?

Rawya: Or it’s like, ‘what do you want from this?’ (code-switch) Okay! It’s fine...we will do those things and answer those questions, but it doesn’t feel logical. Sometimes we get readings about a wolf...or something... I used to feel like we don’t need this information. It talks about the wolf in the South Pole. I mean...talk about Alhusni [Arabian red fox] (laughing), for example. This Ramadan, we got a paragraph with questions about Ramadan ‘Ghabqa’ [a gathering at night for food], and ‘Greish’ [a meal served a day before Ramadan], about those things in detail. There were stuff I didn’t know, but when I read the paragraph, I understood. For example...they have a habit that if the food gets exposed to a lot of heat, it will become inedible. So, what’s the meaning of (code-switch) “spoil”? I linked it with cooking (code-switch) “boil.”

Researcher: Boil (laughing)?!

Rawya: Yea! I linked it with (code-switch) “boil.” It means that its temperature is high. So, this is one of the mistakes I realised because I knew the topic.

Researcher: Mm!

Rawya: So, I understood that, and I was like (code-switch) wow! I was really enjoying it.

Researcher: Nice! Nice!

Rawya: This changed my impression. I also felt that now...in English...they started to pay attention to linking English with reality so that the students won’t get bored and become curious.

Researcher: Mm!

Rawya: I mean, anything that you feel is unacceptable, try to link it to an environment that attracts the student.

Researcher: (code-switch) Okay!

Rawya: So, he’ll start wanting to know more, even if he didn’t give it much effort.

Rawya’s narrative shifts the focus from English as a necessity for daily interactions to the significance of incorporating socio-ecological perspectives in classroom instruction. Her experience highlights how linking English lessons to real-life cultural contexts can enhance engagement and foster a deeper connection to the language. Her perspective leads into the next narrative, which further explores how personal interests influence engagement with English learning, and where both will be highlighted in the discussion.

6.6.3.3. Short Story 21: Awrad

Just like Rawan, Awrad also has another socio-ecological perspective. Awrad reflects on the impact of personal interest in language learning. She recalls lessons that sparked her curiosity but were not explored in depth, leading her to crave more engagement. She describes how the inclusion of personally relevant topics, such as *Food Art and Marketing*, would have significantly enhanced her learning experience.

Awrad: “If they made me study about Food Art, I would translate it from cover to cover”

Researcher: Is there any lesson you studied in the (code-switch) course that made you curious and want to know more about? And there wasn’t enough time for that?

Awrad: Yeah! (smiling)

Researcher: What is it?

Awrad: (code-switch) "Food Art" [referring to a lesson in the textbook]. There was a lesson in the book, but we didn't delve into it. We took vocabulary and answered questions. That's it. There were two lessons; (code-switch) "Marketing", because I like trading a lot, and advertisements and so on. There was also a lesson about links. We shouldn't open any link. It was really interesting, but we didn't delve into it. I don't know why.

Researcher: This makes me move to another question. You mentioned it in the diaries.

Awrad: What did I write?

Researcher: Hmm! What's your opinion if the curriculum contains topics that you like? To what extent does this matter affect your language learning? I mean, for example, if I teach you a course that includes topics that you won't benefit or don't like...

Awrad: Like historical or something?

Researcher: That's an example. For me, I like history. (laughing)

Awrad: Really?! (laughing)

Researcher: What I mean is, imagine that this (code-switch) course includes history only or I give you something about (code-switch) "Food Art" or "Marketing", to what extent something like that may make a difference with you?

Awrad: Yeah! It will differ a lot.

Researcher: How?

Awrad: I feel it would make a difference with a percentage of 160% [intentionally exaggerated to emphasise the point]. If they made me study about (code-switch) "Food Art", I would translate it from cover to cover, because I like (code-switch) "Food Art", "Art of Plating" (decorating plates) so much. There are other people who don't care about cooking or decorating food.

Researcher: Correct.

Awrad: But for me, this is a hobby.

Researcher: Aha! So, would that make a difference for you?

Awrad: Of course.

Researcher: The way of grasping the language itself.

Awrad: Yeah...I might look for videos on YouTube, look for something else, because of my deep love for the topic. You know?

Awrad's story builds on the idea that personal investment in language learning is deeply tied to relevant and engaging content. Her enthusiasm demonstrates how incorporating students' interests into curriculum design can create a sense of ownership over learning, reinforcing the broader socio-ecological factors and identities that shape language acquisition.

6.6.4. Discussion

Wadha's narrative focused on her and her husband (*who*) learning English at home and needing it for travel (*where*) in today's world where English is a necessity (*when*). Rawya's experience revolved around her as a student (*who*), in an academic setting (*where*), during her formal education (*when*). Similarly, Awrad's perspective centred on her as a student (*who*), in the classroom (*where*), during her studies when curriculum choices impacted her motivation (*when*). This structured approach demonstrates the diverse but interconnected nature of English learning in Kuwait, with mainly focusing on the socio-ecological perspective.

The narratives of Wadha, Rawya, and Awrad illustrate the intersection of personal, societal, and educational factors in shaping English language acquisition. Collectively, they reveal how English in Kuwait is positioned as a necessity, not just for communication, but for social and academic integration. Alshatti and Jamali (2023) examined code-switching in Kuwait, focusing on how language and attitudes interact within the country's multicultural and multilingual society, where individuals navigate multiple identities and social connections. Their findings highlighted that exploring these attitudes offers deeper insight into how linguistic choices both reflect and shape Kuwaiti cultural norms and social interactions. This reinforces the close connection between language, identity, and culture in shaping a Kuwaiti learner's language acquisition experience.

At the micro level (*story*), Wadha's husband's determination to learn English reflects a practical need driven by global interconnectedness. His incentive stems from real-world necessities such as travel, independence, and managing affairs, aligning with what Suryavanshi (2020) argues about culturally informed language learning preparing individuals for economic and social mobility. In contrast, Rawya's narrative shifts the discussion towards the role of cultural relevance in education. Her engagement with English improved when the

language was tied to familiar contexts, reinforcing another finding from Suryavanshi (2020) that cultural context significantly enhances communication and learning styles. While Wadha's story underscores the external necessity of English, Rawya's experience highlights the internal motivation that emerges when language instruction is meaningfully connected to learners' realities.

Awrad's perspective adds another layer to the discussion. Like Rawya, she emphasises the importance of content that resonates with learners' personal interests. While Rawya focuses on cultural familiarity from her own culture as a motivational factor, Awrad highlights individual passion (*story*) as a driver of investment in language learning. This underscores the importance of both social and personal engagement in shaping learners' attitudes towards English. Awrad's enthusiasm for topics such as *Food Art* demonstrates how integrating learners' interests into the curriculum fosters deeper investment, reinforcing Norton's (2000) argument that investment in language learning is tied to identity and perceived benefits. Considering the differing perspectives of the three participants, they all view language learning via a socio-ecological lens, though from distinct angles, influenced by their identity construction and investment rationale.

At the macro level (*STORY*), the contrast between Wadha's husband's external motivation and Rawya and Awrad's internal engagement illustrates the multifaceted nature of English learning in Kuwait. At times, English is pursued as a necessity for mobility and independence, while in other cases, its acquisition is shaped by personal and academic incentives. These stories collectively reinforce Bronfenbrenner's (1994) Bio-ecological Model, demonstrating how the interaction between individuals and their environments influences their language learning experiences. The global influence of English, the expectations of Kuwaiti society, and the structure of educational curricula all intersect to determine learners' incentives and engagement.

As discussed in the literature review, Darwin and Norton (2023) highlighted that students' investment in language learning is shaped by both personal experiences and societal influences. By weaving together these narratives across the SSA, it becomes clear that English language learning is not a uniform experience; it is shaped by a complex blend of necessity, identity, and opportunity. Whether driven by socio-ecological pressures, educational practices, or personal passion, the participants' experiences highlight the dynamic and evolving role of English in Kuwaiti society.

6.6.5. Theme 2 - Key insight 3: Integration of Technology in Autonomous L2 Learning Practices *(seven short stories)*

All narratives under key insight 3 focus on a singular perspective, how female learners integrate technology into their language learning. Language learners employ diverse strategies in acquiring L2, reflecting their individual preferences and contextual influences.

Understanding these approaches is crucial for researchers aiming to facilitate effective L2 acquisition in TESOL setting. The integration of technology in L2 learning represents a significant shift towards more autonomous and interactive methods, where learners utilise digital tools to enhance their linguistic proficiency. This key insight explores how female learners navigate various technological resources, illustrating the socio-ecological factors shaping their approaches to language learning.

It explores how female learners incorporate interactive platforms and automated tools into their English language learning. Language learners today have open access to digital tools that facilitate not only linguistic development but also cultural exchange. With the rise of technology and the internet, learners can interact with speakers from different backgrounds, engage in real-world conversations, and develop intercultural communication competence (ICC) (see [Section 3.5.2.2.](#)).

6.6.5.1. **Short Story 22: Lamya**

Lamya's narrative highlights her preference for non-traditional learning environments, particularly through TikTok. Unlike formal TESOL settings, she enjoys autonomous and interactive learning, using TikTok videos that provide vocabulary and pronunciation tips without structured grammar explanations.

Lamya: "It's not like I'm in class."

Researcher: Okay! Is there any technology or other ways that may help you develop or improve your presentation?

Lamya: Yeah! Definitely.

Researcher: Like what?

Lamya: I am following many people...who talks about the language or something.

Researcher: Following...?

Lamya: TikTok

Researcher: TikTok. Yeah, you told me... How? Well, I don't have a TikTok.

Lamya: How! (laughing)

Researcher: I don't know (smiling). It's the only one I don't have... I don't know... I don't like it...

Lamya: No, I really benefited from it...

Researcher: Nice... In what way?

Lamya: They put general words; they don't explain grammatical rules. It's not like I'm in class...no... For example, they put a word, like... instead of saying this word, say that.

Researcher: (code-switch) Okay!

Lamya: That's it.

Researcher: Would you seek its assistance in (code-switch) one-four-two?

Lamya: Yeah! Definitely.

Researcher: (code-switch) Okay! Only in pronunciation or something else?

Lamya: Hmm! (pause) Pronunciation and some words.

Researcher: Good. As a meaning?

Lamya: Yeah!

Lamya's narrative demonstrates how social media platforms like TikTok offer an alternative space for language acquisition. She values the platform for its informal and engaging approach. Her experience highlights the role of technology in fostering autonomy, showing how learners personalise their educational journeys beyond structured classrooms. In the next narratives, Dana shares a different informal story with the use of TikTok at her own time.

6.6.5.2. Short Story 23: Dana

Dana's narrative builds on Lamya's perspective but adds a social and interactive dimension. Unlike traditional resources such as TV shows, Dana prefers TikTok's "story time" format, where influencers engage in conversations that stimulate her curiosity.

Dana: "Because they always create 'story time'."

Dana: I see some people who say that they learn from TV shows and movies, but this doesn't work for me.

Researcher: Why do you think it doesn't?

Dana: Because, maybe ... I don't know. I don't know. Even when I learn new words from a movie, for example, I forget them after watching.

Researcher: What's the difference between that and YouTube?

Dana: I don't know. Maybe YouTube because my aim is to learn?

Researcher: Mm!

Dana: But now... honestly I do mostly TikTok, because there are a lot of people chatting (laughing)... And I want to understand.

Researcher: Honestly, I don't have TikTok, and you're not the first one who tells me about that. Now you're encouraging me to create an account on TikTok, but how do you learn from TikTok?

Dana: Because they always create (code-switch) 'story time', and chat.

Researcher: Aha!

Dana: (laughing) So, I became curious... I want to know what they mean... So, I (code-switch) search for the word, for example, so that I can understand more about the topic.

Researcher: What's the most thing that makes you curious in what they say? What do you want to know?

Dana: Hmm! Simply, I want to know what they mean in their chats, the meaning of some terminologies. They use specific terminologies a lot with more than one person, so I became like "so what...I want to know too" (laughing).

Dana's story highlights how social engagement and curiosity-driven learning play a crucial role in language acquisition. Unlike traditional methods such as watching TV shows, which she finds ineffective, Dana benefits from the interactive nature of TikTok, where the conversational style of "story time" videos encourages her to actively search for word meanings. Her experience demonstrates how digital platforms foster incidental vocabulary learning.

6.6.5.3. Short Stories 24 – 25 – 26: Three short stories on Cambly

The Cambly application emerged as a significant tool for English language learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a commercial platform, established in 2013, that connects English learners with native-speaking tutors for real-time conversations, enabling them to enhance their speaking skills through interactive practice (Alghammas, 2020). While the narratives shared by three learners (Rawya, Noura, and Soad) could also relate to the theme of intercultural communication (Theme 2, Key Insight 2), the emphasis here is placed on how these learners autonomously engaged with technology to teach themselves, rather than on the specific intercultural content they encountered. They shared their narratives and experiences with Cambly, reflecting the varying impact of the application on their language learning journey.

SHORT STORY 24 :

“Rawya: So, at the time of Corona, I took English courses. I downloaded an application named “Cambly.”

Researcher: What was the name?

Rawya: Cambly. I mean (code-switch) real people I can speak with him I mean (code-switch) my English very little... I (code-switch) I don't understand... I mean everything. He speaks with me in an English language, so what I understood later is that English is about practice, just like Arabic. We speak Kuwaiti accent, not Standard Arabic. We might not understand.

Researcher: Correct.”

SHORT STORY 25:

“Noura: Till now, I like English and like to learn it. Even at the time of Corona, through Mac, I was using “Cambly,” if you know about it.

Researcher: You're the second one telling me about it. I have to (code-switch) check it.

Noura: I used it, but I don't feel that I benefitted from it. What was said by teachers, (code-switch) ‘Just practice. Just practice.’ What I heard about is to log in to it to chat with other people in video calls, but only what I saw was saying, ‘Practice.’ So, what did I benefit from that? I want to feel free to chat with them. I want to listen to them.

Researcher: Exactly, yes. (overlapping) I don't have an idea about it, indeed.

Noura: You're just interacting and chatting with them fluently. Even if you're wrong, it's okay.

Researcher: So they're foreigners? (as in English is their first language)

Noura: Yeah, all of them are foreigners.

Researcher: Okay!

Noura: They didn't encourage me to use the application, so I stopped using it."

SHORT STORY 26:

"Soad: Now, I have the intention to improve my English in the application for conversations.

Researcher: Do you remember its name?

Soad: Hmm, wait a moment (pause)... It's "Cambly."

Researcher: Ah! Okay!

Soad: I decided to register in it so that when I can have a conversation with foreigners, I acquire the language properly from them, because during conversations... when I give myself the chance to speak, I feel that it's something that I'll benefit from.

Researcher: Where did you hear about that application?

Soad: Mmm, when I first heard about it, it was from my professor who told us about another application... It was about regular sentences... From that application, I looked for other applications. So, I found this application (refers to Cambly).

Researcher: So, you're the one who searched?

Soad: Yeah!"

Rawya reported a positive experience with the application, noting its ability to facilitate interactions with "real people." In contrast, Noura expressed dissatisfaction, pointing out a lack of engagement that did not meet her expectations. Offering a contrasting perspective, Soad viewed Cambly as a valuable resource for improving her conversational skills. The narratives showcase the diverse responses that underscore the learners' perspectives and expectations that shaped their language learning experience with the technology-assisted language tools. In the following narrative is a different approach to technology yet still serves another socio-ecological perspective.

6.6.5.4. Short Story 27: Hussah

Hussah's story reveals her adaptive approach to language learning. She balances her reliance on Google Translate with seeking support from knowledgeable friends, demonstrating a socio-ecologically influenced learning strategy.

Hussah: “in that case I would choose Google Translation”

Researcher: And how will you learn pronunciation?

Hussah: (pause) Google Translate (smiling).

Researcher: Google Translate.

Hussah: Or my friends; they're so ...

Researcher: What if I told you, for example, which one comes first when seeking assistance, Google or your friends?

Hussah: (overlap) My friends.

Researcher: Your friends come first?

Hussah: Yeah!

Researcher: Why?

Hussah: Because...I said earlier, hmm, (pause) two of my friends...their English is good, so good, that's Allah's will, and one of them is (code-switch) top...I mean top of the top.

Researcher: What made you prefer them over Google?

Hussah: Easier.

Researcher: In what sense it's easier?

Hussah: Mmmm I don't get more tired. It's okay that I take a photo of the paper and tell them...mmm or the word, I mean it depends, if it's just one word, it's not worth it to send it to her and ask her to send me a (code-switch) voice (as in a voice note)... so in that case I would choose Google Translation... But I feel that... Mmm if you gave me a topic, I would take a photo and I ask her to help me.

Researcher: Aha! Okay!

Hussah: But not everything, I mean I don't expect that I seek assistance from (my friends).

Researcher: You don't expect that you'll seek their assistance?

Hussah: Yeah!

Researcher: From your friends?

Hussah: Yeah!

Hussah's narrative underscores the importance of socio-ecological factors in shaping learning preferences. In her narrative, she adopted two distinct approaches for learning English based on the task at hand, asserting that for minor tasks, such as finding the meaning of a single word, she would use technological applications, whereas for more complex enquiries necessitating comprehensive explanations, she would consult friends whom she considered proficient. An approach to technology that significantly contrasts with Shaikha's subsequent narrative.

6.6.5.5. Short Story 28: Shaikha

Transitioning from diverse experiences with platforms like TikTok and Cambly, Shaikha's narrative, shaped by her experiences with platforms such as TikTok and Cambly, indicates a special journey of autonomy and engagement with language learning. While previous narratives concentrated on the role of interactive platforms; however, her narrative presents a unique aspect, as she used songs and YouTube to support her English language learning. Her narrative highlights an independent approach, providing a novel perspective on how learners can use technology and culture-related resources such as songs to develop their linguistic competence.

Shaikha: “I depended on myself from the very beginning.”

Shaikhar: There is absolutely no opportunity to speak English with family whatsoever.

I'm unable to practise it. The real practice started when I was at school...honestly, during that period, the first “F” I got was in English.

Researcher: Fine (laughing together).

Shiakha: I was at the elementary school. I was shocked. I have a weakness! and I wasn't aware of it (laughing). Then, after high school, I worked on myself to improve the English language.

Researcher: Okay! How did you work on yourself?

Shiakha: I used my phone; series, songs... step by step I tried to speak a little with our housemaid in English. Hmm! I see that the best grade I achieved is now while I'm at the university.

Researcher: Oh! Wow! What skills do you believe you have developed to improve your English?

Shiakha: I see that I can translate better. When I see a word, I know what it means in Arabic. My brain translates it immediately.

Researcher: Why do you think you can do that?

Shiakha: When I listen to songs, I like them. I mainly translate them.

Researcher: Aha!

Shiakha: I look for the lyrics on YouTube, but if I can't find it, I would translate it on Google Translate.

Researcher: Why do you like doing that?

Shiakha: I don't know. I feel that songs are like books, because songs have emotions. You can imagine another world and other cultures, which is truly impressive.

Researcher: Nice! Why did you choose English songs?

Shiakha: English songs are another world, indeed.

Researcher: Really?!

Shiakha: Yeah...our Arabic songs are all about love, literature...but then I hear songs including...maybe, children's songs on Spacetoon (a channel with English cartoons). They talk about dreams...they talk about goals and stuff...so these songs are nice!

Researcher: Okay!

Shiakha: This is something that I didn't know about before...I really enjoy it...honestly.

Researcher: Well done! Do you believe that your childhood language acquisition has influenced your adult life? Or it is unrelated?

Shiakha: Of course, it's related!

Researcher: How?

Shiakha: Hmm! Because we always fear asking questions. So, it's better to ask using phones than to ask a person. I used to...if there is something I don't know, I won't ask anyone. I search for it. This is what made me develop my language; I depended on myself from the very beginning.

Shaikha's narrative demonstrates a strong sense of autonomy. Her experience also reveals how technology empowers learners to take control of their own progress, using digital resources as a means of discovery rather than just support., highlighting how personal

motivation and exposure to cultural elements, such as songs, can foster engagement with L2. Her experience reflects on investment, where learners take control of their own learning by integrating language into their personal interests.

6.6.6. Discussion

The narratives of Lamya, Dana, Rawya, Noura, Soad, Hussah, and Shaikha illustrate the intersection of personal, social, and technological factors in shaping English language acquisition through digital tools. Each participant's story reflects how English learning is embedded in their daily lives, with technology serving as both an enabler and a reflection of their learning needs. At the micro level (*story*), the participants' individual experiences highlight their diverse approaches to integrating technology into their language learning. Participants under the current theme exemplify the complex interrelation of language, identity, and culture, which is shaped by extensive immersion and diverse international situations (Peng, 2023), including the intercultural communication through the use of technology. Lamya and Dana engage with TikTok, valuing its informal and engaging format as a way to expand vocabulary and pronunciation skills. While Dana struggles with traditional resources such as movies, she benefits from TikTok's conversational structure, which aligns with her curiosity-driven approach to learning.

In contrast, Rawya, Noura, and Soad experimented with Cambly, showcasing how structured digital tools can either enhance or hinder learning based on individual preferences. Rawya appreciated Cambly for its real-world interaction, while Noura found it lacking in engagement, revealing how expectations influence the perceived effectiveness of CALL tools (see Section 3.5.2.1). Soad, meanwhile, used Cambly to gradually build her confidence in spoken English, highlighting the role of interactive learning in skill development. This aligns with research on socially mediated learning environments, where engagement with authentic digital interactions enhances linguistic development (Rummler et al., 2020). However, based on the current findings, the digital interaction must be effective otherwise it will hinder the educational process of a language learner.

Interestingly, the findings from these narratives challenge prior research on the role of culture in foreign language education. Kramsch (2013) and Chavez (2002) highlighted that some learners, such as immigrants, resist cultural elements in language instruction, feeling that it threatens their L1 identity. In contrast, participants in the current study actively sought cultural insights as part of their language learning experience. For example, Rawya's appreciation for Cambly stemmed from engaging with 'real people' and learning the language within its cultural context. Even Noura, despite finding the platform disengaging, was searching for native English speakers to model authentic usage, rather than simply listening to her errors. This suggests that when learners have the autonomy to choose their learning methods, they are more likely to seek out cultural elements with genuine curiosity, as seen in Shaikha's independent exploration of songs and cultural expressions. This contrasts with Chavez's (2002) findings, where learners felt that imposed cultural education challenged their sense of identity. The difference may lie in the distinction between forced exposure to cultural content versus self-directed exploration, as the participants in this study viewed cultural learning as an asset rather than an imposition.

At the meso level (*Story*), the participants' reliance on technology intersects with their social environments. Hussah's choice to alternate between Google Translate and peer assistance underscores the balance between efficiency and social learning. Hussah's choice to alternate between digital and social resources aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of social scaffolding, where learners engage with human and digital mediators, based on the task's complexity, to receive gradual support to achieve their independent competence. While she prefers the immediacy of translation tools for quick understanding, she still values the guidance of knowledgeable peers when the task is more complicated, reflecting the interplay between digital autonomy and social support.

In contrast, Shaikha's experience presents a different approach to seeking assistance with language learning challenges. Unlike Hussah, who navigates between technology and social interaction, Shaikha prefers to independently seek knowledge due to her apprehension about asking others for help. This contrast illustrates how language learning is not a fixed or uniform process, it is deeply influenced by identity, personal experiences, and the socio-ecological environment in which the learner operates. As demonstrated in previous themes, factors such as household environment play a crucial role in shaping who learners become. It is now

evident that these influences extend to how learners choose to engage with language learning autonomously, determining whether they seek assistance or prefer self-reliance in acquiring linguistic competence.

Reflecting on the recent development of the Bio-ecological Model, the findings from this study support Navarro and Tudge's (2023) Neo-ecological Theory by showing how the virtual microsystem plays a central role in shaping learners' language development (see Section 4.5.6). Participants like Lamya and Dana used TikTok not only for exposure to English but also to build curiosity and motivation. Others, like Rawya, Noura, and Soad, turned to Cambly for real-time conversations with native speakers, highlighting the shift from traditional classroom learning to virtual spaces. In section 3.5.2.2 on cultural communication, Godwin-Jones (2013) analysed the integration of intercultural communication competence (ICC) into language learning via technology, emphasising telecollaboration, wherein learners engage with peers or native speakers from diverse cultures through digital tools. Upon reflection of this conclusion, it is noteworthy that Dana, despite exhibiting an individualistic perspective which intersects with Theme 3 (key insight 4), and Theme 2 (key insight 2) where she actively seeks culturally relevant material like TikTok to independently learn English. Although she would have favoured interacting with actual individuals as indicated in other participants' narratives using Cambly, she selected a learning approach that aligns with her personal requirements and autonomy. This also demonstrates the ability of adult learners to comprehend themselves and acquire the language in a manner they believe appropriate. This finding suggests that it is crucial to provide adult EFL learners with the opportunity to select their preferred learning methods, thereby creating a more adaptable environment that acknowledges the socio-ecological factors affecting adult EFL learners, which are anticipated to vary across cultures. As indicated in the literature review, cooperative learning is primarily adopted in Western cultures, necessitating more research to evaluate its cultural adaptation (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2022).

These experiences reflect the blurred lines between physical and digital environments, as outlined by Navarro and Tudge, and contrast with earlier models like Johnson and Puplampu's (2008), which placed technology solely in the microsystem. The data also show how learners engage with cultural content, digital communities, and peer support, which further supports

the expanded scope of the macrosystem in the Neo-ecological Theory. This reinforces the theory's relevance in understanding language learning in a digitally saturated and culturally specific context like Kuwait.

6.7. Theme 3 - Socio-ecological Variables in TESOL Settings

This theme intends to address research question (3): *What is the impact of socio-ecological variables on the experiences of female learners in Kuwaiti TESOL settings at Kuwait University?* This theme explores the socio-ecological factors that impact the TESOL classroom setting and emerged in four key insights. The pre-semi-structured interviews, conducted at the beginning of the academic year, were intended to reveal the students' previous socio-ecological experiences prior to being exposed to the English language within the context of higher education. In contrast, the post-course semi-structured interviews and reflective diaries at the end of the course focused on examining how previous socio-ecological factors impacted female Kuwaiti L2 learners in TESOL setting at Kuwait University. Most of the key insights from the current theme originated mainly from the post-interviews and reflective diaries. This theme is important since it emphasises the broader contextual factors that shape learners' experiences and results in language acquisition. The key insights address various aspects of the TESOL classroom, particularly in the context of Kuwait such as; (1) The Influence of Teacher-Student Interaction on Language Learning in TESOL Settings, (2) Key Insight 2: The Role of L1 and L2 in TESOL setting, (3) Peer Judgement and Foreign Language Anxiety, and (4) Teamwork in TESOL Setting Through the Individualist and Collectivist Lenses. These key insights are interrelated, reflecting the complex dynamics of the TESOL classroom environment at Kuwait University.

6.7.1. Theme 3 - Key Insight 1: The Influence of Teacher-Student

Interaction on Language Learning in TESOL Settings (*two short stories*)

The first key insight derived from Theme 3 and research question 4 delves into the influence that teacher-student dynamics have on language learning within the TESOL environment. Teacher-student interactions play a vital role in the development of language proficiency. Research indicates that classrooms with consistent and meaningful teacher-student engagement enhance students' language abilities (Cummins, 2016). Such environments offer

learners valuable opportunities to practice their language skills and receive constructive feedback, ultimately fostering higher levels of proficiency (Cummins, 2016). Two narratives, one with a positive experience and the other with a negative experience, are presented in the insight. They reveal different ways of impact, ranging from building confidence to addressing learners' anxiety and challenges. The inclusion of the two narratives aims to illustrate the influence teachers can have on language learners. By exploring these narratives, it became evident that the role of the teacher extends beyond the content of the course being taught.

6.7.1.1. Short Story 29: Maha

Maha's narrative highlights the transformative role of a supportive teacher in her English language journey. Initially, she experienced anxiety and a lack of confidence, which hindered her participation in class. However, a positive experience with her tenth-grade teacher changed her perception of the subject, leading to increased engagement and improvement in her proficiency.

Maha: "it was my teacher, who was teaching me in the tenth grade, she was extremely excellent"

Researcher: What do you remember about English? Your impression of it? Who taught you? Simply, how did you start? Tell me.

Maha: Hmm! First of all, when I was at the elementary school, my English level was very low.

Researcher: Mm! Okay!

Maha: I wasn't even participating in class, because I was anxious. I fear, maybe, (pause) from giving a wrong answer or something. I mean it's a second language, so I was worried about that. But after when I became in the secondary stage, I did my best. Praise be to Allah! My English level was really improved, it was my teacher, who was teaching me in the tenth grade, she was extremely excellent. She was kind and helpful, so glory be to Allah, she made me like the subject. I started to participate with her, interacting with her in class, and as if I know English, because of my level.

Researcher: Do you remember when that was? What grade?

Maha: The tenth grade.

Researcher: The tenth grade. (code-switch) Okay! Fine. Tell me what was her impact on you? What did you feel?

Maha: I felt, at the very beginning, when I had no confidence and knowledge about English, I didn't like to interact with the teacher during the class. Even the exams, my level was very low. But later, when I became (pause) I mean I know English and so on, glory be to Allah, my perspective towards English changed, even towards the grammar rules. When I became aware how to study vocabulary and grammar rules and so on, everything became easy, even now in the introductory course and in (code-switch) one-four-one, praise be to Allah, my level was really good.

Researcher: I was about to ask you, do you think the experience you were exposed to with your teacher affected your level nowadays?

Maha: Of course.

Maha's story underscores how teacher encouragement and support can influence learners' attitudes toward English. Her teacher's kindness and effective teaching methods helped her overcome anxiety, develop confidence, and engage more actively in learning. More importantly, thanks to her tenth grade teacher, Maha's investment started to shine in her language learning journey. A contrasting narrative with a contrasting perspective on teacher influence is what Lamya has faced in a different story and a different outcome.

6.7.1.2. Short Story 30: Lamya

Unlike Maha who benefited from a supportive teacher, Lamya's experience reveals a different side of teacher influence of how a strict classroom atmosphere can lead to anxiety and self-doubt. Lamya struggled with a professor who emphasised harsh grading and discipline, causing her to feel uncertain about her own abilities despite having a strong English foundation.

Lamya: "She used to scare us (laughing)"

Researcher: Is there anything you want to share about your teacher? Anything that would come to your mind?

Lamya: Hmm! She used to scare us (laughing).

Researcher: How?

Lamya: For example, in the (code-switch) presentation, she told us, 'I am the strictest professor in evaluation'... And I became afraid, honestly. I felt that my performance wasn't good. I told the girls, 'We have to change the entire topic, it's not good.' She is really strict although the topic was good and she liked it later.

Lamya: And for the course itself, I was really afraid of it. Although my level in English is good.

Researcher: Praise be to Allah!

Lamya: So, when she was saying, 'I am strict; I don't give good grades; I give "F" and so on,' I became less confident about myself. I kept saying to myself that I won't get a good grade. That I should put more effort. Believe it or not. I didn't have to put more effort, but I made myself disappointed without justification. However, in the end, my level was good.

Researcher: (code-switch) Okay! In your opinion, what made you not to put more effort?

Lamya: (long pause) Because I was lost. I didn't know where to start. I remember that one day we had a (code-switch) quiz, I said to the girls, 'What should I study? Do you have any questions to practice on?'

Researcher: Why did you feel lost?

Lamya: (pause) Hmm! Maybe because, hmm, (pause) I like to have everything arranged in front of me. Simply, I like, for example, to have a paper including the grammar rule, simple illustration, and exercises. So, such stuff was not available for me. For example, in (code-switch) one-four-one, the professor was giving us exercise sheets. Now, we don't have that. Now, the notes are printed, including the rules, and everything is disorganised. So, I felt lost. If everything is disorganised, I won't know anything.

Lamya's narrative highlights how fear and intimidation in the classroom can negatively affect students' confidence and engagement. Even when a learner possesses strong skills, a stressful learning environment can make them question their abilities, raising an important question about how different teaching styles impact students' motivation, performance, and even perspectives on language learning. These two narratives present divergent viewpoints on teacher influence, establishing a foundation for a more profound discussion on how different approaches to instruction affect language learning experiences.

6.7.2. Discussion

The narratives of Maha and Lamya (*who*) provide an important distinction regarding the impact of instructor influence and classroom dynamics on language learning experiences in TESOL settings (*where*). Although both participants reflected on their interactions with their language instructors, the characteristics of these experiences and their subsequent impacts vary significantly, offering valuable insights into the socio-ecological dynamics of the TESOL setting. Maha recalls her positive transformative shift during the tenth grade (*when*), while Lamya portrayed a contrasting experience with her strict language instructor in the semester at Kuwait University (*when*).

Both Maha and Lamya's narratives revolve around their instructors' influence on their language learning experience but with varying influence. Maha's instructor boosted her confidence and engagement in the classroom through kindness and encouragement, creating a supportive environment that helped her overcome her anxiety. In contrast, Lamya's instructor showed strictness and high expectations for her students, which led to anxiety and self-doubt. A key intersection in both narratives is the essential role of the language instructor in their respective language learning journeys. The socio-ecological framework emphasises variation in language learners, necessitating that teachers take into consideration diverse attitudes, qualities, and levels of confidence (Kasbi & Elahi Shirvan, 2017).

However, it is noteworthy that although Lamya's instructor was strict, Lamya then said that "*however, in the end... my level was good*". This highlights that multiple identities can coexist within a single language learner depending on the context, making it unreasonable to classify a learner simply as motivated or unmotivated (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Research also argued that perceiving language learners as possessing a fundamental, and cohesive identity neglects the complex nature of their experiences (Darvin & Norton, 2023). This viewpoint overlooks the fact that even highly motivated learners may disengage from learning environments in which they feel marginalised. For example, Lamya, despite her "good" knowledge of English, expressed anxiety and considered altering her entire presentation due to the fear of her strict instructor.

This example supports Norton and Darwin (2023)'s argument by demonstrating that previous perceptions of learners as either consistently motivated or unmotivated are not sufficient explanations for the complex decisions learners make in relation to their socio-ecological context. In contrast, Maha described a more positive classroom experience, which suggests that the teacher's approach plays a key role in shaping how learners feel and respond. These contrasting experiences point to the idea that teachers themselves bring different socio-ecological backgrounds into the classroom, which can either support or hinder learners' engagement. In fact, Nguyen (2019), in a qualitative study conducted in Australia, showed that teachers' learning experiences were shaped by a range of personal and contextual factors within their educational settings. These included their prior beliefs, educational and teaching experiences, and their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The study found that the characteristics and experiences of English language teachers strongly influence their teaching practices and, by extension, their learners' experiences.

This may help explain why some teachers struggle to engage effectively with their students, potentially contributing to issues such as Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). For instance, Alzankawi (2021) found that in-service English teachers at Kuwait's Public Authority of Applied Education and Training (PAAET) reported limited access to professional development in key areas, highlighting the need for ongoing skill enhancement. These contrasting narratives highlight the pivotal role of teacher-student interactions in shaping learners' confidence and engagement, reinforcing the importance of recognising the diverse socio-ecological factors that influence classroom experiences.

6.7.3. Theme 3 - Key Insight 2: The Role of L1 and L2 in TESOL settings (three short stories)

Language instructors play a fundamental role in shaping students' language learning experiences within TESOL settings. As previously mentioned in the literature review chapter, Cox and Philips (2022) demonstrated that incorporating learners' native language in the classroom can be highly empowering. Their study found that when instructors integrated the L1 alongside the L2, students felt more confident, welcomed, and independent (see Section 3.4.1.2). In the following narratives, learners' views on using L1 and L2 in the classroom

reflected a mix of preference and uncertainty. None of the participants gave a firm answer, instead, they showed hesitation and found themselves somewhere in between. Noura felt she needed Arabic to make sense of English words. Dana believed that relying only on English might push her to understand better. Shaikha worried that using just English would make learning harder. Their mixed responses highlight that there is no fixed approach for everyone. These stories offer a glimpse into how each learner navigated their own needs and feelings when it came to language use in the classroom

6.7.3.1. Short Story 31: Noura

Noura's narrative reflects the importance of translation in language learning and the role of Arabic in English instruction. She describes her experience with an L2 instructor who strictly adhered to an English-only approach, which she found beneficial as it encouraged participation and reduced the fear of making mistakes. However, she still prefers some degree of Arabic translation to understand vocabulary effectively.

Noura: “I must know its meaning in Arabic. I translate to know them. That’s what I know.”

Researcher: There are things that you don’t know, so the professor has to, for example, explain it in Arabic, then complete the explanation in English.

Noura: ... to learn English properly.

Researcher: Yeah... so, how would I learn if it has been translated into Arabic?

Noura: Look! I tried ... Dr [name removed] is not a foreigner. She has never said a letter in Arabic at all.

Researcher: What was the result?

Noura: actually, it was good. At first, I was afraid ... no ... Dr [name removed] ... we may make mistakes ... just for raising your hand ... she was giving us marks, because you raised your hand. She was really helping us ... ‘make mistakes ... on the contrary, you take a mark on such a mistake, because you tried.’ For that, I didn’t see difficulties.

Researcher: But you prefer that she speaks Arabic...

Noura: A little bit ... yea (laughing).

Researcher: Okay! The reason behind it is that she translates into Arabic for you.

Noura: Maybe, that’s the reason.

Researcher: If you got the Arabic word, what would you do with it in order to learn English?

Noura: I would understand its meaning. The same happened with the vocabulary. I must know its meaning in Arabic. I translate to know them. That's what I know. Even dad tells me, 'Don't translate it into Arabic, but into English, like into a meaning you know in English'.

Researcher: Correct.

Noura: That's the matter. Now, ... no, I translate into Arabic.

Researcher: Are you talking about vocabulary only?

Noura: Yea, possibly...

Researcher: Or is there another thing that needs to be translated in English?

Noura: No, I don't see anything else that needs a translation.

Researcher: The most important thing is vocabulary.

Noura: Yeah... As for the paragraphs, if I didn't know what's it talking about, I would continue reading until I understand the meaning.

Noura's experience highlights the complex balance between English immersion and the need for L1 support in EFL classrooms. While full English exposure can promote engagement, translation remains a critical tool for vocabulary acquisition, reflecting the socio-ecological reality of bilingual learners where they hold some old habits for language acquisition "*that's what I know*".

6.7.3.2. Short Story 32: Dana

Dana's perspective provides insight into students' emotional responses to L1 and L2 instructors from a comparable viewpoint to Noura. She expresses a preference for a Kuwaiti (L2) teacher due to familiarity and comfort, though she acknowledges that learning from a native speaker (L1) would be beneficial in the long run. She recognises that a native English-speaking instructor would probably enforce full English immersion, which could ultimately enhance learning.

Dana: “So, I feel it would be better, because I am forced to understand.”

Researcher: Let's suppose that the teacher of the course one-four-two, is originally a foreign instructor ... I mean an English speaker ... and a Kuwaiti person as an example, which one would you prefer to learn with?

Dana: (pause) The Kuwaiti.

Researcher: Why?

Dana: Although it would be better if I chose the foreigner.

Researcher: Yeah, tell me here and there, tell me. Which one do you want?

Dana: I want to start with the Kuwaiti...it's easier.

Researcher: Go ahead! Why do you think it is easier?

Dana: Because first of all I have never learned English with a foreigner.

Researcher: Okay!

Dana: I feel comfortable, and, hmm, I feel that with a foreigner, it is out of my comfort zone. I feel that, but ... the Kuwaiti, because I am familiar with that situation.

Researcher: Aha!

Dana: But I believe that learning with a foreigner would be highly beneficial because they would communicate solely in English. With a Kuwaiti, there's a possibility they might switch to Arabic for explanations. On the contrary, foreigner also speak English, so the issue would be limited to instances where you didn't understand.

Researcher: Okay!

Dana: So, I feel it would be better, because I am forced to understand. I feel that.

Researcher: Why is it easier with the Kuwaiti?

Dana: Because he might explain in Arabic if you didn't understand the English context to understand it better.

Researcher: But in the end you're learning a foreign language, if he explained it in Arabic, how would you benefit?

Dana: I might understand it better.

Researcher: How would you understand it while it ...

Dana: I am telling you that it's better there, but here ...

Researcher: Okay! Let's suppose this situation. Okay! he taught me something in Arabic, how would I benefit from him in English? What would I do?

Dana: It's basically in English, so he just translates it, as it has already been there in English, so I feel it won't have an impact.

Researcher: You don't feel that there will be an impact?

Dana: Yeah!

Dana: Yeah, as I said, I just want the professor to speak English, and all the classes. I feel that this matter will make everyone not speak Arabic. They'll assimilate that it's English (laughing).

Researcher: Okay! So, you think that it's very important.

Dana: Yeah!

Researcher: Not to use Arabic.

Dana: Yeah!

Dana's story reveals the psychological aspect of teacher preference, where familiarity can provide a sense of security, but immersion may offer better long-term language benefits. Her mixed feelings reflect a dilemma in language education choosing between comfort and challenge. Leaving both stories in clear hesitance between the two approaches.

6.7.3.3. Short Story 33: Shaikha

Shaikha's experience introduces a fresh perspective by focusing on the cognitive demands of learning with an L1 versus an L2 instructor. She notes that while an Arabic-speaking (L2) teacher may clarify concepts in Arabic, a native English-speaking (L1) teacher forces her to process meaning directly in English, which could be beneficial for deeper learning.

Shaikha: "I feel that it'll be a little hard."

Researcher: What about the course itself, one-four-two, if it was taught by a person who is American, British, or whatever?

Shaikha: I feel that it'll be a little hard.

Researcher: Why?

Shaikha: Especially when I want him to explain something to me that I don't understand, the person who speaks Arabic will explain it to me in Arabic, but he'll (L2 speaker) try after to deliver it in English. ... so...maybe that will be better, in the sense that my mind won't translate the word into Arabic, I will know it in English. Sometimes you depend on

translation, you're a translator...you don't know the language, you're just a translator... there are words in English that you can't find the exact translation to it in Arabic, so your mind will stop. This is something that maybe I'm suffering from at the moment.

Shaikha's story underscores the challenge of dependence on translation versus direct comprehension in English. While L1 instructors eliminate reliance on Arabic, L2 instructors may provide crucial support for struggling learners, showing the balance between learning only in English and using some Arabic for support.

6.7.4. Discussion

All narratives were referring to the TESOL setting at Kuwait University (*where*) during their years of study (*when*). The three participants (*who*) explained their perspective for on language instructors to be L1 or L2 speakers. Noura, Dana, and Shaikha reflect the complex interplay between language learners' and language instructors' identity, instructional language, and student learning preferences. The findings show that the preference for the use of L1 in L2 classroom is not simply about language proficiency but also about emotional comfort, cognitive processing, and pedagogical style.

Noura, Dana and Shaikha acknowledged the importance of using Arabic language as a scaffold. From a Vygotskian perspective, this aligns with the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) as in her narrative, the language instructor. This preference aligns with the idea that learners can achieve a higher level of understanding with the help of scaffolding, which in this case is the use of L1 to bridge the gap between current knowledge and potential learning (Shabani et al., 2010). These narratives also show the mediation of language learning through interaction and cultural tools (Poehner & Lantolf, 2024), through the use of L1 as a cultural tool to learn L2 (see [Section 3.2.](#)). By saying "*that's what I know*", Dana clearly shows the influence of her socio-ecological background by emphasising that this is how she was exposed to English.

Noura clarified how it can be useful in comprehending and translating vocabulary, although she maintains that it will not be necessary for other skills, such as reading. This finding is particularly significant as much of the research applying Sociocultural Theory (SCT) has

focused on children. It is insightful to see an adult learner articulate this process. Noura demonstrated an awareness of when to rely on L1 and for which specific skills, such as using it for vocabulary comprehension but not necessarily for reading. Her ability to make this distinction highlights how identity evolves over time and how socio-ecological factors shape learners' decisions on what strategies best suit their needs. This finding is notably important since a substantial portion of the research applying ZPD has concentrated on youngsters. It is enlightening to observe an adult learner express this process, and in the context of Kuwait. The narrative also transcends beyond the ZPD and the classroom by showing how the social and cultural identities of the learners shaped their learning choices (Kramsch, 2013), that may vary among participants (see [Section 3.2.1.](#)).

At the micro level (*story*), each participant highlighted their experiences with English instruction and translation. Noura appreciated English-only instruction but relied on Arabic for vocabulary acquisition, showing that students often balance immersion with the need for comprehension support. This corresponds with various research cited in the literature review, which assert that employing L1 in L2 can be advantageous in several respects, including providing grammatical rule instructions, conducting comprehension checks, and explaining vocabulary (e.g., Atkinson, 1993; Auerbach, 1993; Cook, 2016).

Dana's preference for Kuwaiti instructors reflects a sense of familiarity "*because I am familiar with that matter*", aligning with the concept of imagined communities and its role in shaping language acquisition. Pavlenko and Norton (2007) explain that second language learning is closely linked to identity, as learners' sense of belonging, both within their existing communities and the ones they aspire to be part of, affects their learning experiences, and investment. Learners do not only rely on immediate social networks but also form connections with broader communities, influencing their sense of self and investment in the language. Dana expressed a preference for an instructor who shared her Kuwaiti background yet recognised the advantages of complete English immersion. She explicitly stated that L1 language instructor is better, emphasising how identity and imagined communities influence language learning choices. As previously discussed in the literature review, Ferguson (2003) highlighted that the classroom is more than just a space for formal instruction; it also serves as a social environment where students and teachers actively shape relationships and

identities. Akbar and Taqi (2020) similarly discovered in their study on translanguaging as an ESL learning strategy in Kuwait (see [Section 3.2.3.](#)), that translanguaging contributed to the enhancement of learners' comfort zones, indicating profound connections to identity, investment, and power. Dana also clarified that *'I feel comfortable, and, hmm, I feel that with a foreigner, it is out of my comfort zone.'* which could also help reduced her FLA. As noted in the literature review, Bruen and Kelly (2017) argued that when teachers and students share a common language, switching to the first language (L1) can help reduce learners' anxiety and create a more supportive classroom environment.

Shaikha viewed the use of L1 in L2 learning differently from the other participants. She recognised the limitations of over-reliance on translation, suggesting that direct exposure to English promotes deeper cognitive engagement. Her approach indicates a preference for contextual language use, where learning occurs through meaningful interactions in L2 rather than through direct translation. This perspective aligns with Suryavanshi (2020), who emphasised that understanding cultural contexts enhances communication, learning approaches, and teaching practices. Shaikha's experience suggests that incorporating culturally relevant topics could support language acquisition by making learning more engaging and contextually meaningful. Also, looking back at Shaikha's narrative in Short Story 14, it is evident that her language learning process involves an active search for meaning, as seen in her efforts to explain words to her housemaid without searching for direct translation, reinforcing her belief in acquiring language through context and interaction rather than linguistic substitution.

At the meso level (*Story*), the learners' perspectives collectively highlight broader classroom dynamics that shape language learning. Some students find that a teacher's approach to language use affects their investment and confidence. When instructors genuinely engage with learners in the target language, showing an interest in their progress whether with the use of L1 or not, students feel more comfortable, engaged, and less anxious (Dewaele et al., 2024). On the other hand, differences in cultural expectations between L1 and L2 instructors may sometimes create challenges in communication and classroom dynamics. Foreign English teachers and local learners may experience misalignment in teaching styles or classroom expectations, leading to occasional misunderstandings or conflicts (Alsharhani,

2017). These differences highlight the need for intercultural awareness in TESOL settings, ensuring that both teaching strategies and classroom interactions align with students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds (see [Section 3.5.1.](#)).

6.7.5. Theme 3 - Key insight 3: Peer Judgement and Foreign Language

Anxiety (three short stories)

Any communicative activity conducted among learners with minimal or no involvement from the teacher is referred to as peer interaction (Philp et al., 2013). Peer judgement within the peer interaction can play an important role in shaping learners' engagement and confidence in the TESOL classroom. This emerged key insight emphasises how social interactions and perspectives can generate a challenging environment for language learners, affecting their willingness to participate in the classroom. The narratives of Anfal, Maha, and Munira clarify the anxiety, self-doubt, and fear of mockery that female students experience when participating in English in front of their peers. Regardless of differing levels of proficiency, all three participants demonstrate increased sensitivity to peer judgement, frequently leading to embarrassment and negative self-evaluation. The narratives underscore the complex interplay between socio-ecological factors and individual learner experiences, demonstrating that peer judgement in language learning is a vital socio-ecological element that affects learners' confidence and their willingness to engage in classroom activities.

6.7.5.1. Short Story 34: Anfal

Anfal expresses her difficulties with anxiety and embarrassment when speaking in English during class, particularly in the presence of her peers. Despite her belief that her peers are of equal competence, she perceives them as having greater confidence. She remembers instances when laughter in the classroom, regardless of whether it was aimed at her, induced feelings of self-consciousness and hesitation. Anfal expresses that she feels better at ease conversing in Arabic, as her infrequent usage of English contributes to her anxiety and apprehension about committing mistakes in the presence of others.

Anfal: “I feel that they are in the same level of mine, but maybe they have more courage.”

Researcher: When you speak English among your colleagues in the class, describe the feeling. What's your feeling, honestly?

Anfal: I feel that sometimes I made mistakes because of anxiety.

Researcher: Okay!

Anfal: I feel quite embarrassed.

Researcher: You become more embarrassed from your colleagues than your teacher?

Anfal: Certainly, from my colleagues.

Researcher: Your colleagues, why? What do they say about you in your opinion?

Anfal: I don't know. Sometimes ... I don't know... I hear someone laughing, not about me. For example, if someone participates, there may be a girl sitting at the front or at the back who laughs. It won't work.

Researcher: Okay!

Anfal: So, I don't like ...

Researcher: In your opinion, when you give wrong answers, how do you think of you?

Anfal: They think that for example, "She doesn't know." They think negatively or something.

Researcher: Okay! Do you see their levels are the same as your level, more or less?

Anfal: I feel that they are in the same level of mine, but maybe they have more courage.

Researcher: Why?

Anfal: I don't know. I feel that I am not accustomed with speaking English a lot, because most of my subjects are theoretical. I like discussing in Arabic, not in English.

Anfal's story reveals how peer judgement and classroom dynamics can shape learners' engagement with English. Despite believing her classmates share her proficiency level, she perceives a gap in confidence and willingness to speak, which reinforces her own hesitation to participate. This narrative shifts to the subsequent one, which examines how the fear of judgement can result in self-criticism and a decline in self-worth.

6.7.5.2. Short Story 35: Maha

Similar to Anfal, Maha struggles with the perceived pressure of peer judgement and its effect on her confidence in the classroom. Anfal feels discouraged by responses such as laughter, but Maha takes in her anxiety, fearing mistakes and blaming herself when she makes mistakes

in the classroom. Her belief that certain classmates are more advanced than she is contributes to her hesitation, establishing a barrier to active engagement. Her experience shows the influence of peer dynamics on learners' reactions to participation in the TESOL classroom.

Maha: “I feel like a failure and blame myself for what I said.”

Researcher: What do you feel when you talk or participate in the class while your colleagues are around you?

Maha: (laughing) Honestly? I feel anxious. I’m afraid of giving the wrong answer.

Researcher: What if you said something wrong? (What would happen)? You gave a wrong answer, so what?

Maha: I feel like a failure and blame myself for what I said.

Researcher: Do you think that your colleagues and you are in the same level?

Maha: No! We’re not on the same level. There are students at a higher level. They interact more with the professor.

Maha’s narrative highlights how perceived differences in proficiency shape self-esteem and participation. While Anfal feared peer judgement despite feeling equally skilled, Maha internalised the belief that others were more capable, leading to heightened anxiety. This dynamic is further explored in the next narrative, where negative peer interactions directly reinforce fear and reluctance to speak.

6.7.5.3. Short Story 36: Munira

In Munira’s example, peer judgement seemed to have the most significant personal influence, as she internalised these experiences more deeply than others. All participants exhibited concern and reluctance regarding peer judgement, but Munira’s narrative demonstrates a strong reaction to criticism, interpreting mockery and insults as deeply personal. This increased heightened psychological reaction underscores the variation in learners’ processing and reactions to peer judgement, indicating that certain individuals may be more influenced by these interactions, regardless of external support or encouragement.

Munira: “Although she told us it is ok to make mistakes...but that’s me.”

Researcher: When you participate in the class, what is the feeling that you have the most?

Munira: I feel shy to be honest.

Researcher: Why?

Munira: I don't know.

Researcher: Even if you know the answer?

Munira: Even if I know the answer. I fear that it might be wrong, even if I'm sure.

Researcher: Ok and what if you answered wrong?

Munira: I made a lot of wrong answers, by the way. On the contrary, the doctor (as in language instructor) smiles a lot to me as if it is normal and no problem at all, but I feel shy. I say to myself, I wish I didn't participate. Although she told us it is ok to make mistakes...but that's me.

Researcher: Who do you feel shy from, or from what?

Munira: From students, not from my doctor (as in language instructor).

Researcher: Ah! Why?

Munira: When I am with another person, just me and him, it's OK. I do not feel shy. I even chat, but with students, oh no... because students bully.

Researcher: Oh...

Munira: One of the students keeps laughing... 'oh how ridiculous is she, how did she give a wrong answer.'

Researcher: Aha...

Munira: This is what they would say.

Researcher: Oh, OK.

Munira: Also, the words girls say...They don't have mercy... 'You are stuttering...hurry up... finish... time is running' [recalling her peers' words].

Researcher: Um um.

Munira: This causes fear.

Furthermore, she expressed that she had a positive experience with her teacher. However, she continues to be afraid when it comes to speaking in the classroom:

Munira: Even in ENG 142 course, I feel I'm afraid when I sit in class, I might say something wrong even though Dr. ##### is so cheerful and fine with me when I make mistakes. She even tells me to make mistakes.

Researcher: Yes, yes.

Munira: She wants me to learn. I feel comfortable with her, but there's still a fear and phobia inside me.

Munira's experience shows the significant influence of peer interactions on the development of language learning confidence. Considering the presence of a helpful instructor, the apprehension of peer judgement and humiliation overtook the encouragement she obtained. This underscores how socio-ecological elements in the classroom can either encourage or hinder a learner's desire to participate in L2 classroom.

6.7.6. Discussion

The three narratives reveal profound impact of peer judgement on female language learners (*who*) in TESOL settings at Kuwait University (*where*). All the learners were referring to the English course offered by the English language unit when the interview was conducted (*when*).

These narratives strongly relate to Norton's theory of investment (see [Section 3.2.2.](#)), which suggests that language learning is not just about acquiring linguistic competence but is also shaped by identity, power, and access to opportunities. Maha's perception that her peers were more proficient reflects how learners assess their position within the classroom hierarchy, affecting their confidence and engagement. Similarly, Munira's account shows how negative peer interactions can undermine her investment in learning the language, even when a supportive teacher is present.

All three narratives underscored their internal sense of self (*story*) with peers when considering participation. Anfal thought that her peers might have "*more courage*" and Maha said "*I feel like a failure and I blame myself for what I said*", while Munira was clear in her statement by emphasising "*but that's me*". These quotes highlight the profound impact of her

socio-ecological environment on the formation of her learner identity, especially concerning her mother's strict strategies to language learning during childhood. This reflects the point raised in the literature review, where *communication apprehension* was defined as a fear of speaking and interacting in a foreign language, often linked to concerns about making mistakes or being negatively judged. The participants' reflections were consistent with the definition, as they shared similar anxieties about using English in front of others. Ramadan Elbaoui Shaddad and Jember (2024) identified favourable results in their investigation of peer-work activities in Saudi Arabia. However, they noted in the study limitations that future research should examine the long-term effects of these strategies, considering varying proficiency levels and cultural contexts for a more thorough understanding of their applicability. This finding can be considered part of a cultural context that connects to broader socio-ecological influences, where learners' FLA are shaped by their immediate social environments as well as wider cultural expectations.

The three narratives together demonstrate the presence of varying levels of FLA (see [Section 3.4.2.](#)). FLA has numerous critical factors that affect learners' confidence and performance (Liang et al., 2024). In the above examples, it is the judgement of peers. Interactions at both the micro level (language learner and peers) and the meso level (peers and teacher) can significantly influence the language learner. The macro level of societal and cultural norms may contribute to FLA, as evidenced by Al-Nouri's (2019) findings that students perceived speaking English as an adoption of Western traditions, which diminished the value of Arabic. This supports earlier research, as Lim (2009) argued that anxiety is shaped by sociocultural factors. As a result, the way language learners experience and manage FLA may vary depending on regional and cultural contexts (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2022). This perception led to identity conflicts and reluctance to utilise English outside the classroom, ultimately hindering their language proficiency (Al-Nouri, 2019).

Hajar (2019) reported that teachers, family members, and peers serve as mediating social agents in shaping learners' identities, as seen in the case of two Syrian students in the UK whose learning motivations and beliefs evolved based on different teacher practices and levels of parental support. While Hajar's (2019) study highlighted the collective influence of these agents, my findings indicate that within the complex interplay of multiple identities and

social influences, the most dominant factor shapes a learner's classroom engagement. The strongest influence, often rooted in early experiences, tends to have a lasting impact, regardless of later supportive interventions. For example, Munira benefited from her teacher's encouragement, yet her fear of participating in class remained. Both her earlier and current narratives revealed that her anxiety about speaking English originated in childhood, particularly due to her mother's strict educational approach, which shaped her perception of her peers. This demonstrates that power extends beyond the immediate roles of teacher, student, or peer within the TESOL setting, encompassing wider influences rooted in learners' broader social and cultural environments.

During her interview, Anfal stated that her family played no significant role in her English language learning. However, she did recall moments when one of her elder sisters taught her English. She explained, *"I remember my elder sister when she was teaching me. She likes the language so much, but honestly, my other sister didn't. Hmm! As for my brothers, no, my parents, no, it was normal."* When asked about this particular sister, she added, *"But as for my other sister, who is in the middle, no, she isn't the same. I mean that her personality..."* Although Anfal did not elaborate further on her sister or family, her reflections suggest that she has often positioned herself (*story*) in comparison to others, believing that they possess greater abilities.

However, despite these comparisons, she is still confident about her own potential. Anfal also recounted through her interview a particular incident with her intermediate schoolteacher when she was younger, whom she disliked due to the teacher's frequent anger and continuous screaming. She stated *"I remember also when I was in the intermediate stage, there was a teacher who wasn't good. So, during such a stage, I hated English, I didn't even like her class."* and then she continued *"The teacher was so angry!...she was over angry. She was only screaming! I swear she wasn't understanding! just screaming!"*. Despite her brief reference to the incident, it appears that it significantly affected her and may continue to influence her language acquisition as an adult learner, leading to her subsequent preference not to participate in class. Her experiences reveal a persistent internal conflict, wherein the impact of her socio-ecological environment throughout time (chronosystem) significantly shaped her investment in language learning and the formation of a future identity. This struggle

underscores the intricacy of numerous identities in language acquisition, as external factors and personal ambitions constantly interact.

In the case of Maha, although she previously acknowledged the positive role of a teacher during her secondary school years (short story 29), her fear of judgment from peers persisted. Before her positive experience with her tenth-grade teacher in short story 29, she also recalled experiencing similar anxiety in primary school, suggesting that while teachers can provide reassurance, the influence of peers held greater weight in shaping her classroom fears. Maha replied when asked about her parents' influence on her language acquisition, *“Honestly, no.” I believe my education and knowledge were acquired entirely through school.* This narrative contrasts with Anfal's statements regarding her negative experience with her teacher at a younger age; yet, both participants ultimately demonstrate FLA in the classroom, primarily arising from peer evaluation. This highlights how, despite supportive teaching environments, the social pressure from peers can exert a more powerful influence, reinforcing language anxiety over time.

Another example is when Munira received support and encouragement from her teacher, but her fear of classroom participation persisted. Her previous narrative (short story 1) and the current narrative revealed that her *‘phobia’* of English stemmed from childhood experiences, often rooted in early experiences, particularly the strict educational approach of her mother, which influenced her perception of her peers. This early socio-ecological experience shaped her beliefs and attitudes towards language learning, reinforcing her anxiety in peer-dominated classroom settings. Even with an instructor who actively reassured her that mistakes were acceptable, her internalised fear, rooted in earlier experiences, remained stronger than the positive reinforcement she received from her teacher. Alshuraiaan (2023) stated that teacher-student interactions in TESOL setting are shaped by many factors, including classroom atmosphere, cultural influences, teacher and student traits, and teaching methods. She also adds that building a supportive environment, respecting cultural differences, improving teacher communication, understanding student needs, and using student-focused teaching approaches can lead to more effective and meaningful interactions. While Alshuraiaan's study highlights the positive impact teachers can have, the current study suggests that certain socio-ecological factors, such as past experiences from parents, may carry greater impact.

These influences can be difficult to address within the classroom, even with the instructor's effort in adopting supportive practices.

The narratives demonstrate how identity construction over time (chronosystem) can exert a lasting influence on an adult language learner, creating FLA and multiple identities in a more intricate environment such as the TESOL setting. The participants' reflections take them back to their younger years, showing that the impressions they formed at that stage continue to shape their experiences and perceptions in adulthood.

6.7.7. Theme 3 - Key insight 4: Teamwork in TESOL Setting Through the Individualist and Collectivist Lenses (*four short stories*)

This key insight analyses the experiences of four short stories by enquiring about the collaborative tasks from the perspective of female learners within a TESOL context, highlighting varied viewpoints on the effectiveness and difficulties of teamwork. The narratives of Noura, Hussah, Soad, Awrad, and Dana demonstrate different levels of comfort, dependency, and collaboration, highlighting both individualist and collectivist attitudes in their approaches to teamwork. Applying Barkhuizen's *scales of context*, (*story*, *Story*, and *Story*), we examine how the immediate, relational, and broader social settings influence these experiences.

6.7.7.1. **Short Story 37: Noura**

Noura's narrative underscores the relationship between individualism and collectivism in her teamwork approach. Although she appreciates the concept of teamwork and enjoys collaborating with peers, she maintains a sense of individualism by depending on her own efforts to guarantee the quality of her contributions. Her confidence and self-sufficiency have earned the trust and respect of her colleagues, who often rely on her to confirm their efforts. Noura expresses a sense of pleasure and leadership when her peers seek her direction, illustrating a dynamic in which independent and collaborative efforts coexist seamlessly.

Noura: “If I am in a group, I’ll depend on my own. I do my work with or without them.”

Researcher: There is something I liked here that you focused more on groups, and you said, ‘It’s interesting to work in groups,’ but you focused here saying, ‘if I am in a group, I’ll depend on my own. I do my work with or without them.’

Noura: Exactly.

Researcher: Tell me about that. How do both things exist in the same person? You like working alone and in a group. You said: ‘Every time I give a presentation or do a task, I get the full mark, because I am confident about myself. I like the idea of groups. I enjoy working in them.’ You also mentioned something about the groups... the most important thing you’ve mentioned is that you liked it when the girls wanted to make sure, at first from you, whether their work is correct or not.

Noura: Yea, they are my friends. (laughing)

Researcher: ‘We won’t send it until [name removed] sees it.’

Noura: Exactly! At that time, I was sleeping. The homework was due at midnight. My friends kept chatting on WhatsApp group to answer the homework. They answered it and sent it to the group. One of them said, ‘Wait a minute! Don’t send and wait for [name removed] to check it first.’

Researcher: How did you feel about that?

Noura: This is not the first time. My friends always ask me, so I feel that I am confident about myself. Even my friends have confidence in me. This is something good for me. Even when they see me, they say, ‘You’re fluent.’ They call me that way...like a leader.

Researcher: Good, good, that’s Allah’s will.

Noura: Yeah, this is a good thing.

Researcher: No doubt!

Noura: Even in group discussions, I am confident about my answers. If someone challenges my response, I often end up proving them wrong. In that case, I would go to her to show her that I am right. (laughing)

Researcher: Oh! That’s Allah’s will! Good. Keep going.

Noura’s experience highlights how teamwork can reinforce individual confidence. Although she prefers working independently, her peers’ trust in her abilities enhances her self-esteem. Her leadership role in group work suggests that teamwork can benefit individual learners by

reinforcing their strengths while allowing them to maintain autonomy and authority. In the next narrative, Hussah shows a different perspective on authority.

6.7.7.2. Short Story 38: Hussah

Hussah's narrative presents a balanced perspective on teamwork, showing both collectivist and individualist preferences in her approach. Hussah's perspective on teamwork highlights the challenges of working with randomly assigned peers. While she values collaboration, she prefers having control over group selection to ensure productivity and accountability. Her frustration arises from the unpredictability of collaborating with unexpected colleagues, which can affect the group's efficiency and cohesion. Hussah supports a technique of students selecting their group members, thus encouraging responsibility for their collective performance while guaranteeing compatibility and trust within the team.

Hussah: “The professor can give us the authority to select who’ll be in our group, and we handle the responsibility.”

Researcher: Let’s have a quick look at the diaries. Of course, they are concise and nice. Fine. I highlighted some points. You said that you liked the situation when the professor gathered you in a group to give the presentation and to know each other and to have a kind of cooperation. In your opinion, to what extent did the groups affect the learning of English language?

Hussah: Look! It is sometimes positive and negative.

Researcher: How?

Hussah: It depends on the person.

Researcher: Mm!

Hussah: At the university, we generally face situations in class where the professor distributes us randomly. I don’t know this person... I don’t know if she’s going to work or not, if she’s dependable, and the professor says, for example, ‘Don’t involve me in this, you deal with it.’ We were really facing difficulties.

Researcher: In your opinion, how can we resolve such an issue?

Hussah: We can choose our group.

Researcher: Okay!

Hussah: The professor can give us the authority to select who'll be in our group, and we handle the responsibility.

Hussah's narrative reveals the significance of group selection in fostering effective collaboration. She views autonomy in choosing group members as essential for ensuring responsibility in teamwork.

6.7.7.3. Short Story 39: Soad

Unlike the two previous stories, Soad's narrative encapsulates a clear sense of collectivism in teamwork, highlighting the significance of collaboration and mutual support. She reflects on the positive dynamics inside her group, where interaction and connection development fostered a supportive learning atmosphere. For Soad, assisting a group member in finding the appropriate term or receiving similar support was both exciting and inspiring, increasing her confidence and language abilities. She contrasts this experience with more individualistic classroom environments, where the fear of making mistakes hindered engagement. Soad's narrative exemplifies how collaborative efforts within a group may foster a sense of belonging and promote significant language improvement.

Soad: "If someone paused and I helped her with a word, this is the excitement that I am talking about in the group."

Soad: I felt that when a relationship was established with the group; one chats with another ... when you change your place from here to there in a group, interaction quite exists. I realised that it's not only me who don't understand ... that it's okay ... if I made a mistake, I would learn from that mistake, because I won't forget it.

Yeah, I mean ... you have a limited background of vocabulary. When you start speaking to the group, you have to talk. At the beginning, if you missed one or two words, you get confused, but if I give you a key word in the group, your abilities will be developed. If you can say simple words, you'll be able to say a full sentence.

Hmm! What happened is that if someone paused and I helped her with a word, this is the excitement that I am talking about in the group.

I didn't see that in the other English courses. Everyone on their own, so you can't even participate or answer, because you are afraid of giving wrong answers.

Soad's story demonstrates how teamwork can create a safe space for language learners. By participating in group discussions, she gains confidence and benefits from immediate peer feedback, which strengthens her learning process. A matching viewpoint is evident in the subsequent narrative.

6.7.7.4. Short Story 40: Awrad

Awrad's narrative matches the experiences of Hussah and Soad, intertwining concepts of collectivism. Similar to Hussah, she first faced difficulties with the challenge of being randomly allocated to new group members, articulating her discomfort and anxiety. Similarly to Soad, Awrad discovered that interacting with her classmates and developing relations inside the group resulted in a beneficial and transformational experience. The narrative underscores the transformation of group dynamics, wherein initial resistance transitions into connection and mutual support, thereby emphasising the significance of collectivism in fostering an inviting learning atmosphere.

Awrad: "I told you I like groups so much, and I don't like individuality."

Researcher: Let's have a quick look at (code-switch) 'diaries' in the fourth week.

You said, 'I established good relationship with my colleagues. She forced us this week to sit together with colleagues for giving the presentation... So, there were groups somehow.' Here, the first sentence you wrote is 'I feel comfortable.' Then, you mentioned the reasons. You said, 'We sit together with the colleagues in five groups. My professor wanted us to get familiar with each other.' Can I say that those reasons made you feel comfortable?

Awrad: Hmm! What do you mean?

Researcher: I mean, you mentioned, "I felt comfortable, especially because I established good relationship with my colleagues."

Awrad: Aha! Yeah, you know why I was nervous at the beginning? It's because it wasn't like you choose the group you want. She was like all of a sudden "yalla" and she put us in groups, depending on the names mentioned on the registration list. Honestly, the way we are used to do that a long time ago is... that I choose my friends to be in my group, but suddenly she put me with people that I don't know. (laughing) So, I said that I started gradually to feel comfortable because I got familiar with the groups and started asking

them, 'What's your major, how old are you,' and stuff like that. So, I got used to them, because we didn't even know each other's names... you know...

Researcher: So, you felt that is something positive.

Awrad: Yeah!

Researcher: Because you mentioned that groups might be something good and positive.

Awrad: Yeah!

Researcher: You mentioned more than one time in the fourth week diary, something about groups. It felt as if it really had an impact on you.

Awrad: Yes! I told you I like groups so much, and I don't like individuality.

Awrad's experience underscores the social benefits of teamwork. While unfamiliarity initially created discomfort, group work ultimately fostered a sense of connection and belonging, reinforcing the importance of collaboration in language learning. A distinctly different perspective will be presented in the forthcoming narrative, depicting the varied and intricate environment that an EFL classroom can embody.

Short Story 41: Dana

Dana's narrative presents an opposing perspective on teamwork, emphasising an obvious preference towards individualism rather than collectivism. In contrast to participants like Soad and Awrad, who appreciated group contact, Dana articulates dissatisfaction with the collaborative approach. Her dissatisfaction arises from perceived inequalities in effort and dedication among group members, as she believes she puts in more effort and devotion than her peers. Furthermore, she expresses challenges in concentrating and presenting her views within a group context, noting that individual work enables her to think more clearly and perform tasks more efficiently. Dana's story highlights the difficulties certain learners encounter in adjusting to group dynamics.

Dana: "it's also difficult for me as well, because I feel that when we sit together... I can't think of my own information."

Researcher: You told an important point here in the diary, which is related to the groups.

Dana: Mm!

Researcher: You don't like it... you like to work alone, and it was difficult for you to work in groups. Tell me why didn't you like such an experience?

Dana: Because I feel like... me and the girls are not on the same level, so I don't want to be in a (code-switching) group where the girls don't work as much as I do. I mean even if they don't know English, they should search or do other stuff; that's okay with me, but most of them don't do that... even in other classes... So, my problem is that I work from the bottom of my heart... and the rest mmm they're just lazy... I don't like that... I just don't like that! (laughing)

Researcher: You're working more than them.

Dana: So, I don't like that.

Researcher: Okay! Got it!

Dana: Oh, and it's also difficult for me as well, because I feel that when we sit together... I can't think of my own information. It's difficult... I have to be all by myself and I think well... but like that... mmm I won't work.

Researcher: I got your point.

Dana's perspective illustrates the tension between teamwork and individual learning styles. While group work fosters collaboration, it can also disrupt independent learners who rely on self-direction for deep engagement.

6.7.8. Discussion

The narratives showcase a spectrum of perspectives on teamwork in TESOL setting, highlighting the interplay between individualist and collectivist learning approaches. In terms of identity, Su (2022) defines individualism as a focus on self-identity, personal agency, and values that prioritise individuals over the collective, while collectivism emphasises collective identity, shared agency, and group-oriented values. This clarifies the participants' rationale for their preferences and the reasons behind them. As Alshahrani (2017) indicated, the notion that individualism and collectivism are contradictory concepts has been contested by research findings. The current study reveals that both Noura and Hussah exhibited a degree of authority and autonomy while ultimately collaborating with their peers as a group. This also validates the contemporary perspective that considers individualism and collectivism as

distinct dimensions rather than two extremes of a single spectrum (Tudge et al., 1997; Tudge et al., 2009) (see [Section 3.5.3.](#)).

Words like “*interesting*” and “*excitement*” highlighted in the narratives of Noura and Soad, show that both appreciate teamwork for its collaborative potential (*Story*), but with varied justifications. Noura appreciated teamwork and valued her peers' need for her approval in any assessment given to the group. She viewed the teamwork from her micro lens, considering herself to be a confident leader (*story*) who is capable of completing tasks independently or collaboratively. Soad, on the other hand, appreciated teamwork since she regarded the interaction as aimed at mutual learning. As discussed in the literature review, the notion that individualism and collectivism are entirely opposing concepts has been questioned (Alshahrani, 2017). The current study supports this view, as some participants demonstrated elements of both orientations. For instance, learners displayed strong individual traits while still engaging effectively in collaborative tasks, suggesting that students may navigate and reconcile both tendencies within classroom teamwork.

A distinct meso viewpoint (*Story*) aligns with the findings of key insight 3 regarding peer judgement, highlighting that learners are reluctant to engage separately due to the fear of offering inaccurate answers; thus, collaboration fosters a sense of equality among participants. This explains Hussah's perspective on cooperation as both advantageous and undesirable, positing that it would be an advantageous experience if a learner could choose the group and consider responsibility for that decision. She indicates a preference for peer interaction in a collaborative environment where members are also friends, which intersect with key insight 3 to reduce FLA (*Story*).

In highlighting the complexity of the TESOL setting, Dana was the only participant who found teamwork disruptive rather than beneficial. Dana represents a strong individualist perspective, finding group work distracting rather than beneficial. Her learning style requires self-reliance and control over her thought process which explains her preference in the previous narrative (short story 23) to acquire English independently through TikTok, underscoring once again her autonomous learning preference. At a (*story*) level, she struggled with feeling overwhelmed, saying “*I work from the bottom of my heart...and the rest... they're just lazy*”.

In Soad's reflection: *"If someone paused and I helped her with a word, this is the excitement that I am talking about in the group"*, illustrates the benefits of cooperative learning in the TESOL classroom. Her experience aligns with findings from Ahmadi Safa and Afzalimir (2021), who reported that while both competitive and cooperative learning improved learners' speaking abilities, only cooperative learning significantly enhanced self-confidence. These varied perspectives demonstrate how learners navigate between individual and collective identities in classroom settings, revealing that effective language learning environments must accommodate diverse preferences and social dynamics.

6.8. Chapter Summary

This chapter presented and analysed the study's key findings through an integrated approach that combined participant narratives with theoretical and contextual interpretation. By merging the findings and discussion, the chapter offered a holistic view of how socio-ecological factors influenced the English language learning experiences of female students at Kuwait University.

Through a two-stage analysis, initial Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), followed by Short Story Analysis (SSA), the chapter captured both shared patterns and the unique complexity of individual experiences. Themes were supported by direct excerpts from longer interviews and reflective diaries, and examined in relation to identity, investment, and the broader socio-ecological framework. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of how cultural, familial, teacher and peer dynamics intersect within the TESOL context. The following chapter presents the overall conclusions of the study, reflecting on its contributions, and implications, and offering recommendations for future research and practice.

As a final reflection, the participants' stories clearly show how language learning is shaped by complex, layered interactions across physical and virtual environments, personal experiences, and broader cultural shifts. The inclusion of the chronosystem in the Bio-ecological Model offers a powerful lens to understand the narratives and how these influences unfold over time. Whether through familial influences, evolving use of technology, changing educational settings, or key life transitions like the pandemic, the chronosystem helps explain how learners' investment, practices, and identities continue to develop. These findings reinforce the value of a socio-ecological approach that captures the dynamic, time-sensitive nature of language learning in today's world.

7. Chapter 7: Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the language learning experiences of female EFL learners at Kuwait University, focusing on how socio-ecological factors beyond the classroom influenced their language learning experiences and shaped their identities today as adult language learners in higher education. The study aimed to comprehend the socio-ecological factors that influenced these individuals from childhood to their present adult identities. Therefore, the research questions for this study were as follows:

1. How do past language learning experiences from the household influence Kuwaiti female language learners' perspectives and in constructing their identities within TESOL setting?
2. What socio-ecological factors influence female language learners' investment in acquiring English beyond the classroom?
3. What is the impact of socio-ecological variables on the experiences of female learners in Kuwaiti TESOL setting at Kuwait University?

The study aimed to answer the research questions applying a qualitative approach with a narrative dimension, using Bronfenbrenner's theory of the Bio-ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) to explore the socio-ecological perspective of the learners. The analysis adapted the concept of *the analysis of the narratives* (Polkinghorne, 1995), offering insights from their narratives into their socio-ecological backgrounds and language learning journeys. By allowing participants to determine the focus of their narratives, the study captured their perspectives and identities, highlighting the complexities of their multiple identities, power dynamics, and investment in language learning.

The *analysis of narratives* comprises coding, identifying themes, and categorising them through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), preparing the data set for the next stage. Short Story Analysis (SSA) provided structured ways to explore how learners constructed their identities and engaged with language learning, incorporating the researcher's reflexivity on the narratives and their interpretation. This method allowed for a dynamic engagement with the data, ensuring that themes were identified in a manner that remained faithful to the

participants' perspectives. Rather than relying solely on traditional thematic analysis commonly used in research, the richness of the participants' narratives called for a more nuanced approach. To honour the depth of their experiences and the trust they placed in me as a researcher, I employed SSA to capture and highlight every possible insight embedded in their narratives.

The Short Story Analysis (SSA) adopted a narrative approach, integrating the participants' short stories (excerpts) to create a unified narrative centred on the presented theme. This approach highlighted key insights on similarities and contradictions among participants while exploring the intersections of their experiences. It stressed the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the factors that created participants' experiences within the socio-ecological impact. The SSA further revealed the complex and intersecting socio-ecological factors between themes influencing learners' language identities. It provided insights into the similarities, contradictions, and the intersections of participants' narratives, reinforcing the multi-dimensional nature of socio-ecological factors in identity formation.

Using SSA was crucial for this study, as it made visible the intricate and layered relationships shaping each participant's language learning journey. It offered a student-centred lens that captured the evolving nature of their experiences and identities. The SSA allowed for a clearer understanding of the contextual influences and personal factors at play, providing a deeper insight into how socio-ecological dynamics shaped their development as language learners. This study did focus on pedagogical factors, concentrating instead on the impact of socio-ecological factors on female language acquisition; nonetheless, this omission presents a significant opportunity for future research, especially if pedagogical elements are found to intersect with learners' socio-ecological environments.

To answer the research questions, the study involved interviews with 16 females Kuwaiti EFL learners, allowing them to articulate their experiences and reflect on their evolving identities in a total of 40 short stories. In addition to the interviews, a complementary tool, reflective diaries, was incorporated to guide the second (post) interview, which focused more specifically on the course and the TESOL setting. These diaries offered participants the opportunity to express anything they may have felt unable to share during the initial (pre)

interview, providing both time and space for deeper reflection and generating valuable insights for further discussion. Based on a narrative approach for a better understanding of the learners' perspectives, it can be concluded that socio-ecological factors have a great impact on female language learners at Kuwait University.

In response to the first research question, Theme 1 revealed that learners' early English language experiences were largely shaped by the household environment, with long-term effects on their language development into adulthood. Influences extended beyond family members within the household to include foreign domestic workers (live-in housemaids), particularly Filipino housemaids as main contributors in language acquisition. Cultural and social expectations, including parental influence, religious beliefs, and male authority in Bedouin communities, played a significant role in learners' investment and identity formation. Bedouin culture emerged as a significant factor despite differing perspectives regarding this influence. While some learners altered their academic goals due to cultural constraints, others persisted in learning English despite obstacles. This contrasting impact within the same cultural context was noteworthy. *Badu* and *Hadhar* learners displayed distinct language learning experiences due to male authority, societal expectations, and cultural constraints. In addition, the findings revealed that a strong religious identity, in some cases, is not a barrier for English language learning, challenging common assumptions that Islamic values might conflict with investment in English acquisition.

In addressing the second research question concerning the socio-ecological factors influencing female language learners, Theme 2 revealed that English was perceived both as a necessity and as a marker of social status. This reflects Kuwaiti society's nuanced view of the language, valued for its practical use in everyday contexts (e.g., restaurants, cafés, shops) as well as for its association with prestige and personal interest, particularly through intercultural communication. Moreover, the distinction between leisure and necessity in L2 learning depends on the learner's complex identity. Depending on the specific socio-ecological context, the incentives for language learning can vary significantly across different societies and cultures.

Technology emerged as a vital tool with its influence for autonomous language acquisition, enabling students to use social media, entertainment, and digital platforms to improve their proficiency, interact with English speakers, investigate their cultures, and comprehend societal norms, thereby making the learning experience more engaging and immersive. A preference for acquiring English through entertaining real-life methods also emerged from the dataset under Theme 1, with several participants favouring social media applications, listening to English songs, or watching movies. From a socio-ecological perspective, participants highlighted the importance of making lesson content relevant to real-life contexts, personally meaningful, and aligned with their academic and professional goals.

Theme 3 offered valuable insights into the third research question, showing that socio-ecological variables played a key role in shaping learners' experiences. In TESOL settings (classroom), teacher-student interactions shaped learners' confidence with most students reporting positive teacher influence, while peer judgment contributed to FLA leading to hesitation to participate in the classroom. The emotions of apprehension, self-doubt, and anxiety of making errors correspond with the concept of FLA, a well-established concept that can affect learners' confidence and overall language acquisition. Learners attributed their anxiety to their parents' approach to teaching them English, their instructors, and the influence of peers who made them feel less competent in language proficiency. It is noteworthy that participants who showed positive attitudes from a younger age towards learning English often perceived their learning process as driven by personal interest or leisure activities. This indicates that those displaying FLA in the TESOL classroom context, as previously noted, were more likely to have encountered English in less favourable environments, marked by a sense of obligation or compulsion from their parents rather than personal choice.

Contrasting perspectives on teamwork emerged, reflecting individualist versus collectivist learning orientations. While some participants initially expressed hesitation or uncertainty about working in groups, many became more comfortable once they had the chance to choose their team or grow familiar with its members. This shift highlights the role of interpersonal dynamics and cultural expectations in shaping learners' preferences, suggesting that team-based learning can be effective when learners feel a sense of trust, belonging, or autonomy within the group. Overall, participants who associated English with leisure and

personal interest developed a more positive relationship with language learning, whereas those who encountered it through compulsion or obligation experienced greater anxiety and self-doubt.

7.1. Limitations, Reflections, and Directions for Future Studies

As with any research, this study had some limitations that must be acknowledged to provide a reasonable interpretation of the findings, highlight different reflections, and identify possibilities for future research. Firstly, the qualitative approach, although appropriate for the study's aims, restricts the broad generalisability of the findings due to its context-specific nature, concentrating solely on female EFL learners at Kuwait University. Secondly, the Narrative Inquiry (NI), by its nature, can be subject to personal interpretation and potential researcher bias. However, the use of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), supported by Short Story Analysis (SSA) in the current study, helped mitigate this limitation by grounding the analysis in the data itself. The incorporation of *scales of context* (*story*, *Story*, and *STORY*) enabled a layered interpretation of the narratives based on the *when*, *who*, and *where*, aligning them with the levels of the Bio-ecological Model. It is unrealistic to assume that narrative researchers can approach their data without influence from their own cultural, racial, or educational perspectives, or from existing theoretical frameworks (Dornyei, 2007). Therefore, this structured approach allowed the findings to be situated within specific ecological contexts, offering a more balanced and transparent analysis and helping to reduce the influence of researcher bias.

Thirdly, although the interviews invited participants to reflect on their experiences from childhood to the present, a longitudinal approach would have provided a more accurate representation of the Bio-ecological Model, especially in relation to the chronosystem and the temporal impact. I also noticed that a more focused investigation into gender, particularly the experiences of female compared to male, could have enriched the analysis. However, such an undertaking would require a dedicated longitudinal study in its own right due to its complexity and scope. Tracking participants over time and conducting interviews at multiple stages would have allowed for a clearer tracing of socio-ecological changes across different life phases. In future research, adopting an ethnographic approach could offer even deeper insights, as it

would enable prolonged engagement with participants in their natural settings, allowing researchers to observe the dynamic interaction between individuals and their environments over time.

In addition to these concerns, the study's outcomes may have been richer if the same participants had contributed across all themes and key insights, enabling more direct comparisons of their ecosystems and supporting a deeper understanding of the individual and contextual factors influencing language learning. As a researcher, this process provided an opportunity to explore the intersections between their personal histories, sociocultural influences, and language learning trajectories, offering a deeper cross-analysis of the complexities of identity in second language acquisition from a socio-ecological perspective.

Building on these limitations and reflections, future research should explore the diverse experiences and support structures of Bedouin women and other sociocultural groups within Kuwait to gain a fuller understanding of identity formation and negotiation in language learning in the Kuwaiti context. These findings also reinforce the need for longitudinal studies on peer interactions in EFL classrooms as emphasised in the very recent study by Ramadan Elbaoui Shaddad and Jember (2024), who called for greater attention to cultural backgrounds and varying proficiency levels when assessing the effectiveness of peer-based learning strategies. Moreover, future work should aim to incorporate ideological frameworks to better understand how learners' beliefs and values shape their investment in English. Finally, it is essential for future research to consider the importance of learner agency in selecting preferred learning approaches, and for instructors to remain sensitive to the socio-ecological backgrounds of adult EFL learners and have the awareness of power relations in the TESOL setting. This will help cultivate more inclusive, adaptive EFL classroom environments that reflect the cultural diversity and lived realities of language learners.

7.2. Original Contribution to Knowledge

This study is, to my knowledge, one of the first to address dimensions of English language learning in Kuwait in relation to social and cultural influences beyond the L2 classroom, specifically with the emphasis on female adult EFL learners. It brings attention to the broader,

often overlooked, contexts that shape the female language learner's identity and investment, in contexts rooted in everyday life rather than formal educational setting. The findings revealed how individuals within the language learner's household, and outside traditional educational settings, such as live-in Filipino housemaids, played a central role in shaping language experiences, a perspective that has not been explored in previous research in Kuwait. In addition, the study offers insight into the experiences of Bedouin learners, a group that continues to uphold conservative values despite Kuwait's relatively equal socioeconomic status. Gaining insight into the Bedouin community's cultural challenges in Kuwait provides valuable knowledge for developing educational approaches more connected to cultural diversity and enhances our understanding of the perspectives on the second language learning in Kuwait.

A key contribution of this study lies in the subtle yet powerful ways in which language learners can be misjudged based on visible markers of identity. Rawya's narrative (short story 15) indicates that the misjudgement she faced from her language instructor, a Muslim and Kuwaiti, may not have originated from religious bias but rather from socially constructed presumptions linking religious appearance to inadequate English proficiency, despite her choice being entirely voluntary and a reflection of her beliefs, as she articulated. This underscores a wider social bias that can persist even in a mostly Muslim society. The results highlight that learners' socio-ecological backgrounds are neither static nor homogeneous. This underscores a potential wider social bias that can persist even in a mostly Muslim society. Language instructors should avoid generalised assumptions and instead consider learners' individual evolving identities, assessing their engagement through the framework of investment in language acquisition. This promotes more inclusive teaching methods that provide equal opportunities for various learners to succeed in TESOL environments. In addition, religious identity plays a key role in how learners engage with language learning, yet most research focuses on teachers or Christian learners' motivation (e.g, Lepp-Kaethler and Dörnyei, 2013; Ushioda, 2013). There is limited work on how religion shapes learners' participation and access to second language communities, especially withing the context of Kuwait, which makes this an important area to explore.

A central theoretical contribution of this thesis is the development of a neo-ecological model that reconceptualises Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework in response to the Kuwaiti

context (see (Figure 10). While the original model emphasises nested systems, this study, building on Neal and Neal's (2013) networked ecological approach and Navarro and Tudge's (2023) Neo-ecological turn, demonstrates that language learner identity is shaped through dynamic, overlapping systems that influence one another in complex, sometimes nonlinear ways. The model advanced here shows how micro-level experiences (e.g., peer judgement, Pilipino domestic worker interactions) are not confined to the microsystem. They might be shaped by parental socioeconomic status (exo-), or even broader cultural discourses at the macro level, such as gender expectations, religious values, and societal norms. This model introduces a new conceptualisation of learner identity in TESOL, one that recognises the learner as an agent positioned within a network of social, cultural, familial, and technological influences. The theoretical model also demonstrates how influence can flow both ways, from macro to micro and vice versa, providing a more fluid, situated understanding of identity formation. Supported by empirical data and visualised through an original diagram (see (Figure 10), this model offers a theoretical tool for understanding identity construction in specific environments and extends the use of ecological theory in applied linguistics and TESOL. (see (Table 8)

(Table 8) Neo-ecological Areas of Influence from Kuwaiti Female Learners' Narratives

From the dataset	Characteristics	Neo-ecological Systems Involved
Family dynamics	Influence of parents, household expectations to gender roles, cultural values	Microsystem, Macrosystem
Domestic workers	Early exposure to English through non-Arabic speaking housemaids	Microsystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem
Peer relationships	Judgement, support, competitiveness, individualism and collectivism, investment	Microsystem, Mesosystem
Technology	Assisting investment through social media, and mobile apps expanding exposure beyond the classroom	Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem

This study not only provides significant knowledge contributions but also makes a notable methodological contribution through the application of Short Story Analysis (SSA). which proved particularly effective for working with rich, identity-focused narrative data. The multi-layered analytical framework of SSA, drawing on Barkhuizen's (2016) model of the *scales of context* (*story*, *Story*, and *STORY*) enabled a nuanced exploration of participants' experiences across personal, interpersonal, and socio-political contexts. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of how learners construct and negotiate their identities and investment in English acquisition, shaped by both immediate environments and broader cultural and societal structures. The inclusion of reflective commentary further enriched the analysis, offering critical insight into the dynamic interplay between individual perspectives and the socio-ecological factors surrounding language learning. The application of this method in the Kuwaiti context, particularly with female learners, demonstrates its analytical value and potential for broader use in similar educational and sociocultural studies.

Moreover, a great contribution of this study is the use of weekly reflective diaries as an analytical tool throughout the semester. Reflective diaries have been shown to offer valuable insight into learners' conceptions of knowledge and learning, as well as their strategies for monitoring and regulation (Wallin & Adawi, 2018). These diaries allowed participants to document their thoughts and experiences as they unfolded, rather than relying on immediate recall during interviews. This approach offered richer insights into how learners responded to different classroom dynamics over time. [Theme 3 \(Key insight 4\)](#) emerged clearly from these reflections, showing how participants made sense of their learning environment in relation to their identities. The diaries encouraged deeper engagement with the course experience and highlighted factors that might have been overlooked in a single interview setting. This method helped capture the evolving nature of learners' investment in language learning and provided a more nuanced understanding of how socio-ecological influences shaped their participation in TESOL setting.

Based on these conclusions, in exploring these perspectives, both researchers and language instructors will be provided with a valuable contribution to knowledge. This is particularly important for those who may not share, or have had limited exposure to, the socio-ecological backgrounds of learners from such contexts. In conclusion, this study suggests that language

acquisition is not a linear process but rather a deeply personal journey intricately interwoven with the social surroundings of our lives, consistently influenced by the cultural environments we inhabit, the complex identities we form and reform, and the genuine voices we develop and choose to express to the world we live in.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Roadmap (English)

1. Interview Roadmap: Semi-Structured Interviews (Pre)

Name	
Class	
Major	
Student ID	

1. Why did you choose the College of Education?
2. Do you feel this college suits your ambitions? How so?
3. Let's talk a bit about English in general.
4. What do you remember about it from your childhood? Tell me about your experience learning English.
5. Do you think the way you acquired English as a child has affected how you learn it today? How? Tell me about it.
6. Do you feel your social environment has an effect on how you feel about learning English? How so?
7. How have the people close to you (like your parents, relatives, or friends) influenced your language learning? Can you remember anything specific you'd like to share?
8. Have you ever experienced any kind of discouragement from your surroundings when it came to learning English? Why do you think that happened? What were their reasons?
9. What do you think about the compulsory English courses? How do you feel about them being mandatory?
10. What's your opinion on having them listed in your graduation transcript?
11. Do you enjoy learning English? Why?
12. Is there a difference between learning English in general and learning it as a required course? How?
13. What was your grade in 141?
14. Do you think that course affected your current performance in 142? In what way?

15. Now that you're in 142, after taking 090 and 141, how do you feel about participating in class at this level?
16. How do you feel when you speak English in class, especially with a classmate sitting next to you?
17. And if, for example, you give a wrong answer, what's the strongest feeling you get? Why? Did you feel the same way in 090 and 141? What's the difference?
18. How do you feel about your classmates if you make a mistake? Does it matter to you? How so?
19. And what do you expect their reaction to be if you answer something wrong? Why?
20. Do you feel the same way if you make a mistake in an Arabic course? Why? What's the difference?
21. Today, how would you rate your English from 1 to 10? Why?
22. In your opinion, how can someone's English level be assessed? What's the best way?
23. What do you think about how students are assessed in 142? Do you think it's a good way to determine their level? How?
24. In your view, what are the main challenges that hold learners back from learning English?
25. Do you think there's a difference when speaking English in front of a native English speaker vs. an Arab who speaks English? Who is easier to speak in front of? Who's harder? Why?
26. How do you feel about learning English skills like writing, speaking, listening, and reading? Which one do you find easiest? Which one's the hardest for you? Why?
27. And what about correct pronunciation, do you think it's important in English?
28. How would you define correct pronunciation, in your opinion?
29. Do you think the presentation in this course will help improve your pronunciation? How?
30. Since presentations rely heavily on pronunciation, in your opinion, what are the best ways to make an English presentation strong?
31. How will you help yourself practice?
32. And overall, in your view, what's the best way to learn English?
33. What are your expectations for this course?
34. Is there a question you wished I had asked but didn't?

General Notes	
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Appendix 2: Faces Behind the Data

Name	<i>Faces Behind the Data (A brief description)</i>
1. <i>Munirah</i>	Munirah, a 21-year-old Primary Education (Science) major student at the College of Education, demonstrates resilience and independence. Initially drawn to engineering, she shifted to education due to socio-ecological factors, including her marriage and the restrictive marriage rules within her Bedouin family. Her journey with English was shaped by mixed feelings about her mother, who played a strict yet pivotal role. While her mother's firmness made English feel like a phobia, she also instilled in Munirah the strength and independence she values today. Religious beliefs helped Munirah find calm and justify situations that conflicted with her desires. Now aspiring to become a teacher, she hopes to create a supportive and motivating environment for her students, drawing on her own experiences.
17. <i>Rawya</i>	Rawan, a resilient and self-reflective student at the age of 23, majoring in Arabic at the College of Education, navigates challenges shaped by her multicultural background and strong religious identity. She believes that she is often excluded in her TESOL classroom due to her appearance (<i>wearing a veil and abbaya</i>) and cultural stereotypes, Rawan faces these difficulties with determination. She views mastering English as both a personal challenge and a key to improving social interactions. Her persistence and active engagement have helped her develop a deep understanding of her educational environment. A promising novelist, Rawan writes her own Arabic stories and is working toward publishing her first novel with the support of her family, especially her father whom she describes as a religious man. She advocates for encouraging intercultural teaching methods that address the diverse needs of students.
18. <i>Lamya</i>	Lamya, a twenty-year-old student pursuing a degree in Islamic Studies at the College of Education, is known for her determined approach to learning. Initially anxious about her English proficiency, she often felt confused in structured settings where she perceived the teachers's lack of organisation to undermine her confidence. Over time, Lamya found strength through self-reflection and began trusting her progress. A key turning point came when she recognised that her fear of being judged was a greater obstacle than her actual abilities. As her confidence grew, particularly through classroom activities like presentations, Lamya embraced challenging assignments and learned to rely on her inner strengths to achieve success.

19. Sarah	Sarah, a 23-year-old student with a major in Social Studies, shares a unique language learning experience shaped by her Filipino housemaid. Growing up in a Bedouin household with little exposure to English, Sarah learned the language through daily interactions with the housemaid over six years. This informal learning approach significantly improved her English skills, allowing her to excel academically without the need for placement tests that were required for her university enrolment. Sarah's story highlights how motivation and unconventional learning environments can play a vital role in language acquisition. Her narrative also showcases her innovative and nontraditional approach to learning English.
20. Dalal	Dalal, a 22-year-old English Literature major, developed her English skills through her childhood fascination with Barbie movies. Despite growing up in a family where no one was fluent in English, she relied on her own efforts to learn the language. Her mother unknowingly supported her language learning by buying Barbie CDs and dolls, which provided her with regular exposure to English. Watching and replaying these movies helped Dalal improve her proficiency without any formal instruction or external help. Notably, Dalal was the only participant in the study who preferred to conduct her interview in English, highlighting her confidence with and love for the English language.
21. Athari	Athari, a 22-year-old Mathematics major, shared that her English learning experience was heavily influenced by her father, an engineer who is passionate about the English language. He enforced strict practice at home, often using copying English vocabulary as a punishment to help her memorise meanings and spellings, which he believed were essential for sentence construction. While this method initially made Athari dislike English, failing the subject in sixth grade was her turning point to improve. Through self-driven efforts, she overcame her struggles and eventually enhanced her English, despite not facing challenges in other school subjects. Some of her words were: <i>"I said, 'No. I have to improve myself,' and I learned."</i>
22. Awrad	Awrad, a 22-year-old Kindergarten (Early Childhood Education) major, emphasises the everyday importance of English. She sees it as a practical tool for managing daily interactions in places like university cafeterias, restaurants, salons, and movies, where English often the mean of communication with expatriates. For Awrad, English extends beyond academics, becoming essential for daily life and international travel. Her experiences with teamwork highlight a journey of development. Initially, Awrad felt discomfort and anxiety when randomly assigned to new group members, struggling to adapt. However, as relationships formed, she experienced the benefits of collaboration and support within the group.
23. Farah	Farah, a 20-year-old History major, shared that her language learning journey was influenced by both her parents but in different ways. While her father was very good in English and encouraged her to practice daily, Farah highlighted that her mother played a more significant role in encouraging her to learn. Her mother would frequently tell her, <i>"You must learn English,"</i> emphasising the language's importance. Farah also noted that her believed that

	once she got married, it would be expected for her to rely on her future husband for language-related matters. Her father's limited involvement stemmed from their Bedouin background, where men traditionally hold higher authority.
24. <i>Wadha</i>	Wadha, a 37-year-old Arabic Studies major, says that her main reason for learning English is because it is crucial in today's world, "The time forced us to study English," she joked. Also, she learned English through her husband's determination to study the language. Although he never completed secondary school, he collected English learning books and studied them in his free time. He believed that knowing basic English was essential for everyday situations. Over time, he involved Wadha in his learning by asking her to write for him and helping him understand words from movies. His passion for travelling and managing daily affairs pushed him to become more independent, shifting from relying on Wadha to wanting to take the lead in English communication.
25. <i>Maha</i>	Maha, a 22-year-old Kindergarten (Early Childhood Education) major, improved her English after struggling with low confidence in primary school. She used to avoid participating in class because she feared making mistakes. In the tenth grade, her teacher's encouragement changed her view of English. She gained confidence, understood grammar and vocabulary better, and started to enjoy the English language learning. Despite her progress, she still feels anxious speaking publicly in class, especially when her classmates are more fluent. She worries about giving wrong answers and blames herself when she does. Maha's experience is a great example of how a supportive teacher can help students overcome fear and improve their learning.
26. <i>Noura</i>	Noura, a 21-year-old Mathematics major at the College of Education, is a confident and responsible learner. Her academic journey reflects a strong commitment to improving her English skills, despite initial anxieties about participating in the TESOL classroom. Noura excels in teamwork in the classroom and often takes on a leadership role to ensure tasks are completed to a high standard. As she explained, her language proficiency has been shaped by influences from her household, including a housemaid with a background in teaching English and her father's encouragement. Noura's progress highlights her ability to overcome self-doubt and embrace opportunities for academic accomplishments.
27. <i>Shaikha</i>	Shaikha, a 22-year-old Arabic Language Studies student, embodies self-reliance and curiosity in her English language journey. Unlike others influenced by formal instruction, her motivation stemmed from personal determination to improve and prove her capabilities. Interactions with her housemaid sparked her interest in expanding her vocabulary, while English songs and self-directed learning through technology reflect her individualist approach to language development. Despite challenges in translation and limited family support for language practice, Shaikha's consistent efforts helped her develop strong communication skills through her own initiative and dedication.

28. Soad	Soad is a 32-year-old Kindergarten (Early Childhood Education) major, views English as essential for everyday interactions in Kuwait. Experiencing hesitation in social settings due to language barriers, she became encouraged to improve her skills, exploring conversation-based applications to enhance her fluency. During her English class at KU, she found that group work played a key role in her learning, providing reassurance and helping her build confidence. Through collaboration, she embraced mistakes as part of the learning process, using them to strengthen her communication skills.
29. Dana	Dana, a 19-year-old English major, engages with the language through informal learning, using TikTok and content on the internet to investigate new vocabulary and expressions driven by curiosity. Dana prioritises an all-English classroom setting, deeming it crucial for fluency and affirming her dedication to enhancing her language skills independently. Although she initially prefers Kuwaiti instructors, she recognises that immersion with English speakers might be more advantageous for language acquisition. She prefers individual work and finds collaborative efforts irritating when efforts are unequal among her peers.
30. Hussah	Hussah, a 21-year-old Psychology major student, sees learning English as a mix of technology and personal connections. While she turns to Google Translate for quick answers, she trusts her friends more, especially those fluent in English, finding their support easier and more reliable. Group work is a double-edged sword for her, she enjoys the collaboration but struggles when placed with unfamiliar classmates, unsure if they'll contribute equally. She believes choosing her own group would make teamwork more effective.
31. Anfal	Anfal, a 20-year-old Kindergarten (Early Childhood Education) major, approaches English with hesitation, feeling more anxious around peers than teachers. While she sees herself at the same level as her peers, she believes they have more courage to speak up, so she fears being judged and often holds back. Her reluctance to participate seems rooted in an early experience with a strict teacher, whose harshness made English feel intimidating rather than inviting. Though she wants to improve, the fear of making mistakes still lingers, making her learning journey a quiet internal struggle.

Appendix 3: Interview Excerpt (Sample English/Arabic)

English Excerpt	Arabic Excerpt
Lamya: Yeah! Because when I give a wrong answer, I feel a bit embarrassed.	لمياء: أي... لأن لما أجاب غلط شوية أنحرج الباحث: أممم
Researcher: Mm!	لمياء: فلما الدكتور يصحطني بلحظتها، أنا الكلام اللي
Lamya: So, when the professor corrects me on the spot, I'll never forget what he said, because I learned it while I was embarrassed.	قاله صح ما راح أنساه عمري كله، لأن عرفته وأنا منخرجة الباحث: أوكي
Researcher: (code-switch) Okay!	لمياء: فيثبت بمخي أكثر من لما أتعلم وأنا ساكتة
Lamya: So it sticks in my mind more than when I learn while staying silent.	الباحث: تمام تمام... تتذكرين يمكن سؤال الجمعة بالـ ٢٠٩٠
Researcher: Okay, okay. Do you remember the Friday question in 090?	لمياء: أي الباحث: شنو... يعني كان في إمكانية إن تجاوبون غلط؟
Lamya: Yeah!	لمياء: أممم
Researcher: What about it? I mean, was there a chance of giving wrong answers?	الباحث: هل كان عندج مشكلة بهالشي؟
Lamya: Mm!	لمياء: لا
Researcher: Did you have a problem with that?	الباحث: إنج تحطين الإجابة أيأ كانت؟
Lamya: No.	لمياء: أي، أحطها أيأ كانت. وأنا أصلاً كنت مجاوبة معاج غلط. بعدين إنت بالأونلاين قلتي إن... ما أنكر شنو قلتي بالضبط، بس "إجابتي مالها علاقة، بس حلوة"
Researcher: So, you just give your answer...whatever it is?	الباحث: حلوة! أوكي... بس تعلمتي شي جديد؟ تعلمتي الإجابة الصح بالنهاية؟
Lamya: Yeah, I just say it, whatever it is. I actually answered it wrong with you. Then later, during the online session, you said... I	

don't remember exactly what you said, but something like, "Your answer isn't really related, but it's nice."

Researcher: Nice! Okay. But did you learn something new. did you end up learning the correct answer?

Lamya: Yeah.

Researcher: (code-switch) Bravo! Okay...
hmm, alright.

Lamya: (interrupts) As for the Friday question... I used to answer without worry because there wasn't an immediate response, maybe after a week.

Researcher: Aha, later.

Lamya: Yeah. But it's different when I answer in the moment, and you say, "No, you're wrong."

Researcher: Ah! (code-switch) Okay! So that makes a difference to you?

Lamya: Yeah!

Researcher: How does it make a difference? I mean, this is wrong, and that's wrong.

Lamya: (interrupts) I mean, when I write the answer and you see it later, then respond or correct it—I've already written it and moved on, it's fine with me.

Researcher: So what's the difference? What's the difference if, in the end, you gave a wrong

لمياء: أي

الباحث: برافو! أوكي... اممم زين

لمياء: (مقاطعة) سؤال الجمعة كنت أجاب عادي، لأن
ماكو رد فوري، يعني بعدها بأسبوع

الباحث: آها... بعدها

لمياء: أي... عكس لما أجاب الحين وتقولين "لا، إنتي
غلط"

الباحث: آه! أوكي! تفرق معاج؟

لمياء: أي

الباحث: شلون تفرق معاج؟ هذي غلط وهذي غلط

لمياء: (مقاطعة) يعني لما أكتب الإجابة، وتشوفينها
بعدين، وتجاوبين أو ترددين تعديلينها لي، وأنا أساساً
كاتبته وخلصت، عادي عندي

الباحث: شنو الفرق؟ شنو الفرق إذا الأهم بالنهاية إنج
جاوبتي غلط وبالنهاية أنا عدلت عليج، شنو الفرق إنني
ما أرد مباشرة؟

لمياء: (مقاطعة) لأن مباشرة راح يكون الكل حولي
والكل قاعد يسمع، بس بعدين ممكن تقولينها بدون ما
تذكرين اسم، إن في إجابة جذي كانت خاطئة وكذا...
أنا أتعلم مع نفسي

الباحث: آها

لمياء: بدون ما تقولين "إجابة فلانة شوفوها غلط"

الباحث: أوكي! إنزين، يعني إنتي تقدرين تقولين إن
هذا هو السؤال اللي عقبه سبحانه الله... يعني تقدرين
تقولين إن إجابتي الغلط جدام زميلاتج تخرج أكثر من
إنني أنا أعرف إنها غلط وبعدين أصلحها لج؟

لمياء: أمم

answer and I corrected it—what’s the difference between that and me correcting you directly?

لمياء: أمم

Lamya: (interrupts) Because when it’s a direct response, everyone’s around and listening. But later, you might mention the mistake without saying who wrote it, like “There was a wrong answer like this,” and so I learn on my own.

Researcher: Aha!

Lamya: Without saying, “Look, so-and-so gave the wrong answer.”

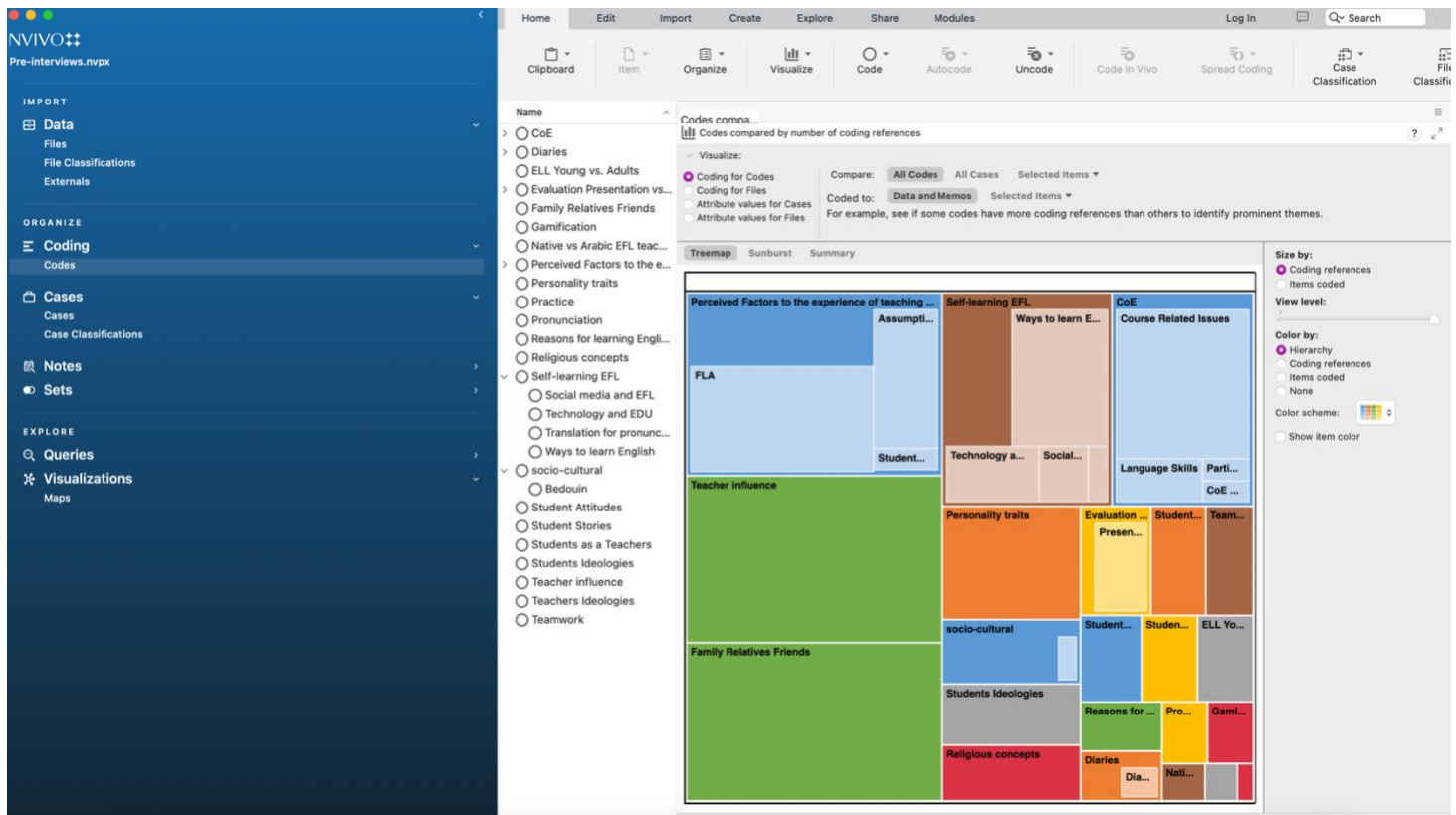
Researcher: (code-switch) Okay! So you’re saying that—this brings us to the next question, Subhan Allah! So, you’re saying that giving a wrong answer in front of your classmates embarrasses you more than me just knowing it was wrong and correcting you later?

Lamya: Mm-hmm.

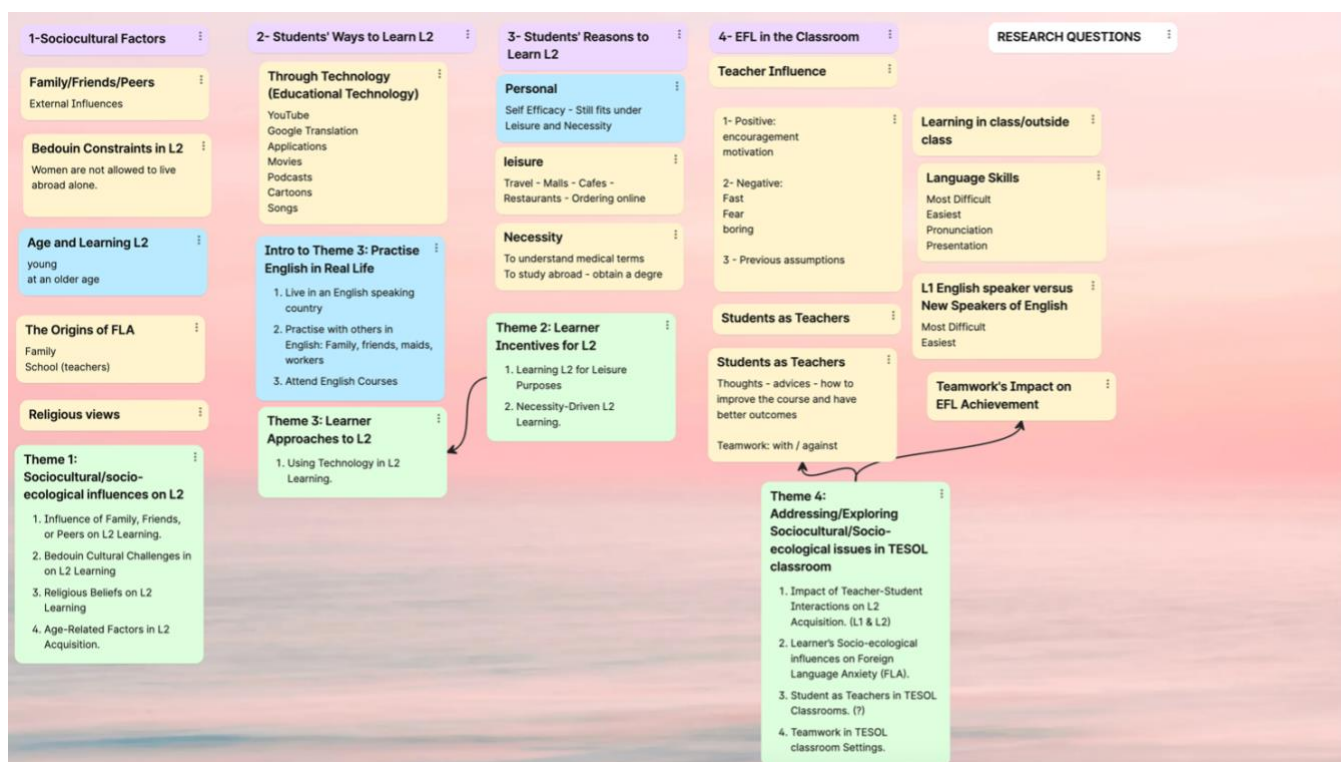
Researcher: (code-switch) Okay! So would you say you feel... shy?

Lamya: Mm-hmm.

Appendix 4: NVivo Visualisation (Coding for Codes) – Snapshot



Appendix 5: Screenshot from Padlet page created to show the key insights – Snapshot



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