Research Article

Hayat Al Masri and Emad A. S. Abu-Ayyash*

Second language acquisition from Syrian refugees' perspectives: Difficulties and solutions

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Abstract: The current study explored the second language acquisition (SLA) difficulties that 45 Syrian refugees and asylum seekers encountered in nine countries (Germany, Turkey, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, France, Malay, Austria, and Romania) that they fled to away from the ongoing war in Syria. The study also sought to elicit the solutions for these difficulties from the participants' views. This research employed interviews and an open-ended questionnaire utilizing the Facebook Messenger application to gather data. The study builds on and broadens the scope of language acquisition research and questions main SLA theoretical underpinnings. The study found a variety of difficulties pertinent to economic, personal, social, linguistic, temporal, and psychological factors. The participants' recommendations were classified into refugee-based, community-based, and authority-based ones.

Keywords: acquisition difficulties, asylum seekers, refugees, second language acquisition

1 Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) has been a pivotal area in research in language due to the significance of language per se to human existence (Cook 2016) and owing to the importance of acquiring at least one more language in the globalized, socially interactive world. Cook (2016: 209) states, "Language is at the centre of human life [...] Knowing a second language is a normal part of human existence; it may be unusual to know only one." However, the hindrances to SLA are multiple and varied. Factors that may impede SLA include, inter alia, first language interference, the discrepancies that exist between the mother tongue and the second language, the degree of complexity of the second language, and the learner-based factors (Gass and Selinker 2008). Add to these factors crises, such as wars, and the issue of SLA becomes more complicated. According to Ferris and Kirisci (2018: 23),

[a]t the present time, humanitarian actors are struggling to respond to multiple mega-crises. The number of displaced persons has reached levels not seen since the end of World War II. Worldwide, almost 60 million people have been forced from their homes by conflict, violence, and persecution.

Nowadays, the worst and probably the most lamentable humanitarian crisis has arisen from the civil war in Syria, which has forced around half of the Syrian population to unwillingly migrate to or to be displaced into different regions all over the world. Filippo Grandi, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) high commissioner, asserts that Syria is so far the biggest refugee crisis that is causing ceaseless suffering for

* **Corresponding author: Emad A. S. Abu-Ayyash**, Faculty of Education, British University in Dubai, Dubai, 00971, United Arab Emirates, e-mail: emad.ayyash@buid.ac.ae

Hayat Al Masri: Work Skills Department, Al Wasl University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, e-mail: Hayat_almasri@hotmail.com

millions of Syrians (UNHCR 2019). This crisis has brought with it a host of dilemmas, including physical, mental, and social health disorders (Chilling et al. 2017).

One major issue, however, that might be added to the array of challenges is that refugees encounter serious hardships in acquiring a second language, whether the process of learning a second language, such as English, takes place in an Arab-speaking country (Alefesha and Al-Jamal 2019) or a non-Arab-speaking context (Şeker and Sirkeci 2015). The factors that may contribute to the refugees' SLA extremity are multifaceted and might be related to a battery of reasons that are inextricably intertwined. Dominant among these are social factors, language-related difficulties, and psychological disturbances. This study was set to understand these challenges and the suggested solutions in situ by exploring the perspectives of refugees and asylum seekers in nine different countries.

1.1 Statement of the problem

An alarming number of Syrian refugees sought asylum in non-Arabic-speaking countries, such as Turkey, Germany, and Sweden, because of the ongoing war in Syria. A corollary of this is that the issue of acquiring a second language has gained much rigor as a serious hardship that the Syrian refugees face in their way of coping with the new societies in the countries accepting them, which has added to the pre-migratory adversities they have gone through before arriving to the new destinations. This study explores SLA difficulties and the recommended solutions from the perspectives of the people experiencing these hardships firsthand, i.e., Syrian refugees and asylum seekers.

1.2 Significance of the study

Refugees and asylum seekers have for long attracted the attention of researchers, and this has naturally resulted in a profuse number of studies (e.g., Kleinmann 1984; Keyes and Kane 2004; Elmeroth 2010). However, only a few studies have been conducted regarding the Syrian crisis since it is a unique and a relatively recent case in point. Once addressed, the Syrian exigency was, quite understandably, approached *vis-à-vis* the humanitarian scope. As for the educational side of the Syrian crisis, the literature is still marked with paucity.

On the heels of the Syrian refugee dilemma, though, came some studies that addressed limited scopes in SLA. Most of the studies that twinned between SLA and seeking asylum were mainly about acquiring a specific language by specific nationalities or population (e.g., Van Tubergen 2010; Alefesha and Al-Jamal 2019). Another area of focus in research was the relationship between the English language, including accent, and asylum-seeking people (e.g., Maryns 2004; Doyle and O'Toole 2013). The present paper attempts to fill a gap in research by addressing SLA by the Arabic-speaking Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in nine second language contexts, which makes this study a first in terms of the broad context and in regard to the richness of data that are likely to emerge. In addition, this study is anticipated to add value to some theories about SLA owing to the uniqueness of its context.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The purpose of the present paper is twofold as it focuses on the challenges and the propounded solutions to SLA from the perspectives of the Syrian refugees and asylum seekers. This general aim can be broken down into the following two research questions:

1. What are the difficulties that Syrian asylum seekers and refugees face in SLA in the countries where they sought asylum?
2. What are the possible solutions to these difficulties from the asylum seekers' and refugees' perspectives?

2 Literature review

Among the many theories on SLA, the Common Underlying Proficiency Theory (Cummins 1980, 1981) could be, quite understandably, the most intriguing apropos the purpose of this study. This theory propounds that when learners acquire one language, they automatically possess the ability to learn subsequent languages. This theory suggests that the set of skills and the metalinguistic knowledge formed upon the learning of the first language will be easily expanded to facilitate the acquisition and development of the second language. Social interactionists argued against such claims, emphasizing the social context and the important role of interaction in acquiring a second language (Bruner 1983; Farrar 1990). Although these two theoretical perspectives may not sit comfortably well together, the present study is set to emphasize the importance of both the cognitive development through language-related factors and the meaningful social interaction in acquiring a second language, which goes in accordance with propositions from a number of related studies and sources (e.g., Kleinmann 1984; Harley 2014).

The emergence of the refugees' phenomenon, its rapid increase, and its authentic relation to SLA have been the focus of copious and varied studies that attempted to come to grips with the refugees' experience from different angles. For example, Kleinmann (1984) looked at the Indo-Chinese refugee experience in learning English as a second language, Hou and Beiser (2006) studied the English language acquisition by Southeast Asian refugees in Canada, Goodkind (2006) investigated the psychological and humanitarian side of refugees by focusing on their well-being, and Gordon (2011), Block (2003), and Horsman (2013) concentrated on the trauma of refugees and second language learning.

As for Hou and Beiser (2006), the most important step in language acquisition is to understand the factors that lead to SLA and that lead to successful integration within the new society. In this regard, refugees are considered to be social beings, while the researchers are the ones who are concerned with the refugees' relationships to the social background in which language acquisition takes place (Block 2003). The relevant factors include social isolation, changes in culture and family roles, barriers to refugee's mental and psychological health, and the ethnic view of the refugee to the new society, as all of these interact with the language acquisition process (Elmeroth 2010).

According to a study conducted by Steel et al. (2002) on adult Vietnamese refugees who live in Australia, the amount of trauma refugees experienced before refuge had a considerable connection to their integration and daily function. In essence, the symptoms of trauma differed widely from refugee to another, and the posttraumatic stress disorders (PTSDs) were much more severe. That is why Goodkind (2006) emphasized the importance of refugees' well-being and suggested that it should be comprehended holistically, and that all the negative experiences and hardships faced by refugees should be taken into consideration along with the challenges they encountered in their daily lives.

As a matter of fact, most of the studies on the relation between refugees and SLA have mainly investigated the factors that affect this relation, but very few studies have considered the ways of mastering second languages or, for that matter, the correlation between second language proficiency and the well-being of refugees (Hou and Beiser 2006). In addition, Fennelly and Palasz (2004) noticed that the main foci of most studies that investigated the determinants of refugees' language acquisition were their social integration, work, and well-being, while their language skills and proficiency did not receive due attention.

It is conjectured, then, that it would be unlikely for refugees to overcome all these challenges unless they get the appropriate and opportune support needed. That is, whenever refugees attend SL classrooms,

they are exposed to many stressors allied to their PTSD of which they may be at different stages of recovery, and that language instructors should take this into consideration and should not expect refugees to be completely healed of their trauma and its harsh memories. Therefore, timely assistance is required from all the surrounding and effective players (Horsman 2013).

By the same token, Rose (2014) examined SLA among a group of refugees of the same nationality, who are studying the same language. In this study, the researcher investigated the acquisition of the English language by Program Chechen refugees who had come to Ireland 10 years ahead of the study. The researcher looked at the way these refugees have acquired English from the beginning of their English course outside the classroom and inside their social surroundings. This research was done in Roscommon town, and it found that Chechen refugees did not benefit from the English course and that they were not able to participate in it. As for them, acquiring English took place mostly outside the classroom where they could integrate more within the new society. Consequently, and as a result of the benefit they got from the outside interaction, they became independent, they spoke English fluently, and they were improving their language by communicating with the local society. More importantly, they planned to integrate in this new society.

A recent study of Karipek (2017) about Syrian refugees' experience in acquiring the Turkish language examined particular factors that affected Syrian refugees' acculturation process at a Turkish university. This study was an attempt to analyze Berry's (1997) acculturation theory by examining the effect of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences and similarities on integration among Syrian refugee students at a university level by interviewing 15 refugees individually. Besides, this study aimed to investigate how Syrian refugee students coped with and integrated in the university, how they improved and acquired linguistic skills, how they managed to employ their educational objectives in correlation with their future goals, and how they adapted with the ethnic and cultural differences in the Turkish society. The findings of this study suggested that the main obstacle that Syrian refugees faced on their way toward acculturation was the language barrier, yet the short cultural distance between Syria and Turkey contributed highly in acculturation and Turkish language acquisition.

Taken together, the studies conducted so far on refugees and the dilemmas they found themselves facing in the hosting countries are valuable to understand certain refugee-related issues. This study can be taken as one more piece in the jigsaw that was put together in order to gain more in-depth understanding of the full picture regarding the difficulties that refugees and asylum seekers encounter along the way during their SLA journey. The present paper has also the practical element related to proposing the appropriate solutions that are based on the participants' firsthand experiences.

3 Research method

Forty-five Syrian refugees and asylum seekers participated in the study by responding to open-ended questions delivered through a questionnaire and semistructured interviews. These instruments were conducted via social media, mainly Facebook, since it is one of the most popular social networking sites, one of the most accessed on the web, and because all the participants had Facebook accounts.

The research was done in two phases. The first phase involved the use of an open-ended questionnaire that sought volunteers to respond to it via a Facebook post. The second phase involved interviewing each one of the participants individually on Facebook messenger in an attempt to triangulate the qualitative instruments to further validate the data (Cohen et al. 2002). The 45 participants were displaced in Turkey, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Austria, France, Malaysia, and Romania.

The participants were aged between 23 and 43, and the sample was mostly males. Table 1 gives more details about demographics.

All the participants were debriefed about the purpose of the research, and they were told that they had the right to quit at any point. They were also told that they had the choice of not responding to any question they found inappropriate or threatening in anyway. In particular, the question about the reason

Table 1: Participants' demographics

Age	Gender	Marital status
23–43	Female: 12 Male: 33	Married: 17 Single: 28

behind seeking asylum could have been one of the sensitive questions that some participants may choose not to answer, a concern that was partly overcome by emphasizing anonymity and confidentiality of the data and partly by giving the participants the choice of not responding to such questions.

3.1 Instrumentation

This study specifically aimed to examine the issue of acquiring a second language by Syrian refugees via exploring the difficulties they face and their recommendations. Due to the nature of the research questions and the nature of the data required to answer them, the researchers utilized two qualitative data-gathering instruments: open-ended-question questionnaires and semistructured interviews. One merit of semistructured interviews is that they are flexible in the way they allow both the interviewer and the interviewee to make some amendments on the questions like deleting, editing, or even rewording them whenever they find that they are inappropriate (Creswell 2012). This helped the participants in this study to express their opinions freely and to skip questions that they felt may cause a future threat to them. This flexibility allowed the participants from France and Norway, for example, to choose not to answer the second interview question “Why have you chosen this country in particular?” As for the questionnaire, it utilized open-ended questions because they have no prior expectations in terms of what the answer should be and allow you to fully explore the field avoiding any potential bias that may result from suggesting responses, which is usually tied to close-ended questions (Reja et al. 2003). In this study, the open-ended questions allowed the researchers to seek more elaboration on certain information. It is worth noting here that the questionnaire and the interview questions were almost the same, and that the idea behind using follow-up interviewing was that not only did it serve as a validity check for the questionnaire items (Glesne 2011) but also as a probing instrument that gathered more information necessary for data saturation.

3.2 Social media research

The use of social media instrumentation has proliferated with the ceaseless advancement of technology in many areas. In particular, a significant number of qualitative studies are making use of social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) to gather their data (Snelson 2016). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media is “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (61). Since the participants of the present study were geographically disseminated, this research was conducted via Facebook, which is one of the most popular sites on the web.

3.3 Sampling

Since this is a qualitative paper that sought to find information-rich participants, purposive sampling was espoused. This entailed that the researchers selected the participants who could best help them gain the

required data (Creswell 2012). One type of purposeful sampling is homogeneous sampling where the selected individuals share some sort of membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics (Creswell 2012). Based on this, the sample of the present study was purposive, homogeneous sample that consisted of 45 Syrian refugees and asylum seekers. The participants were relatives, friends, or former students of one of the researchers.

3.4 Data analysis

Following data collection, analysis went through two phases, data coding and thematic data analysis. In the data-coding phase, the researchers analyzed the data from the interviews and the survey, looking for links through data reduction and data categorization. Similar codes were conflated and patterned to form themes, which constituted the core of the second phase, thematic analysis. This phase involved organizing the codes and describing them. Thematic analysis also involved interpreting these codes and comparing them to discern relations between different themes.

3.5 Validity and reliability

In principle, this study is dominantly qualitative, and a word on the validity and the reliability of the research instruments should be in order here. Validity dwells upon the concept that an instrument measures what it claims to measure and that an account represents the features that it purports to explain accurately (Winter 2000). The instrumentation and data accounts of the present paper can be considered valid on a number of counts: the principal source of data comes from the natural setting (Syrian refugees and asylum seekers currently in refuge), the subsequent analysis applies thick description, the point of data saturation was reached (interviews followed the questionnaire to get more information necessary to answer the research questions), the data were presented and reported through the eyes of the participants, and respondent validation, or member check, of the ensuing analysis was applied to make sure that intentions and meanings were caught accurately (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Bogdan and Biklen 1992; Merriam 2009; Flick 2018). As for reliability, it is generally concerned with accuracy and precision (Cohen et al. 2018), and this was sought in the present paper through seeking high detail on important aspects, neutrality of the researchers, and instrument triangulation.

4 Findings and discussion

This paper reports and discusses the findings that emerged from the open-ended-questionnaire and the semistructured interviews. The questions asked utilizing the two instruments will be discussed with reference to the present paper's aim and the specific research questions. Therefore, this section is divided into three parts: background of the problem, SLA difficulties and solutions, and SLA in normal conditions and in refuge.

4.1 Background findings

The first and the second questions sought to gain more informed understanding about the background of the participants. The first question was "Where/why have you sought asylum?" The first part of this

question was answered by all the 45 participants, while the second one was not, probably because Syrian refugees were still reluctant to discuss political matters. Table 2 demonstrates the exact number of the participants in each of these countries.

The difference in the number of the participants here is evident, which definitely calls for more research to be conducted in countries, such as Norway, France, Malaysia, and Romania, which registered the minimal number of participants.

The second part of the first question was about the reason behind refuge. Two major themes emerged from the data gathered via the questionnaire and the interviews: war conditions and study. The former theme emerged from the responses of around 75% of the participants, who said explicitly that the reason was war, or implicitly by saying, “due to the devastating bombardment and shelling,” “I don’t want to fight,” and “to avoid serving in the army and getting my hands blooded.” The remaining 25% indicated that they were seeking to pursue their studies. Apparently, most of the participants fled from their country as a result of the current war in Syria. The results of this question are compatible with the fact that refugees are people who faced a well-founded fear of being persecuted, killed, tortured, or even who cannot avail safety and security in their country.

The second question was, “Why have you chosen this country in particular?” The answers to this question varied owing to the fact that this study targeted a sample of refugees who were hosted by multiple countries. Additionally, not all the participants answered all the questions; the participants from France and Romania (a total of two), for example, chose not to answer this question. The responses to this question showed that Germany was mostly desired by the Syrian refugees for its freedom and its great reputation in the field of study and work. As for the participants, Germany respects human rights, it provides safety, and it keeps supporting refugees who dream to have a bright future on its lands. Thinking language, this finding may cast light on the important role of the social context in acquiring a second language, as speculated by social interactionists (Bruner 1983; Farrar 1990). Turkey, on the other hand, is distinguished by its close geographical location from Syria that made it the first destination of asylum for Syrians. The participants mentioned traditions, culture, religion, and the common words between the two languages, Arabic and Turkish, as being important reasons for choosing Turkey in particular. Sweden was also among the countries that hosted a good number of Syrian refugees because, according to them, it grants citizenship in shorter time than the other countries, and because it is a safe country that respects all citizens. The reason of language was mentioned in the cases of Sweden, Turkey, and Austria. Finally, four of the participants said that it was not their choice to seek asylum in the country they were in then.

The three questions were as follows: “Was the official language of this country the reason why you chose it to seek asylum? What is the official language of this country? Have you got any prior knowledge of this language?” These questions sought to elicit responses related to the languages spoken in the nine refuge countries and to pave the way toward getting the data necessary to answer the first research question about SLA acquisition hardships fully. The responses revealed that out of the 45 participants, 39 did not have any prior knowledge of the languages they were learning in the countries of refuge.

Table 2: Numbers of participants in asylum countries

Country	Number of refugees
Germany	17
Turkey	10
Sweden	7
Norway	1
Denmark	4
Austria	3
France	1
Malaysia	1
Romania	1

In addition, 41 participants emphasized that language was not the reason why they selected the countries they were in. Together, these findings can rightly anticipate that learning the second language is unclear and troubled waters.

4.2 SLA difficulties and recommended solutions

“What difficulties have you faced in acquiring the language?” and “What are, in your opinion, the possible remedies or solutions to these difficulties?” were the sixth and the seventh questions, respectively. These two questions are germane to the research purpose, and they were the main reason for seeking data saturation via interviews since the majority of the participants provided scanty responses to the questionnaire items addressing the difficulties and the recommended solutions.

Question six about the language-related difficulties encountered by the Syrian refugees elicited varied and expanded responses that were thematically classified into six categories: economic, personal, social, linguistic, temporal, and psychological. Well above half of the participants reported linguistic-related hardships, while around a third referred to social factors. The remaining four dwelled upon around 10% of the participants' responses.

The linguistic-connected factors were primarily related to pronunciation, word formation and length, grammar, vocabulary, and the gap between the standard language and the dialect. The participants in Germany found the German language very difficult to acquire. The syntax of the German language was described by the Syrian refugees in Germany as complicated and having very long words and expressions. In principle, though, all the participants faced pronunciation-tied difficulties. The problem with the Turkish language was its nature of being a mixture of languages as stated by the participants; it has a different word formation and different semantics. In accordance with these claims, the language barrier was also found to be the major difficulty in acquiring the Turkish language in the recent study done by Karipek (2017). Danish, on the other hand, caused problems in pronunciation, while Malay was found to be difficult in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Moreover, participants who were trying to acquire Swedish encountered difficulties between the language they studied in classes and the colloquial one used by Swedish people along with the multimeaning vocabulary imbricated within the Swedish language. Finally, only Norwegian was found to be easy by the sole participant in Norway. These findings are particularly illuminating to SLA theories, particularly the Common Underlying Proficiency Theory (Cummins 1980, 1981). The finding that language-related hindrances were the dominant cause behind difficulties of SLA in refuge casts doubt on the premise that learning one language will automatically facilitate learning another language due to the built-in metacognitive skills developed in the process of acquiring the first language. The refugee context suggests that this premise is not definitive and that, contrarily, language-related factors are the major hindrance to SLA.

As for the social difficulties in acquiring these languages, German and French people, according to the participants, appeared to be very conservative and monolingual. They are afraid of communicating with strangers and do not make any effort to learn the languages of the other nationalities in their countries. Diversely, Malaysian people were shy to communicate with others, and the Turkish did not even bother themselves to have a full understanding of the conception of refugees to know how to deal with them. The participants had a preconception that the German language is complicated and “cold,” and thought that the Germans were so as well. In addition to this preconception, lack of necessity of acquiring the second language was another obstacle. The huge presence of Arabs in asylum countries hampered acquiring the official languages of these countries. It was not only the Arabic language, but people in countries like Sweden and Denmark speak English too as a second language. Thus, in the case of refugees being surrounded with people who speak their first language or any other languages they are familiar with, they were not motivated to learn the hosting country's language. These findings reveal the importance of social interaction (Bruner 1983) from the users' perspectives.

According to some of the participants who live in Germany and Turkey, the demographic distribution of refugees either in camps or compounds made it difficult for them to be in contact with the citizens and to acquire their languages. In Turkey, one of the participants said,

We have to start working from day one, and the government does not provide any language courses for refugees who cannot pay for them, so we go to work for Syrians who have their own businesses there. We avoid working with the Turkish people and they in return refuse to hire us since they do not know any other way of communication, but the Turkish language which we do not know or did not have the chance to learn.

This finding about the significance of social interaction, in large part, validates the propositions of social interactionists, who emphasized the important role of interaction within the social context in acquiring a second language (Bruner 1983; Farrar 1990). The suggestion here is that the findings relevant to the two dilemmas of language and social interaction support the theoretical perspective that both the cognitive development through language-related factors and the meaningful social interaction are equally significant in SLA (Kleinmann 1984; Harley 2014).

Additionally, lack of time was one of the difficulties that hindered the process of acquiring a second language as averred by the research participants in Turkey. The participants claimed that Turkish government opened its doors to Syrian refugees, but hardly provides any facilities, especially for those who did not stay in the camps. According to them, Syrian refugees in Turkey had to depend on themselves from day one; they had to work as soon as they had arrived to cover their daily-life needs. They worked for long hours, which left no time for them to learn the Turkish language. Furthermore, Syrian refugees in Sweden complained about queuing for a long time in order to be registered in the language courses provided by the government.

The financial difficulties as well were experienced by Syrian refugees in Turkey and Germany. One of the participants in Turkey said, “Life expenses are too high, earning a living is prioritized over anything else.” Other participants could not attend any language courses because they were expensive. However, in Germany and the other countries in the European Union, participants said that these countries provided free language courses for refugees and supported them to cope with the new societies by all means. Still, one problem reported by refugees in Germany was that the government did not pay much attention to assisting elderly in acquiring the German language.

Finally, due to the harsh civil war back in their country, Syrian refugees suffered from the PTSD. Continuously, some of them resumed to experience fear from the new societies that hosted them as, in some cases, some hosting communities looked at refugees as terrorists and avoided contacting with them. Being obliged to live within a totally new community is likely to lead to stress; one of the refugees in Sweden suffered from depression caused by the stressful kind of life he experienced there. Such circumstances weakened the participants’ self-confidence and made them feel shy to speak up the new language in order not to make mistakes that the society may mock them for.

To sum up, it was found that these difficulties varied from one country to another, but the main difficulty that almost all the participants shared was in the language itself. Acquiring new languages appeared to be a difficult endeavor. So, the main difficulty lay in the grammar, structure, and pronunciation of the new languages, in addition to the society which hindered the process of acquiring a language by isolating itself away from the refugees’ community, giving them very few chances to acquire the language from the native speakers. Lack of time and life expenses along with the psychological problems have also played recognizable role in obstructing acquiring the languages of the hosting countries.

As for the question about the suggested solutions, the participants’ responses fell into three categories: individual-based, community-based, and government-based initiatives. By way of elaboration, one of the participants suggested the following solution:

To learn any new language, you have to take time to learn it, especially when you do not know anything about it. I’d say, that the Germans should be more patient, to help the refugees to be able to speak their language fluently. In addition the refugees should be more active to learn it because the German government offers free German courses for them.

Furthermore, these responses were in line with the issue of the linguistic barriers that almost all the participants have encountered. The suggested solutions to this problem were the need to practice the language and all its skills on a daily basis by attending intensive courses and interacting with the native speakers. Working with the native speakers was also recommended by one of the participants in order to be in a continuous contact with the acquired language. For some other participants, watching series and movies of the target language in addition to listening to songs and to the national radio stations of the hosting countries would help much in SLA. According to some participants, refugees should attend any social activities that enable them to contact with native speakers. Finally, refugees should not be shy of committing mistakes while speaking in the acquired language; they should also have ambition and persistence and never give up.

Regarding the solutions related to the governments of the hosting countries which are applicable to some of them, the participants recommended that the Turkish government should provide free language courses and that they should make them obligatory. Besides, the Turkish government should bestow the participants a monthly amount of money that would help them to fulfill their daily needs for at least 6 months in order to let them have free time to attend language courses before starting work.

On the other hand, the German government was advised to take an action to mediate between the refugees and the Germans in order to increase integration among them. Additionally, the Swedish government should equip the language institutes with qualified teachers who can facilitate the process of acquiring the Swedish language, as per the participants. Finally, a general point of view from one of the participants emphasized the urgent need of providing psychotherapy sessions for all refugees and asylum seekers to attend as soon as they arrive the hosting countries in order to help them heal from the psychological trauma that resulted from the hardships they went through.

4.3 SLA in normal conditions and refuge

This part is meant to gain more profound understanding about the nature of difficulties faced in SLA by showing how acquisition in refuge compares to acquisition that transpires in normal conditions. The focus of questions eight and nine was to explore whether the difficulties linked to SLA in the present study were similar to those encountered in normal conditions. So, two more questions were forwarded to the participants: "Have you experienced acquiring a second language before seeking asylum?" and "What are the differences between acquiring a second language in normal conditions and under the necessity of seeking asylum?" In response to the former, all the 45 participants emphasized that they experienced SLA in normal conditions, with the second language being English for the majority of them, followed by French, Spanish, and German. Probably, a word on the level of second language reached by the participants in normal conditions is in order here. It is rightly conjectured that the acquisition level of a second language may influence the acquisition of the third. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that more research be done on how learners in different CEFR levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) respond to the acquisition of a third language, since this factor was not considered in this study.

As for the question about SLA in normal and asylum conditions, the majority of the participants (more than 90%) acknowledged salient differences between acquisitions in the two contexts. The exact responses of the participants are shown in Table 3.

The responses to this question showed that the majority of the participants think that learning a language in normal conditions is totally different since there is no obligation, and a person learns the language that he wants to or likes to learn. According to the participants, acquiring a second language in normal conditions is not restricted by time limits, which gives the learner peace of mind to study in a comfortable and a flexible way. It is also distinguished by being a desire and passion of which the learner feels motivated, enthusiastic, and interested to acquire a language.

On the other hand, acquiring a language under the necessity of asylum seeking is found to be obligatory and an urgent need by most of the participants, which accords with the view of Cook (2016)

Table 3: SLA in normal vs refuge/asylum conditions

Host country	Normal conditions	Refuge/asylum conditions
Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The aim here is to pass exams and get good grades. – “People choose the language that motivate [sic] them.” – “I want to learn.” – “People have passion and find it interesting.” – “You learn the language with more comfortable, and you have the time.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “we don’t have the choice, we have to learn it, especially [sic] it is the key for everything.” – “I must use it with a teacher from the same language” – “It is easier to speak a language in a country that speaks it.” – “Absolutely more difficult.” – “You have to speak the language because all people around you speak it, and you get many chances to get work and study.” – The refugee is obliged to continue his life and to get a [sic] better job opportunities. And it is easier and more exciting since we hear the language everywhere. – “I have to.” – “People have problems when they have to learn.” – Learning a language should be faster to have more chances in work and study. – “You will be under time pressure, so you will learn quickly and you could practice it with the native speakers.” – “Asylum seekers have to.”
Turkey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “People learn a language because they like or want to learn it.” – “Peace of mind and the lack of obligation help acquire a second and a third language.” – It is a desire and personal motivation.” – You have the choice with more excitement and enthusiasm and less persistent. – “It is easy and not under stressful conditions” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Obligatory. – You are obliged with more persistent and less excitement and enthusiasm. – It is easier and faster since you are motivated by the urge to live and continue to cope with society.
Sweden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “May give room for more flexibility.” – “You choose the language that you want to learn.” – You have the choice to learn hard or not. – “I will be less serious in studying it.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “You should learn the language to get a job otherwise life becomes difficult and you face misunderstanding.” – “Limited period of time during which a refugee has to prove linguistic and communicative capabilities.” – “You are forced to learn it.” – A person is obliged to, which helps in acculturation. – “You don’t have the choice.”
Denmark		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “Pressure of time, it [sic] is a challenge for refugees because they have to use it every day.”
Malaysia		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “You will love to learn the language if you love the country and felt welcomed from [sic] the citizens.”

regarding the significance of learning a second language. As for them, acquiring a language in such conditions is stressful and should be done faster so that learners can cope with the new society they live in and can get good job opportunities and more chances to complete their studies. For some of the participants, being surrounded by native speakers facilitates acquiring a language and accelerates it, especially if the refugee feels welcomed by the citizens of the asylum country. Finally, acquiring a second language under the condition of refuge needs more persistence than acquiring it in normal conditions. Refugees are obliged to learn it even if it is difficult or not interesting, or they will not be able to continue living in the countries of refuge that hosted them.

Furthermore, the participants’ responses to this question showed that they were fully aware of the factors that lead to SLA and had a comprehensible view about the importance of acquiring the language of

the hosting country toward achieving a successful integration within the new society and having good ways of life (Hou and Beiser 2006).

5 Conclusions and recommendations

To conclude, this paper presented an exploration for the SLA-pertinent difficulties that Syrian refugees have been facing in the countries that hosted them. The participants of this research were 45 Syrian refugees and asylum seekers who were hosted by 9 different countries. The broad scope of the present paper can be rightly considered valuable as it contributes to viewing the full picture of SLA in the refugee context. This research also sought to know the possible solutions for these difficulties from the participants' perspective as firsthand experiencers, another strength that can be claimed to enhance the validity of the findings being based on natural-context-generated data. In addition, this paper presented the main theoretical perspectives that underpinned the study, and situated the findings within these theories of SLA. Relevant work was only discussed and the significance of the present paper highlighted in relation to the literature. The findings of the present paper were presented employing qualitative thick description, a source of validity in qualitative research, and the relevance of the findings to the theories of SLA and the relevant work was elucidated.

The research found that the difficulties in acquiring a second language varied according to the language and the country, and were found to fall within six categories: economic, personal, social, linguistic, temporal, and psychological. But the main difficulty that almost all the participants faced was the language and its structure, grammar, and pronunciation. Although all the participants have experienced acquiring a second language before seeking asylum, the majority of them complained about the differences between the languages they acquired and the ones they were trying to acquire in terms of structure, syntax, and pronunciation. Another serious difficulty was the societies that refused to be in contact with the refugees' communities, like the German, French, and Turkish societies. Some other difficulties were caused by the lack of time to attend language courses and the lack of the financial support from some governments. Finally, another difficulty was caused by the psychological condition of the participants due to what they experienced during the war in Syria and after seeking asylum, which made them possible threats in the eyes of some communities.

Regarding the solutions that the participants recommended out of their experience in acquiring the languages of the hosting countries, it was found that individuals, the hosting communities, and the governments share the responsibility quite equally. As for the individuals, they should practice the acquired language in all the available means like attending courses and integrating with the native speakers whenever they have a chance to. One recommendation was that they practice the skills of the new language like reading, listening, and speaking on a daily basis. On the other hand, governments were found to be responsible for encouraging their population to help the refugees in integration by communicating with them and not to keep themselves away in their own world, since the colloquial language they speak is different from what is taught in the classes. Some governments were advised to provide free-cost language courses for the Syrian refugees; in addition, there was a need of a financial support that enables the refugees from fulfilling their daily-life needs, which make them work for long hours and leave them with no free time to attend language courses. Finally, the participants suggested psychotherapy sessions as a solution done by the governments in order to help the refugees get cured of the PTSD they had during the war. The hosting communities were also advised to create more bridges of communication with the refugees.

As being a very recent phenomenon, the Syrian crisis is a very rich subject for research in all fields. Regarding SLA, more research can be done by investigating the factors of age and gender. The researchers also recommended studying the case of the illiterate refugees who have not experienced acquiring a second language before seeking asylum as there are plenty of them among the Syrian refugees. Also, a very beneficial research could be conducted in classrooms to investigate the role of the teacher in

facilitating acquiring the language of the hosting country through teacher–student interaction. Finally, the scanty number of participants in some countries, for example, France and Norway, merits more in-depth research in these contexts.

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