**AN ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL NETWORKS AND ENGLISH ATTAINMENT OF BOARDING STUDENTS IN DUBAI**

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**Abstract:** This study explores the effects of social networks on English progress in a UAE international English National Curriuclum (ENC) boarding school. The observed population consisted of a case study of 11 boarding students, three female and eight male, who completed their first year of International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) curriculum in Year 10. Social network data was collected through the administration of a customized questionnaire, in addition to a semi-structured teacher questionnaire conducted with their English as an additional language (EAL) instructor. The results indicated that the plexity of social ties and the number of relations who used the target language had the highest positive relationship to the students’ English progress across most skills. An increased frequency of ‘non school friends’ in the social network had the strongest negative impact on language progress. This study proved that there may be various significant links between social relationships and language acquisition.

**Keywords:** social network theory, English as an additional language, boarding school

**INTRODUCTION:**

The continued presence of English language as the world’s “lingua franca” has contributed to pressure of understanding, analysing, and improving language acquisition for the millions of language learners worldwide. There are a multitude of causal influences and variables that act as contributing agents to this field of study, ranging from academic to psychological, and cognitive to social. The UAE is a country that boasts over 200 different nationalities according to the Dubai Culture & Arts Authority (2014), located in a region most recently associated with vision, rapid growth, and mass development. The English language has become a critical necessity to bring this diverse market together under a “lingua franca.” Cradled in the highly regulated environment of a UAE based English curriculum private school, this study will argue the dominant influences of social variables on language acquisition for Year 10 boarding students receiving EAL. Social Theory is the primary framework and foundation for the analyses and investigation of said social effects on language learning.

Considering the selected school was the sole boarding facility in the region, this also justified additional research on significance of its social variables on English language learning. No other school in the UAE has boarding as an option, so the environment and social structure of the subjects were completely unique to those of other students in the rest of the region. There have been a few studies on Study Abroad programmes in the Gulf at a tertiary level (referenced in the literature review), however none in the K-12 school range. This study aimed to be the first attempt to understand the social consequences of boarding in younger age groups in the region.

**SOCIAL NETWORK THEORY AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**

An array of structural (e.g. native language, markedness) and non-structural (e.g. personality, proficiency, age, social context, and linguistic awareness) constraints operate in second language acquisition (Odlin, 1989). Central for the purpose of this study, the non-structural social factors will be considered only. Spolsky’s (1989) 74 conditions for second language acquisition also captures the socio-cultural factors in language analysis. For instance, conditions 48 ‘Linguistic convergence condition’, 51 ‘exposure condition’ and 55 ‘instrumental language learning condition’ capture the importance of treating a language as a communicative tool rather than a subject in itself.

The rise of the internet and computer-supported social networks (CSSNs) also calls our attention to wider modes of communication, which in effect shapes one social network- i.e. who the learner connects and communicates with, either face-to-face or through computer mediated communication (CMC). In essence, CSSNs contain both specialized and multiplex relationships which can include strong and weak ties. The emergence of *netizens* and virtual communities urges the need to look deeper at all possible social interactions and code choice of language learners in both regulated and unregulated contexts. The current study will therefore be guided with the Interactionist framework of language learning. The rationale for such approach is neatly summed by Kitade (2000, p. 145) “socialization and language acquisition cannot be separated from the interactive linguistic contexts in which they occur”.

Based on this rationale, the social network theory has been selected as the underlying theoretical framework to this study. A social network is defined more specifically by Milroy & Gordon (2003) as a web of relations tying individuals together geographically and socially. There are multiple layers to these ties, with the first-order consisting of direct contact relations, while second-order referring primarily to indirect links that are located in the heart of an individual’s social network (Milroy & Gordon, 2003). There is quite a rich history leading to the development of Network theory. The roots of this framework stem from a blend of varying disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics and other social sciences (Sarhimaa, 2009). Social network theory allows a researcher to investigate micro-level aspects of a person’s social network in relation to their peers and then apply the findings to a macro-group (such as gender or nationality). In the education context, networks consist of students as the primary interacting entities, and the relationships between/among them as the social ties or links. Bergs (2000, p. 240) best demonstrated social networks in the form of a mathematical based graphical form depicted in Figure 1.

*Figure 1.* Social network diagram



Plexity and density are further terms also associated with social network relations. Multiplex relationships consist of high density ties bearing multiple forms of support (Whitten, 2007). Uniplex relationships on the other hand are low density links with a unilateral form of support (Whitten, 2007). The plexity and density of relationships will be taken into account in this study as independent variables as discussed in a later chapter.

**Language Acquisition and Social Network Theory**

Studies of language acquisition have brought on heightened focus to social network theory with the hopes to understand how students are obtaining and sharing knowledge among each other, both in the formal and informal social contexts (Rientes & Nolan, 2014). The social network theory was initially investigated in the field of sociolinguistics, such as for understanding language variation and change in the social context (see Labov, 1972; Milroy, 1987; Edwards, 1992). Trudgill (2011) similarly outlined a myriad of his past sociolinguistics studies in a recent publication, and postulated that language is a product of various social networks and structures, rather than a random occurrence. Studies in second language acquisition have also highlighted the importance of SNT. Rientes & Nolan (2014) have stated that social networks are the primary determinant to academic learning and performance. Li Wei (1994) further supported this notion by observing that the makeup of a person’s social network (particularly the ethnic composition) had a far greater impact on their language selection than other social variables such as gender or age.

Kurata (2010) valued informal social relations established by a subject as a chief agent for Second Language (L2) learning thus further signifying the relationship between individual social networks and language acquisition. The language learner may capitalise on language socialisation by latching onto a native speaker socially and developing a master-apprentice type of relationship, thereby enhancing their experience and increasing language proficiency (Dewey et al., 2013). Evidence revealing that social networks are not isolated social factors, but active influencers of language development best summarises the relevance of SNT when investigating language usage (Chambers, 2009).

**Capturing Social Networks: Social Network Analyses**

With the theoretical framework for this study established, the next step would be to look at methods for testing and experimenting the research question to determine significance. The methodology selected in this study for capturing social networks and measuring their impact on language attainment is Social Network Analyses. Individual language learning factors may be identified using SNA and utilised for predictive, qualitative, or quantitative analyses. The critical component of a successful SNA lies in the strength of the question-stem (Rientes & Nolan, 2014). This impacts what types of networks and desired linguistic phenomena a researcher can explore. Considering most language learners are bilingual or multilingual, the strength of social network analyses in predicting language selection for such a community of people adds to the validity of the framework in this study (Lanza & Svendsen, 2007).

SNA is also considered as a useful tool for investigating language maintenance and shifts in expatriate and immigrant communities (Valazquez, 2012). This social measurement tool provides a means to compare specific differences in relationships resulting from pressures of social behaviours. Examples of findings supporting this claim will be discussed further in the ‘previous studies’ section of the literature review. Bergs (2000) supports Labov’s approval of using adjusted or modified SNA for analysing languages and their variation since there has been little change with the laws of language over history.

**THE BOARDING SCHOOL SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT**

Boarding school is an educational provision that can be found all around the world and across various social classes and curricula. There are certain difficulties linked with boarding education such as psychological, logistical or financial concerns. However, there are positive values that have been identified for adolescents that cannot be underestimated. The curriculum in a boarding school does not merely consist of the academic subjects offered, but also the requirement for a student to work for their basic needs through self-reliance and independence. The opportunity to form a diverse variety of social networks is one of the most significant facets of the boarding provision (Ayer & Stone, 2006). All social actions have *significant* consequences in a boarding school; you live where you work (study), where you eat, and where you socialise. It places pressure on the students to maintain positive relations and improve their overall social environment.

**Understanding social networks in SA and its impact on SLA.** There is a vast difference between learning a target language in a foreign classroom setting, versus among host people while being immersed in their language and culture. Drawing on research with exchange students at an American and a British university, Bochner et. al (1977; 1985) suggest that students belong to three types of social networks and friendship patterns in the study abroad context, these include: 1) monocultural network (co-national friendship(s)), 2) bicultural network (host national friendship(s)), and 3) multicultural network (‘other; national friendship(s)). There are a number of advantages and opportunities to learning English in a study abroad (SA) or boarding school environment. Geeraert et al. (2014) claimed that although initially a close proximity to co-nationals has a stress reducing effect, long term it can be cancerous to adjustment and understanding of the target culture. Research literature on immigrant adjustment outlines several beneficial effects when it comes to intercultural interaction between the hosts and the visiting learners (Rientes & Nolan, 2014). There is a strong facilitation of assimilation in SA environments as well as improved performance due to reduced uncertainty in such settings. By providing a vehicle for language socialisation, social networks in a second language SA class become pivotal to language acquisition (Dewey et al., 2013). A deeper understanding of SLA could result from the research of social theory and networking in SA settings.

**Programme management in SA.**Another advantage of SA is the opportunity for intervention to cross-cultural socialising, allowing language programme managers to ensure randomised grouping of students working on authentic activities, thus developing stronger learning links and cross-cultural friendships in each division (Rientes & Nolan, 2014). If guidelines are given to L2 learners on methods to interact, many social obstacles can be avoided. The social benefits of SA and boarding are at risk if programmes rely purely on indiscriminate chance meetings of students. It is therefore critical to facilitate the opportunity for socialising in an organised fashion to benefit the students (Dewey et al., 2013). Kurata (2010) discovered concerns when a contradiction was noted between the language learning activity and socialising activity of three L2 students. The inconsistencies in the programme lead to further issues with the social interactions eventually impeding some of the benefits and desired learning outcomes. Something as simple as suggesting suitable subtopics to groups could go a long way for learners.

**Location.** The location of a study abroad programme can also play a significant role in the language acquisition quest of its students. Dewey et al. (2013) found significant differences in the progress of Arabic learners who spent time in Jordan versus Egypt. The contrast came down to the ability to access the local population for informal conversations, which proved much more difficult, in particular for female learners, in Egypt than the more open and relaxed encounters documented in Jordon.

**Family and social capital.**For younger learners, the fact that they are not situated with their parents may also have a social consequence. Velazquez (2012) identified that there are increased instances of socialisation in immigrant children coming from households with a high frequency of parental interaction. There is a degree of family capital that can be transmitted onto the children that is lost in the boarding context. Separation from family is a major element of boarding or SA programmes, and for many this is a viable (and successful) option; however it may not work for all households (Ayer & Stone 2006). Despite the social advantages of immersion into the target language culture, there are clearly a few limitations of SA and boarding programmes for young language learners when one factors the loss of family capital.

Depending on the structure and context of the study environment, social capital may be lost or gained as a result of SA. Many students form lifelong connections and friendships while they are studying abroad. These connections continue to pay off long term as their colleagues enter the work force following their studies. In other instances, social capital may also be impeded in SA settings. In a mixed day and boarding school, Bass (2007) observed that boarders were isolated from their family and home communities, as well as from their day school peers, limiting the overall social exposure. This may not always bear a negative consequence, however. There are boarding schools across Africa for underprivileged children whose home environments are plagued with instability, poverty, and a lack of the basic needs required to learn (Bass, 2007). In such environments, a separation from the family and home life is considered as an advantage for the social and academic development of the child.

**PREVIOUS STUDIES**

Listed below are previous studies relating to social network theory, student motivation, and personality as a variable of language learning. The studies span over a very broad time period, commencing in the early 1970’s when social network theory truly came alive, until present day. The findings demonstrate the evolution of network theory research over the years, signifying the relevance of this framework in the linguistic and sociolinguistic community.

**The Influences of Social Networks**

Labov (1972) conducted a network study on young African Americans from poor education backgrounds who were associated with two street gangs in Harlem, New York City. The rules of gang life prevented their members from crossing certain boundaries, which socially isolated the subjects at times. However, it was found that despite this segregation, there was a stronger similarity among gang members in different communities both linguistically and socially resulting from a shared set of values, activities and creeds more so than “lames” (those un-associated with a gang) hailing from the same neighbourhoods (Labov, 1972).

Eckert’s (1989) study of the social differences between the “Jocks” and “Burnout” networks in Detroit suburb high schools rendered some evidence in relation to social class and a child’s network affiliation. The parents’ social class was found to correlate to the social group that their child associated with. This gave evidence that networks and class are actually independent, although overlapping, social units.

Young adolescent motivation in a peer group setting was investigated by Ryan (2001). Middle school groups were analysed using social network analyses. The results showed a significant influence of peer groups on a student’s attitude and achievements over the school year. The study did not demonstrate any correlation with peer groups and a student’s value in the importance of success or education in general however.

**The Effects of Social Variables on the Second Language**

Fathman (1976) administered oral examinations at the commencement and end of the school year to approximately 500 elementary and high school second language students in the Washington D.C. area. Several independent variables such as the time spent in ESL class, methodology of teaching, class size, and number of foreigners in a class were considered. Fathman found that all groups made significant progress, however those that were in settings encouraging greater usage of English for communication had a more marked improvement.

Dewaele and Furnham (2000) researched personality and French oral inter-language scores. They related the oral inter-language skill measures of their Flemish university student subjects against their extroversion results. It was found that the extroverts had a higher level of fluency than the introverts. Extroversion was not necessarily considered a predictor for L2 language performance however. Similarly, Wakamoto (2000) measured the tendency of Japanese language learners to be extroverted or introverted, and used these statistics to attempt and determine the most common used language learning strategy (LLS) according to each personality type. There was a significant correlation found with preference of utilising social-affective strategies among extroverts, while introverts displayed no significant preference.

Kurata (2010) conducted a case study on a Japanese learner’s interactions with two native Japanese speakers residing in Australia. Their results found that exposure to the foreign language as both a speaker and a listener, increased the overall learning opportunities. L2 opportunities are constructed socially, and thus there is a need to understand how to provide an environment for learners to interact.

Dewey et al. (2013) sought to shine light on the events leading to social network formation in language learners. A similar curriculum and language provision was offered to two groups of University students in two different locations (Egypt and Jordan). The dominating influences discovered by the group were the location of the programme, and the type of programme interventions offered to aid the learners in socialising with the host population. The study could not identify a significant difference between the benefits of interacting with Native speaking peers (local Arabic students) versus extended network interactions (shop keepers, custodians etc.).

**THE STUDY**

 Based on the aforementioned rationale, this study takes up the following question for investigation: *Is there a relationship between internal and external social factors of an EAL boarding student against their English language progress?*This research question incorporates results of social network analyses data (student internal and external social factors as independent variable), and measures it against the dependent variable of progress in English attainment. A study of this design will allow for quantitative records to be included in the findings, providing a statistical and objective comparison for relation. The hypothesis of this study is that the subjects who surround themselves in highly dense multiplex relationships using the target language will demonstrate the steepest rate of progress in English language attainment. Additionally, it is hypothesised that higher levels of integration in the school ethos will also lead to higher progress results among the participants.

This study seeks to determine if there is a relationship between Year 10 EAL boarding students’ social networks, and their English language attainment. The study endeavours to plot each social characteristic of the subjects against their English attainment progress to establish if there are any parallels between certain social tendencies and language achievement. The results will be summarised both with quantitative data analyses of linear regression, in addition to a qualitative analyses of responses provided from the subjects and their instructor. Therefore, an overall mixed-method approach will be used to relate the findings of this study.

**Participant and Site Selection**

 The population of this study consisted of all Year 10 full boarding students who were receiving English language support in a UAE based ENC school. This comprised of a total of 11 students hailing from different nationalities, genders and ages. Full boarding implies that the children were residing in the school throughout the entire term, only leaving for major holidays such as winter, spring and summer breaks.

**The curriculum.** Year 10 students in the 13 year ENC system are typically 14 years of age. Year 10 is also the first year of the IGCSE programme, a two year course consisting of a minimum of six subjects. The school attended by the subjects allowed students to take a maximum of 12 IGCSE subjects, although in the case of the EAL students, this was usually limited due to their English language proficiency.

**Age and year group.** One major factor considered in this study was the age of the sample population. Adolescence is the commencement of a downward spiral in academic achievement and motivation for young learners (Ryan, 2001). As such it was imperative that motivation was considered when measuring social effects on English language attainment. This study additionally required a certain level of comprehension and maturity to elicit the required data on the participants’ social networks.Year 10 was specifically selected because the age range of 15-17 demonstrated the necessary developmental capacity to complete the questionnaire prepared for the study. Additionally, this sample group were going through adolescence, presenting a unique opportunity to examine a critical period of growth and development that would undoubtedly render interesting social network results.

**Nationality, gender and L1 (first language) of the participants.** There was a healthy representation of genders and nationalities among the 11 subjects of this population. Most of the participants were male, representing eight out of the 11 students. There were six different nationalities represented among only 11 students. The largest denomination came from Russia (four students), followed closely by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) representing three of the subjects. It should also be noted that two additional subjects in the study came from Russian speaking countries, further signifying the dominance of this demographic in the boarding house population. Table 1 outlines all of the sample populations’ independent variables.

*Table 1.* Subject profiles

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Pseudo Name** | **Year Group** | **Nationality** | **L1/Primary Language** | **Gender** | **Years in the boarding school** | **Age in years at time of the study** |
| SUBJECT 1 | 10 | Iran | Persian | Male | 2 | 16 |
| SUBJECT 2 | 10 | Russian | Russian | Male | 2 | 16 |
| SUBJECT 3 | 10 | Russian | Russian | Female | 1 | 16 |
| SUBJECT 4 | 10 | S. Korean | Korean | Male | 2 | 15 |
| SUBJECT 5 | 10 | KSA | Arabic | Male | 2 | 16 |
| SUBJECT 6 | 10 | Russian | Russian | Male | 1 | 17 |
| SUBJECT 7 | 10 | KSA | Arabic | Male | 2 | 16 |
| SUBJECT 8 | 10 | Russian | Russian | Female | 1 | 16 |
| SUBJECT 9 | 10 | KSA | Arabic | Male | 1 | 16 |
| SUBJECT 10 | 10 | Kazakhstan | Russian | Male | 1 | 16 |
| SUBJECT 11 | 10 | Turkmenistan | Russian | Female | 1 | 16 |

**Setting.** The site of this study takes place at a private School in Dubai, and all through day and boarding school. The school offers the ENC, in line with that of independent schools in the UK, both in educational standard as well as ethos and culture. True to this, it incorporated a traditional house system that was applied to both the boarding students and the day students attending the school. The school was a second branch of another UK based educational institution. The relationship and link between the schools boosted credibility among the various UK competitors in the region. Table 2 displays the breakdown of each school’s profile.

*Table 2.* Cross-cultural and cross-curricular observation of Boarding Schools

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| UK | UAE |
| * Founded in 1557
* 650 pupils, ages 13 to 18
* English National Curriculum/GCSE & A-Levels
* 90% pupils boarding, 5 % of boarders receiving EAL support
* Offered weekly and full Boarding
* Approximately 32,000 GBP/year boarding and tuition fees
 | * Founded in 2007
* 2300 pupils, ages 3 to 18 (boarding available from 11 and above)
* English National Curriculum/IGCSE & IB Diploma
* 12% of eligible pupils boarding; 75% of boarders receiving EAL support
* Offered weekly and full Boarding
* Approximately 25,000 GBP/year (average) boarding and tuition fees
 |

The school boasts one of the highest annual tuition fees in the country, and has a plot size of over one million square feet. Some of the distinct features of the school other than its unique boarding offering are the world class sport, academic, arts, and music facilities. The school also prides itself on a rigorous academic standard, with very rigid entrance requirements for all of its students. This is one of the primary contributing factors to the low boarding numbers, as English language proficiency often times prevents entry into the school without intensive and costly additional support. The number of students in the school at the time of the study was approximately 2320 across, with only 70 children residing in the boarding facilities.

Boarding was offered to both girls and boys in the selected private School. The boys resided in an on-campus building, while the girls lived in two offsite villas approximately 15 kilometres away from the school. Both genders followed very similar schedules during the week, as well as over the weekends. Students resided together according to their year groups as per the boarding house policy. Additionally, to encourage cross-cultural socialisation and the use of English language, students of different nationalities were assigned as housemates who were rotated on an annual basis unless there was a need to adjust during the year (new joiners, student request etc.) A major concern and ethical consideration of this study was the age of the subjects. The entire population were under the legal age of consent (18 years). The boarding Heads provided the required written consent for the children to participate in the administration of the social network questionnaire under their “loco parantis” role.

**Data Collection and Analyses**

**Instrumentation.** The study employed structured SNA questionnaires, semi-structured teacher questionnaires, and CEFR English attainment results. The questionnaires were designed in a format that asked the students to make a “Top 10” list in a similar fashion to how they see their favourite songs and films listed in the media. This Top 10 list consisted of the relations who the participants communicated with the most on a daily basis. The questionnaire was semi-structured, both capturing the networks using the top 10 list, and fielding open-ended questions from the participants eliciting more details about relationships with their social contacts.

**SNA questionnaires.** The following social variables were captured about each of the subject’s listed relations in the first part of the questionnaire: 1) Relationship type (e.g. boarding housemate, day school classmate, friend, family, teacher, etc.); 2) Gender of the relation; 3) Frequency of communication; 4) Nationality of the relation; 5) Language most frequently communicated in; 6) Most frequent type of communication (e.g. in person, digital, etc.); 7) Plexity of the relation (i.e. uniplex or multiplex). The data analyses consisted primarily of the SNA results from the variables captured in the questionnaire; however additional open-ended questions included in the second part of the questionnaire were also collected from the subjects to gain a better understanding of the nature of the relationship (see Appendix 1). The final and third part intended to measure any further external factors. Analyses were conducted in the both quantitative and qualitatively, in addition to the use of descriptive statistics.

**CEFR English attainment results.** English attainment scores were selected as the dependent variable in this study. All students were administered CEFR examinations upon entry into the school, and were also re-tested under the same framework at the end of the academic year. Considering the examinations are internationally recognised and standardised, this form of measurement was considered to be reliable and consistent for this study’s purpose. The study used the progress (movement in levels per skill) for the dependant variable. All social variables were measured against the change in levels for the four skills and overall marker to determine if there were any inferences that could be made.

**Teacher semi-structured questionnaire.** One risk of administering questionnaires to participants is the prevalence of self-report bias. The study incorporated teacher feedback questionnaires for each child as a means for validation of their responses. The following questions emailed to the EAL teacher to answer against each of the participants:

1. How social is XX? Who does (s)he usually mingle with, inside and outside of the classroom?

2. Does XX have a tendency to code-switch between English and their mother tongue? If so where and when?

3. How does XX fair in terms of communicative English Skills?

4. How does XX fair in terms of their grammatical/lexical Skills?

5. What types of assessments (formative and/or summative) does (s)he receive in her EAL class?

6. What do you think may be hindering their progress in English?

7. What do you think aids their progress in English?

8. What are three words you would use to describe XX?

9. How would you rate them on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being delinquent and 10 being model student?

Feedback was collected directly from the instructor and then thematically analysed via qualitative description.

**SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSES RESULTS**

Many social variables were captured from the student questionnaire. The study chose to measure these results against the internal independent variables of gender and number of years in the boarding school, in addition to the dependant variable of English progress skills. Considering the modest size of the sample, there were no statistically significant correlations determined. However, these results will ascertain whether there are certain trends or social behaviours that encourage a steeper rate of progress and attainment in the English language. The results were determined by plotting social data (percentage of English Usage in top 10, percentage of Multiplex relations in top 10 etc.) from the questionnaire of each subject against their attainment progress in the five language skills. There were three social categories of comparison; grouping the entire population together, grouping by gender, and grouping by number of years in boarding. Trend or regression lines were added to these charts, and an R squared value was calculated to measure the predicted variance of progress resulting from each of the social behaviours. The R squared value provides a reference as the goodness of the fit of a model.

**Most Significant Positive Overall Social Influences of Progress in English Attainment**

Overall progress showed positive trendlines for three categories. The multiplex relationships dominated the top with a 26% R squared value, with a slight exception for girl boarders.

Multi-relations finished in second at 11 %, with English usage taking the last place with a 9% reading.

**Most Significant Negative Social Influences of Progress in English Attainment**

The top two negative influencers of overall English progress were non school friends and uniplex relationships. They reported overall R squared values of 42% and 25% respectively.

 **Summary of findings.** Having reviewed the impact of certain social variables on the overall progress in English, it is evident that there is a relationship with the density of social ties and English language usage among relations and increased progress results. The encouraging plexity results contradict Labov’s (2001) findings that showed a derivation from native speech patterns when learners were part of close knit networks. Benefits of using the target language on the other hand were supported by Kurata (2010), who demonstrated the benefits of social exposure to the target language when it came to learning opportunities.

There was also a clear negative impact of non school friend relations and weaker uniplex relationships on the rate of overall English progress in this study. These social relations both have fairly strong negative relationships with the achievement in English skills. Interestingly, family, boarding house, and day school relations had a very low impact on the rate of progress in results. Perhaps there is a lack of opportunity for significant interaction and socialisation with these relations, preventing them from adding or subtracting value to the language learning experience. Another conclusion drawn from this study was the minimal impact of verbal and written communication on results. This demonstrated that there is little significance in *how* the subjects are communicating versus *who* they are communicating to.

**Teacher interview responses and individual profiles.** The teacher interview questions were collected as a method to validate the information observed in the social network questionnaires. Appendix 2 contains the teacher question responses against every subject in the study. The feedback from the teacher interview questionnaire gave a strong indication that the questionnaires were answered accurately by the students by demonstrating consistencies noted between responses and the instructor’s observations. Gender of the subject seemed to have an effect on the teacher ratings.

**Individual differences.** The results of the various data collected in this study provided a profile of the individual differences of participants across the range of abilities. Below are four profiles of the top two and bottom two achievers of the population.

***Lower acheiveing’ profiles***. Subject 6 was very confident and demonstrated a level of pride in his profile. His instructor was concerned with the number of Russian speakers in his peer group and his belief that some tasks were beneath him. His communicative English and grammatical/lexical skills were strong however, and he received an overall rating of 8/10. His Top 10 questionnaire supported the concerns of the teacher, showing a 70% Russian speaking network. However, his communications were predominantly in-person and across a wide range of types of relations. His overall progress was fairly low, only increasing by a single level and recording no progress in his reading levels. He was only in the boarding programme for a single year which may also be attributed to his limited progress.

Subject 8’s profile slightly contradicted her English progress results. Both her questionnaire and teacher interview feedback indicated a high level of socialisation, and she scored a 10/10 in her teacher ranking. In contrast, she reported the lowest level of progress, with only a half level increase in overall English (the only skill she recorded improvement was in speaking). She surrounded herself with L1 relations, which was a hindrance according to the teacher. Subject 8 may have limited linguistic or academic aptitude considering her healthy social profile did support her progress in language, as was the case with other participants.

***Higher achieveing’ profiles***. Subject 2 had one of the highest performances in terms of English progress, increasing his overall results by 2.5 levels. His socialisation was predominately in his L1 Russian language, with 80% of his Top 10 coming from this category. He was described as social by the EAL teacher, although she noted that his excessive use of Russian was one of the hindrances to learning English. Most of his contacts were family members; however this had a positive influence according to the instructor, who noted that Subject 2 had a very supportive brother living in the region. Subject 5 also scored the highest overall progress of 2.5 levels during his two years with the boarding school. He did not identify himself as a social person, however the number of in-person contacts and the balance of percentage of English speaking Top 10 relations showed a healthy and dense social network. This was also supported by the instructor’s feedback in the interview questions. Subject 5’s maturity was highlighted, and he took an overall teacher rating of 9 out of 10, the highest among the male subjects.

**DISCUSSION**

This study sought to identify social behaviours and tendencies that could potentially affect the English progress of teenage language learners. There have been a number of social network analyses conducted worldwide on language students; however there is no such research available in the UAE. Another unique aspect of this study was the boarding element of the learners’ environment, a facility that is not offered widely in the Arab world, but is rooted in the traditions of many European and Western high class families. By identifying social behaviours in UAE boarding schools that positively or negatively impact language skills, the Researcher could look at ways to increase and improve this provision in an area overwhelmed with the need for English language instruction.

The plexity or density of social relations proved to be the most significant social factor in relation to progress in English language skills. Multiplex and multi-relational ties plot against various language skills’ progress both had the highest R squared values of any other social variables. These results support the boarding ethos considering one major goal of boarding programmes is to establish life-long bonds among their students that follow them beyond their education. The results demonstrated that constructing higher density relationships may in fact hasten the progress of most English language skills.

L2 language use was also found to have a positive trendline when calculated against English progress. The regression analyses results of this social variable were smaller than anticipated by the Researcher however. Nevertheless, there was enough consistency in the readings across all language skills to warrant a further look into the use of target language to improve the overall English attainment. Findings by researchers such as Dewey et al. (2013) indicate the influential strength of language development when learners are in touch with natives or the target language speakers.

Types of relationships had either negative influences on language progress according to the results of this study, or little to no influence at all. In particular, non school friends seemed to have an almost toxic effect on language skills, recording the highest rates of R squared (in some cases up to 50%) with a negative directionality. Most non school friends were coming from the L1 background of the subjects’, which minimised their target language utilisation time with the increased exposure.

**PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Knowing that there is an advantage to higher density relationships highlights the need and requirement for teachers to try and increase the opportunities for the boarding students to mingle and bond with their relations. One recommendation would be to provide more social settings between the day and boarding students. For example, the school could perhaps hold monthly banquets or social events where day students are invited to stay on campus throughout the evening and dine or socialise with their boarding peers. This would also provide the opportunity for the learners to utilise the target language with a greater frequency, which was also shown as advantageous in the study’s results.

Implications of the negative findings may also be considered by the school. It was demonstrated that the influence of non school friends had a negative effect on language progress; therefore once again there is pressure to maintain the social focus on the internal relationships such as boarding house or day school mates, as well as instructor bonds. One opportunity to discourage an increased uptake in socialising with non school friends is by forming more structured schedules. By providing alternatives and engaging the boarders in other interests, there would be a natural drop in social interaction with external relations, which would improve their progress rates if the findings of this study are correct.

The advantages attributed to the boarding provision on English language learning could also justify a new strategy for teachers to improve weaker EAL candidates’ results. Since there is evidence demonstrating strong progress as a result of the boarding school lifestyle, this provision could be extended to other EAL students who are struggling to keep up with the demands of the curriculum in the school. The fact that weekly boarding is an option provides an opportunity even for children whose families are residing within the same city to attend and benefit from the structured and monitored environment.

The findings also revealed that virtual speech communities, established by computer mediated communication played a vital role in the formation and maintenance of social networks. It is therefore advised that blended learning or computer assisted language learning should be encouraged in order to foster communication in the target language and establish relationships in regulated as well as unregulated contexts.

**LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study had a very ambitious approach to capture and understand the social networks of a population of 11 EAL boarding students. The primary limitation was the modest size of the group. With only 11 participants, it was difficult to produce meaningful statistics. Only hints of relationships could be identified and not actual statistically significant correlations. One of the reasons attributing to such a small sample was the physical limit of number of boarders in the region studied. It would be beneficial if there was a higher representation of UAE boarding in the future, allowing a researcher to compare results across a number of different populations to determine a greater number of significant results.

Another limitation identified was the lack of access to the parents of the subjects. Although data was collected on the education level of the mother and father, there was little information about the family environment of the subjects available. Details such as parent’s marital status, income levels, religious beliefs etc could all have contributed to the social blueprint that the Researcher attempted to collect on the participants.

The population in this study were all attending the same EAL class for language support. The advantage of using that instructor’s perspective was that she had the specific insight into their social and language development considering her daily interaction with them. It may have been beneficial to include feedback of other teaching staff members however, to get a broader view on the social and behavioural patterns of each participant. One way to enhance this study in the future would be to include a student interview as part of the data collection process. Interviewing candidates would provide better insight into their social profiles, as well as other attributes such as personality and confidence.

**AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The participants in this study were all Year 10 IGCSE boarders. There is definitely a scope to continue to follow this group as they work their way through the remaining years of secondary school education. It is important to acknowledge that social network is a flexible independent variable; hence there is need for additional longitudinal data. The rigour of IGCSE curriculum created a natural barrier of entry for a number of EAL students looking to study in the region with a boarding provision. It would be beneficial to try and find other curricula boarding programmes, and compare the progress in English to see if there is an impact of curriculum on achievement. Likewise, an ethnographic approach which provides a more rigorous analysis of each indiviuals’ social mobility and literacy practices remains an area for further research.

The school that was researched has a founding campus in the UK, also offering the boarding provision. There is an opportunity to look into cross-sectional research across the different campuses, comparing the progress and social profiles of students in the UK versus the UAE. The incorporation of exchange programmes can open the opportunities to see the impact of location and culture on academic development in an ENC school. A new phenomenon of observing reactions and effects to a drastic shift in social network would be added in a cross-sectional study of this nature.

**CONCLUSION**

The 21st century is an era marked by technological growth, globalisation, and constant pressures for development. This environment has placed an immense amount of stress on language learners to develop ways of understanding and communicating with cultures all over the world. The usual focus areas of language acquisition includes themes such as communicative practices, student centred teaching strategies, and lexical and grammatical development. This study, however, highlights the need for greater understanding of the social implications on language development, especially considering the sudden and sharp social changes that are witnessed in modern society. In light of this information, two conclusions can be drawn from the findings. First, there is potential to impact a student’s language progress by encouraging or avoiding certain social behaviours. Second, there is a need to fuse structural as well as non-structural factors, in order to capture the complex and dynamic systems of language learning, as postulated by the complexity theory (Larsen-Freeman, 2011, 2015). It is hoped that this study has paved the way to future research in language learning and teaching, which adopts an ecological and sociocultural approach, in order to better understand a less analysed population within and beyond the Gulf region. From a pedagogical perspective, it is also important that teachers build and maintain an intimate knowledge of their learners, especially for vulnerable and underage students. .

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**Appendix 1: Social Questionnaire Format**

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**Appendix 2: Semi-strcutured questionnaire results**

