The impact of oral English proficiency on humanitarian migrants' experiences of settling in Australia

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Abstract

Key drivers for migrants' social integration are education, employment, and skills in the dominant language of the settlement country. Data from Building a New Life in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants were used to examine migrants' English proficiency and how oral English proficiency facilitated or hindered participation in activities that may help them become self-sufficient and settle. Participants were 2,399 humanitarian migrants interviewed in the first wave of data collection (during 2013/14). Before arrival in Australia, 80.1% reported they spoke English not well or not at all. After arrival, oral English proficiency was a statistically significant predictor of self-sufficiency (knowing how to look for a job, get help in an emergency, etc.) explaining 21% of the variance while controlling for confounding variables such as age and education. After English proficiency, age (neither too young nor too old), gender (male), education (more than 12 years), and time since arrival (more than one year) were significant predictors of self-sufficiency. Identification of factors that predict self-sufficiency informs the understanding of people who provide support for humanitarian migrants. These findings indicate poor oral English skills may profoundly hinder humanitarian migrants' ability to settle and highlight the importance of supporting migrants' English learning.

Key words

English proficiency, humanitarian migrants, refugees, participation, self-sufficiency, settlement

Introduction

The number of displaced people escaping conflict, persecution and human rights violations is increasing. In 2015, 63.3 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, a record number not seen since the end of the Second World War (UNHCR 2016). This total included 21.3 million refugees (humanitarian migrants), 40.8 million internally displaced persons, and 3.2 million asylum seekers. Over half (51%) of humanitarian migrants were under 18 years of age, 46% were between 18 and 59, and 3% were over 60 years of age (UNHCR 2016). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), people may be forced to migrate in order to escape persecution or discrimination (based on race, ethnicity, gender, or religion), because their country has been devastated by ethnic or religious conflict or natural disasters, or because they are victims of trafficking (IOM 2013).

The movement of people between countries has social and economic implications for source and destination countries as well as for migrants themselves (IOM 2013). The socioeconomic profiles of migrants can have positive and negative implications for a country's labour market (whether they are skilled or unskilled workers), population structure (home language, age, gender, etc.), and for the provision of services, according to the World Migration Report describing 25,000 first-generation migrants in more than 150 countries (IOM 2013). Consequently, there is growing recognition that migration can positively contribute to socioeconomic development, as long as effective management policies exist in the destination country (IOM 2013).

Migrants' settlement

Settlement services in western countries such as the USA and Australia aim to assist humanitarian migrants to successfully transition to life in their destination country and achieve self-sufficiency as soon as possible (Department of Social Services, DSS 2016a; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2016). Self-sufficiency means

migrants can participate in the community to the best of their ability and minimise long-term dependence on support services (DSS 2016a). Activities aimed at helping migrants become self-sufficient focus on critical skills and knowledge needed to live and function independently in society, such as accessing services, education, employment, legal and cultural activities (DSS 2016b). Individualised support is based on assessment (DSS 2016a), because even when humanitarian migrants have the same country of birth, they may be diverse in terms of personal factors (e.g., gender, education, language skills, employment experience) and migration factors (e.g., immigration status) (Taylor and Stanovic 2005). Loss of identity associated with leaving jobs, skills, language, and culture through forced migration means humanitarian migrants may face a formidable task to rebuild their identity in a culturally diverse context, when migrating to a Minority world country from a Majority world country (Colic-Peisker and Walker 2003).

Numerous studies have been conducted addressing humanitarian migrants' settlement experiences and factors that contribute to positive settlement. Significant predictors of wellbeing in humanitarian migrants include region of birth, time in the destination country, and experiences of discrimination (Correa-Velez, Gifford, and Barnett 2010).Younger people appear to adapt more readily, learning the language and gaining employment (Colic-Peisker and Walker 2003; Correa-Velez, Gifford, and Barnett 2010). Child minding can limit women's opportunities for education and employment (Sulaiman-Hill and Thompson 2012), with women more likely to be socially isolated (Markovic, Manderson, and Kelaher 2002; Sulaiman-Hill and Thompson 2012) and their well-being may subsequently affect their children (Colic-Peisker and Walker 2003).

Migrants' proficiency in the language of their country of residence has implications for settlement in their new country. Language proficiency affects migrants'

ability to participate in education and remunerative employment (Chiswick, Lee, and Miller 2006; Hwang, Xi, and Cao 2010; Blake et al. 2016), to access health services (Chin et al. 2006; Shi, Lebrun, and Tsai 2009; Zhou 2015) and appears to be a key factor affecting the ability of migrants to participate in a wide range of community activities (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, DIBP 2014; Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS, 2015a). Migrants report fewer social connections and need help building a support network in their new country (IOM 2013). Many factors are interrelated, such as poor English proficiency creating a barrier to accessing health services (Markovic, Manderson, and Kelaher 2002), while poor health (mental and physical) can have a significant impact on workforce participation (Khoo 2010).

Australia's multicultural and migrant context

Australia, as a country whose cultural and linguistic diversity is continually reshaped by migration, offers an opportunity to consider humanitarian migrants' settlement experiences. Australia ranks fourth among countries within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for the largest proportion of overseas-born residents, behind Luxembourg (43.7%), Switzerland (28.3%), and New Zealand (28.2%) (OECD 2016). In the 2011 census, over a quarter (26.0%) of Australia's population reported they were born overseas (ABS 2013). The source countries for migration are changing from European to Asian and consequently, linguistic diversity is changing. The five most common languages spoken at home after English are Mandarin (1.6%), Italian (1.4%), Arabic (1.3%), Cantonese (1.2%), and Greek (1.2%) (ABS 2015b).

Migration appears crucial to Australia's future prosperity. By 2050, it is estimated migration will contribute $1,625 billion to the Gross Domestic Product and increase the workforce participation rate by 15.7% (Migration Council Australia 2015). Humanitarian migrants also make an important contribution through business ownership

(Collins and Krivokapic-Skoko 2016), workforce participation, and volunteering within the community (Hugo 2011). Migrants, especially those with non-English speaking backgrounds, possess language skills which support Australia's ability to participate in a global economy (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2014). While 23.2% of Australians reported speaking another language at home in the 2011 census, 13.1% also claimed to speak English well or very well. Multilingual speakers who also spoke English *very well* were more likely to have full-time employment, high income, and post-graduate qualifications, than monolingual English speaking Australians (Blake et al. 2016).

Australians have a more positive attitude to immigration than residents in other western countries. In 2014, more than half (58%) of Australians surveyed in the Social Cohesion Report thought the immigration intake was *about right* or *too low*, while American and European surveys have found disapproval of immigration in the range of 60 to 75% (Scanlon Foundation 2014). Similar attitudes exist towards humanitarian migrants. In 2016, Australia was ranked the fifth most welcoming out of 27 countries surveyed in the Welcoming Refugees Index (Amnesty International 2016). Notwithstanding this, there are concerns negative perceptions of boat arrival asylum seekers will change supportive attitudes to migration as some politicians and media foster the perception that these arrivals indicate the government has poor control of migration (Hugo 2014).

A comparison of immigration laws and policies from nine countries, including Australia indicate a trend toward more restrictive regulations since the 1990s, as well as differential treatment of certain groups, such as skilled migrants (Beine et al. 2016). Australia's immigration policies have changed significantly in recent years as the migration program is established annually in consideration of economic and labour force forecasts, net overseas migration and community views (DIBP 2017). Up to

190,000 permanent migrants will settle in Australia in 2015-2016 through various programs (DIBP 2015a). There are up to 128,550 skilled migrants' places, 57,400 places for family sponsored migrants, 565 places for special eligibility migrants, and 3,485 permanent child visa places (DIBP 2015a). Australia's humanitarian migrant program will provide 13,750 places (DIBP 2015b). This program has an onshore component that offers protection to refugees who apply for asylum after arrival and an offshore component that covers people usually outside their home country. The offshore component is comprised of a Special Humanitarian Program and a Refugee category. Most applicants in the Refugee category are identified and referred to Australia for resettlement by UNHCR (DSS 2014).

Context of the current study

Data used in this article were from the first wave of participants in Building a New Life in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants (BNLA). BNLA is conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) on behalf of the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS). BNLA is the first comprehensive national study to examine the lives of humanitarian migrants at regular intervals across their settlement in Australia and aims to support migration policy development as well as improve existing programs for humanitarian migrants. The project will follow approximately 1,500 migrating units comprised of a principal applicant (PA), who received initial approval to migrate, and secondary applicants (SA) who are members of the household migrating on the same application. Recruitment of the BNLA sample was via the Australian Government's Settlement Database. Data is being collected annually in 5 waves from 2013 to 2018. Waves 1, 3, and 5 involve home visits and telephone interviews are being conducted in Waves 2 and 4 (DSS 2015b). The current paper reports on data from wave 1.

Study aims

This paper aims to identify the impact of English proficiency on humanitarian migrants' participation in Australian society. Specifically,

1. To describe the cultural and linguistic diversity of humanitarian migrants in Australia from the first wave of the BNLA (home language, age, gender, etc.).
2. To describe humanitarian migrants' self-reported English proficiency (i.e., understanding, speaking, reading, and writing) and their efforts to improve their English proficiency.
3. To determine humanitarian migrants' perceptions of how their oral English proficiency (i.e., understanding and speaking) affects their participation in activities that may help them to settle and become self-sufficient (get a job, make friends, etc.).

METHOD

Participants

A total of 2,399 Australian humanitarian migrants (from 1,509 migrating units) participated in the first wave of the BNLA. Migrants came from 35 countries and spoke 50 languages in their homes [2] (Department of Social Services 2015a). The majority of participants came from the Middle East and Central Asia. The top five countries of birth were Iraq (*n* = 944, 39.3%), Afghanistan (*n* = 611, 25.5%), Iran (*n* = 286, 11.9%), Myanmar (*n* = 135, 5.6%), and Bhutan (*n* = 84, 3.5%) (see Table 1). The five most common home languages were Arabic (*n* = 546, 22.8%), Assyrian Neo-Aramaic (*n* = 426, 17.8%), Persian (*n* = 399, 16.6%), Hazaraghi (*n* = 260, 10.8%), and Dari (*n* = 209, 8.7%) (see Table 2). While most participants were literate in their home language, some were not with 45.1% (*n* = 1,081) reporting their ability to read in their home language as *very well*, 20.6% (*n* = 493) as *well*, 12.2% (*n* = 292) as *not well*, and 19.8% (*n* = 475) as *not at all*. At the same time, 43.0% (*n* = 1,032) reported their ability to write in their

home language as *very well*, 20.3% (*n* = 486) as *well*, 12.3% (*n* = 296) as *not well*, and 21.8% (*n* = 523) as *not at all*.

[Table 1 and 2 near here]

Participants were aged between 15 and 75 years [3] (*M* = 35.48) with 54.5 % male (*n* = 1,307) and 45.5% female (*n* = 1,092). The majority (*n* = 1,468, 61.2%) had been in Australia for 3 to 5 months; however, 18.8% (*n* = 452) had been in country for 6 to 11 months and 11.4% (*n* = 274) for 1 to 2 years. Most participants (*n* = 2,230, 93.0%) were not currently in paid work. Participants reported their highest completed education before arrival and 15.8% (*n* = 380) never attended school, 19.7% (*n* = 473) had 6 or less years of schooling, 18.2% (*n* = 436) had 7 to 9 years of schooling, 10.8% (*n* = 258) had 10 to 11 years of schooling, 18.5% (*n* = 443) had 12 or more years of schooling, 6.0% (*n* = 143) had a trade or technical qualification, and 10.1% (*n* = 243) a university degree. PAs reported people in their immediate family experienced trauma before arrival due to extreme living conditions (*n* = 512, 33.9%), war or conflict (*n* = 865, 57.3%), violence (*n* = 324, 21.5%), imprisonment/kidnapping (*n* = 266, 17.6%), political or religious persecution (*n* = 835, 55.3%), natural disasters (*n* = 95, 6.3%) or other causes (*n* = 266, 17.6%).

Procedure

Wave 1 data collection took place between June 2013 and March 2014. A home visit was conducted utilising a survey instrument translated into 14 languages; however, 19 languages were used to complete interviews with assistance from additional interpreters. The most common languages used were Arabic, Persian, English, and Dari. Topics included demographic information, housing, language proficiency, education, employment and income, health, self-sufficiency, community support, and life in Australia. For example, participants completed two tables to report their English proficiency both before they came to Australia and currently using the following

question: “how well did/do you understand spoken English, speak English, read English, write English?” Participants selected from the following answers: *very well, well, not well,* or *not at all* (DSS 2013). Participants completed either a computer assisted self-interview using a computer tablet with audio support (*n* = 1,692, 70.5%), a computer assisted personal interview with support from a bilingual interviewer (*n* = 658, 27.4%), or an interview with assistance from an accredited interpreter (over the phone or in person) as well as an interviewer present to ask questions and record responses (*n* = 49, 2.0%). Interviews took between 35 and 55 minutes to complete (DSS, 2015b).

Data analysis

Data analysis was undertaken using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 22.0 (IBM 2013) and STATA Version 13.1 (StataCorp 2013). Missing data were removed prior to Chi-square (χ^2) and regression analysis and several variables were recoded. For example, a derived variable *oral English proficiency* was created by combining *understanding spoken English* and *speaking English,* as both skills are necessary to successfully communicate orally. (Reading and writing skills were not examined in the analyses.) In order to combine the two variables, the response values for both variables were recoded using a 4-point Likert-type scale (0 = *not at all,* 1 = *not well,* 2 = *well, and* 3 = *very well),* added together and divided by two (i.e., *understanding spoken English* plus *speaking English* divided by 2) to determine a mean score from 0 to 3. Scores were then recoded into three groups. A score of 0 was coded as *No oral English*, a score from 0.1 to 1.9 was coded as *Low oral English* and a score from 2 to 3 was coded as *High oral English*. Therefore, individuals who self-rated as *well* for *speaking English* (score of 2) and *not well* for *understanding spoken English* (score of 1) would have a mean score of 1.5 which would be recoded as *Low oral English.*

Open-ended responses were collated for why participants had not studied English since arriving in Australia. Fourteen common themes were identified and responses were categorised within themes according to gender to determine which factors most hindered participants' ability to undertake English language training.

A self-sufficiency scale was created by combining participants' responses to the following seven questions relating to their level of knowledge accessing help, information and services. Participants were asked "If you had to, would you know how to: look for a job, use public transport, get help in an emergency, use a bank service (e.g., start an account, get a loan), find out what government services and benefits are available, find out about your rights (e.g., legal rights, tenancy rights etc.), and get help from the police" (DSS 2013). The seven items used to measure self-sufficiency were assessed to ensure they were conceptually coherent and represented an internally consistent and reliable measure. Prior to assessing these items using principal components analysis, the distribution of each item was examined for outliers and missing data. Of the 2399 respondents, there were missing data for 122 cases. No imputation was undertaken and these cases were excluded from the analysis. Distributions of many of the items were skewed, indicating respondents were less likely to consider themselves self-sufficient. A principal components model was fitted to the data. Components to retain were extracted on the basis of Eigenvalues (> = 1.0) and Cattell's scree test. This resulted in one component accounting for 65.04% of the item variance. Proportions of item variance accounted for in this component ranged from (0.3419 – 0.3926). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.8929 indicating that items were generally suitable for principal components analysis. Using the seven items as a general scale appeared feasible and the Chronbach's alpha for this item set was .91 indicating excellent internal reliability. Therefore, it was feasible to add the items up into a single measurement variable. Each question was scored on a 4-point

Likert-type scale. Missing items were removed and scores were rescaled to equate a high score with a high level of knowledge (0 = *wouldn't know at all,* 1 = *would know a little,* 2 = *would know fairly well, and* 3 = *would know very well)* to create a scale with a potential score of 0 to 21. Three linear regressions were performed utilising the scale score to determine the impact of the following variables on participants' self-sufficiency: oral English proficiency, gender, age, having a partner, level of education, living outside a major city, living in Australia for more than one year, and country of birth.

RESULT

English proficiency

Participants rated their English proficiency across the four domains of understanding, speaking, reading, and writing both before arriving in Australia and currently. In general, participants reported poor English proficiency prior to arrival, which had improved over time (see Table 3). For example, the percentage of participants who self-rated the lowest English proficiency (*not at all*) decreased across all language domains. Before arrival 38.3% (*n* = 919) rated their understanding as *not at all*, which reduced to 21.3% (*n* = 511) currently. Before arrival 44.6% (*n* = 1,070) rated their speaking as *not at all*, which reduced to 28.0% (*n* = 672,) currently. Before arrival 39.1% (*n* = 938) rated their reading as *not at all*, which reduced to 25.9% (*n* = 621) currently. Before arrival 40.0% (*n* = 959) rated their writing as *not at all*, which reduced to 26.3% (*n* = 632) currently.

[Table 3 near here]

A similar result was evident using the derived variable *oral English proficiency* created by combining *understanding spoken English* and *speaking English*. Before arrival, 38.0% (*n* = 892) of participants had *no oral English*, 44.8% (*n* = 1,051) had *low oral English*, and 17.2% (*n* = 404) had *high oral English*. At wave 1, 20.9% (*n* = 493) of participants had *no oral English*, 51.5% (*n* = 1,216) had *low oral English*, and 27.7% had *high oral English* (*n* = 654).

English proficiency and gender

Before arrival there was a significant difference between males' and females' oral English proficiency ($\chi^2(2) = 29.95$, $p < .000$, $\phi = 0.11$). For example, before arrival, 33.1% (*n* = 424) of males and 44.0% (*n* = 468) of females had *no oral English* (see Table 4). At wave 1, there remained a significant difference between males' and females' oral English proficiency ($\chi^2 (2) = 92.20$, $p < .000$, $\phi = 0.20$). For example, at

wave 1 there were 14.0% (*n* = 181) of males and 29.1% (*n* = 312) of females with *no oral English* (see Table 4).

[Table 4 near here]

Of the 888 participants with valid data who self-reported *no oral English* prior to arrival in Australia, males (*n* = 237, 56.4%) were significantly more likely to report improvement to the *low oral English* category than females (*n* = 167, 35.7%) (χ^2 (2) = 51.39, *p* <.000, ϕ = 0.24) (see Table 5). Similarly, of the 1,047 participants with valid data who self-reported *low oral English* prior to arrival in Australia, males (*n* = 170, 27.7%) were significantly more likely to report an improvement to the *high oral English* category than females (*n* = 77, 17.8%) (χ^2 (2) = 14.39, *p* =.001, ϕ = 0.12).

[Table 5 near here]

English language study

The majority of participants had studied English since coming to Australia. At wave 1, 71.4% (*n* = 1,714) were currently studying while 5.3% were no longer studying English (*n* = 127). Most studied through the Adult Migrant English Program (*n* = 1,151, 62.5%). A further 3.6% (*n* = 87) had not studied because their English was already good, and 18.2% (*n* = 436), including similar numbers of males (*n* = 204, 46.8%) and females (*n* = 232, 53.2%), provided open-ended responses regarding reasons for not studying. These responses were collated into fourteen common themes where some responses varied according to gender. More males gave work-related reasons such as looking for work (male, m = 10, female, f = 0) or working (m = 21, f = 0), while females gave reasons related to caring for children (m = 1, f = 64), health (m = 47, f = 63), pregnancy (m = 0, f = 8), or illiteracy (m = 0, f = 5). Reasons common to both genders included caring for others (m = 21, f = 24), age (m = 17, f = 10), disability (m = 4, f = 4), recent arrival (m = 6, f = 3), waiting for space in a class (m = 16, f = 12),

commencing study soon (m = 23, f = 17), receiving no information on classes (m = 3, f = 3), or other reasons (m = 35, f = 18).

English proficiency and participation

Participants reported poor proficiency in English affected their ability to participate in activities that helped them to settle. Of 1,509 PAs, 40.9% (*n* = 617) reported poor English proficiency hindered efforts to find housing. Both PA and SA participants reported difficulties finding employment. Of those who were either already employed or reported having looked for work 48.7% (*n* = 293) indicated that low English proficiency hindered efforts to find employment. Poor English skills were also a reported cause of stress (*n* = 1,356, 56.5%) and a reason they were finding it hard to settle (*n* = 1,542, 64.3%).

Poor proficiency in English also affected participants' ability to participate in activities that facilitated social integration. Oral English proficiency had a significant impact on self-ratings of difficulty making friends (χ^2 (6) = 122.74, p <.000, ϕ = 0.17), understanding Australian ways (χ^2 (6) = 196.19, p <.000, ϕ = 0.21), and talking to Australian neighbours (χ^2 (6) = 312.53, p <.000, ϕ = 0.28) (see Table 6).

[Table 6 near here]

Participants rated how well they knew how to access the help, information, and services that would help them to settle and in general, oral English proficiency had a significant impact on participants' knowledge with those with higher levels of proficiency reporting greater understanding (see Table 7). For example, oral English proficiency had a significant effect on participants' knowledge of how to look for a job (χ^2 (6) = 438.96, p <.000, ϕ = 0.31) with 84.0% (*n* = 401) of participants with *no oral English* reporting they *wouldn't know at all* how to look for a job, compared to 59.0% (*n* = 693) of those with *low oral English* and 27.4% (*n* = 174) of those with *high oral English.*

[Table 7 near here]

Participants rated their overall settlement experience as *very good* (*n* = 554, 23.1%), *good* (*n* = 1,400, 58.4%), *hard* (*n* = 328, 13.7%) or *very hard* (*n* = 87, 3.6%) and oral English proficiency had a significant effect on their self-ratings of overall settlement experience ($\chi^2(2) = 13.10$, $p < .001$, $\phi = 0.07$) (see Table 8). Of the 479 participants with *no oral English*, 21.7% (*n* = 104) rated their overall settlement experience as *hard/very hard* compared to 18.1% (*n* = 218) of those with *low oral English* and 13.6% (*n* = 88) of those with *high oral English*.

[Table 8 near here]

Self-sufficiency

Three linear regression analyses with robust standard error were performed utilising the self-sufficiency scale (scored from 0 to 21) as determined by participants' level of knowledge about how to access help, information and services (see Table 9). The regressions were used to predict the effect of oral English proficiency on participants' self-sufficiency, as well as to investigate the impact of confounding variables such as gender, age, education, and time living in Australia. Model 1 considered the impact of oral English proficiency, model 2 considered the impact of personal factors and model 3 considered the impact of migration factors.

Oral English proficiency was a statistically significant predictor of participants' self- sufficiency explaining 21% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.21$, $F_{2, 2247} = 293.84$, $p<0.000$) in the first model. Compared to the reference category of *no oral English*, participants with *low oral English* had predicted self-sufficiency scores 3.25 points higher and participants with *high oral English* had predicted scores 7.64 points higher than *no oral English*.

Personal factors such as age, gender, and education predicted only an additional 6% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.27$, $F_{11, 2224} = 88.85$, $p<0.000$) over oral English proficiency

in Model 2. Age was significant in the model with each year of age predicting slightly higher self-sufficiency until the age of 28, when self-sufficiency began to gradually decrease. Gender was also significant with females 2.02 points less self-sufficient than males. Compared to not attending school, participants who undertook any schooling were more self-sufficient; however, only undertaking more than 12 years of schooling or a university education were significant predictors of higher self-sufficiency. Whether or not a participant had a partner or lived in a major city or a regional area were not significant in the model.

The migration factors of country of birth and time since arrival predicted only a further 2% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.29$, $F_{17, 2218} = 64.89$, $p<0.000$) in the third model. Participants from the top five countries of birth (Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Myanmar, and Bhutan) were all less self-sufficient than participants from any other countries in the dataset; however, being born in Afghanistan and Bhutan was a significant predictor of being less self-sufficient. Time since arrival in Australia was a significant predictor of self-sufficiency with participants who had been in Australia for more than 1 year, 1.60 points more self-sufficient than recent arrivals.

[Table 9 near here]

Discussion

This study utilised data from the first wave of the BNLA to describe the cultural and linguistic diversity of humanitarian migrants and their English language proficiency and to determine whether oral English proficiency facilitates or hinders participation in activities which may help migrants to become self-sufficient and settle in their destination country. Several factors were identified that predict low self-sufficiency: having poor oral English skills, being female, never attending school, being a recent arrival and coming from Afghanistan or Bhutan predict humanitarian migrants will be less self-sufficient and will require more support to settle in their destination country.

Oral English proficiency was the most statistically significant predictor of self-sufficiency explaining 21% of the variance while controlling for confounding variables such as age and education. Factors that prevented some humanitarian migrants (especially females) from participating in English classes included caring for children, poor health and disability.

The cultural and linguistic diversity of participants in the BNLA varied from resident multilingual Australians. Most participants migrated from the Middle East and Central Asia, with more than half from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran. As a result, the most common language spoken at home by the migrants in the BNLA study was Arabic. In contrast, Arabic was the third most common language other than English spoken at home in the 2011 Australian census (ABS 2015b; Blake et al. 2016). Therefore, new migrants who speak less commonly spoken languages may require assistance to prevent them becoming isolated from other migrants and from the resident multicultural/multilingual Australian population. The low levels of home language literacy reported by these humanitarian migrants will necessitate higher levels of support (e.g., public transport signage, forms in banks and health services, etc.). These findings highlight the heterogeneity of this population and confirm the need for settlement services to conduct accurate and timely initial assessments in order to determine individualised support required by humanitarian migrants.

English proficiency

In general, participants reported poor English proficiency prior to arrival in Australia that improved over time. Although participants reported an improvement in their English speaking and understanding skills, there was less reported improvement in reading and writing English as these skills take longer to acquire and because of the low literacy levels in home languages. The majority of participants had studied English since coming to Australia and most through the Adult Migrant English Program. This

program provides eligible migrants with up to 510 hours of training in foundation English to help them to settle; however, eligible humanitarian migrants can receive up to 400 extra hours in recognition of their special needs (e.g., pre-migration stressors, limited schooling, etc.) (DSS 2016a). The low levels of literacy in the home language reported in this study warrant extra support for English language training. Training will potentially need to cater for migrants with little experience participating in standard classroom lessons. Participation in these English language programs is voluntary; therefore, it is important to ensure English training is provided in a time, place and manner that will maximise attendance and ensure positive outcomes.

English language study outcomes were generally poorer for females than males, with women significantly less likely to report an improvement in their English and reporting more obstacles to study, such as health issues, illiteracy and childcare. These findings suggest that women may not only require more help to increase their English language skills, but also to support their overall settlement in Australia.

English proficiency, participation and self-sufficiency

Participants' oral English proficiency had a significant impact on their knowledge of how to access the help, information, and services that would help them to settle, such as how to look for work, use public transport, and get help in an emergency. Those with higher levels of proficiency reported greater understanding. As a consequence, when responses were converted into a self-sufficiency scale, oral English proficiency proved a statistically significant predictor of self-sufficiency. After English proficiency, age (neither too young nor too old), gender (male), education (more than 12 years), and time since arrival (more than one year) were significant predictors of self-sufficiency. Country of birth was only significant for those born in Afghanistan or Bhutan as a predictor of low self-sufficiency. Whether or not a participant had a partner, or lived in a major city or a regional area was not significant. These results support

previous literature on humanitarian migrant's settlement in Australia (Colic-Peisker and Walker 2003; Correa-Velez, Gifford, and Barnett 2010; Markovic, Manderson, and Kelaher 2002; Sulaiman-Hill and Thompson 2012). Identification of factors that predict self-sufficiency will inform the understanding of people who provide support for humanitarian migrants, such as settlement services who provide assessment and early practical assistance through initial settlement. Additionally, these findings highlight the need for assistance and training for humanitarian migrants to access the help, services, and information they require to successfully settle.

Poor proficiency in English affected the participants' ability to participate in activities that facilitated social integration, such as making friends and talking to Australian neighbours. In general, migrants report fewer social connections and need help building a support network in their new country (IOM 2013). They are less likely to have friends and someone they can count on, and their situations do not improve over time. Long-term migrants (82%) are no more likely than new migrants (84%) to report having friends or relatives they can depend on (IOM 2013). All migrants, especially new arrivals, are more likely to experience sadness than the resident population (IOM 2013). Participation in social activities may not only improve social connections, but may also provide opportunities to practise English language skills in a social context.

Implications

The findings from the current study can inform policy in Australia. For example, in November 2016, the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection and the Minister for Social Services asked the Joint Standing Committee on Migration to inquire into and report on migrant settlement outcomes. The committee will consider available settlement services, international best practice in improving settlement outcomes as well as the influence of English language skills on settlement outcomes (Parliament of Australia 2016). The Australian government recognises English language skills are a

key factor affecting the ability of migrants to participate in a range of community activities (DIBP 2014); however, results from the current study indicate English language skills also facilitate humanitarian migrants' successful transition to life in their destination country and help them to attain self-sufficiency. Consequently, migration policies that emphasise early support for oral English proficiency should assist humanitarian migrants to become self-sufficient as soon as possible.

The heterogeneity of participants in the current study affirms the need to provide individualised policies and plans for humanitarian migrants who have different settlement experiences and needs. For example, participants who were illiterate prior to arrival will require different support from those with tertiary qualifications. Additionally, post-migration stressors can significantly affect some individuals' ability to settle (Davidson, Murray, and Schweitzer 2008). Unemployment, financial adversity, decrease in socioeconomic standing, social isolation, the attitude of the host community, and educational services available for children and adults can all negatively affect humanitarian migrants' mental health and subsequently impact their ability to adapt and become self-sufficent (Murray, Davidson, and Schweitzer 2008). Poor English skills can also be a barrier to accessing formal health services. Multilingual speakers with lower English proficiency are more likely to experience barriers to accessing medical care (Chin et al. 2006; Shi, Lebrun, and Tsai 2009, Zhou 2015). Additionally, Chin et al. (2006) found that when multilingual patients were acutely ill, they had diminished capacity to understand English medical terminology. Migrants therefore require support to ensure that their proficiency in English does not negatively impact on their health outcomes and subsequently their ability to participate in the other domains of Australian society discussed here.

Strengths and limitations

The sample size of the BNLA and the targeted survey ensures this study provides important evidence on which settlement services and English language training can be planned and provided. The current study only reports data from the first wave of the BNLA while four more waves of data will be available. Future research could analyse subsequent waves to investigate key transitions in humanitarian migrants' lives. Change is central to the migration experience and therefore longitudinal research is ideal because it can provide insights into the changing nature of the challenges and opportunities humanitarian migrants face over time when settling in their destination country (Beiser 2006).

The BNLA is self-reported so the accuracy of self-reported English proficiency could be questioned (Edele et al. 2015) and cannot be used as a definitive measure of language skills. Additionally, multilingual skills may be under-reported as the English proficiency question asks for language spoken at home, which does not account for participants who speak English at home, but another language elsewhere (e.g., at their friends' or relatives' homes, in their workplaces, or community).

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide insight into the English proficiency of humanitarian migrants in Australia and indicate that oral English proficiency has a significant impact on their settlement experience. The results highlight the importance of supporting humanitarian migrants' English language learning. Caring for children, poor health and disability prevented some humanitarian migrants from participating in English classes. While some positive outcomes were reported, such as improvements in English proficiency over time, with individuals with higher proficiency achieving better outcomes and more positive settlement experiences, individuals with poor oral English skills were especially vulnerable and in need of support to undertake any activities that

would help them to settle and become self-sufficient. This study will inform development of policy and improvement of programs for humanitarian migrants to ensure migrants have a positive settlement experience and become self-sufficient as soon as possible.

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Notes

1. Multilingual speakers are defined as individuals who are able to understand and/or speak more than one language; however, they may have varied competence in each of the languages they use and in the ways they use them, whether orally, in writing or signed (International Expert Panel on Multilingual Children's Speech 2012).
2. Data on country of birth and home language were confidentialised when there were fewer than 10 households with a member who nominated a specific country/language (Department of Social Services 2015b). Therefore, only 16 countries of birth and 16 home languages were listed in the data.
3. Data on age were confidentialised due small numbers to preserve anonymity. Responses where age was over 70 years were coded as 75 years to reflect the average age of respondents in the dataset aged over 70 years (DSS, 2015b). The oldest participant was 83 years of age (DSS, 2015a).

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Table 1. Country of Birth Reported by Participants (N = 2,399)

SACC[a]	Country of birth	*n*	%
4204	Iraq	944	39.3
7201	Afghanistan	611	25.5
4203	Iran	286	11.9
5101	The Republic of the Union of Myanmar	135	5.6
7102	Bhutan	84	3.5
7106	Pakistan	68	2.8
9108	Democratic Republic of Congo	40	1.7
7107	Sri Lanka	36	1.5
4214	Syria	31	1.3
4102	Egypt	30	1.3
4103	Libya	21	0.9
7105	Nepal	21	0.9
9207	Ethiopia	21	0.9
9206	Eritrea	15	0.6
4105	Sudan	13	0.5
7103	India	9	0.4
-10	Other- Confidentialised	34	1.4
Total	Total	2,399	100

[a] Standard Australian Classification of Countries (ABS, 2011). *Source*: Building a New Life in Australia, SPSS, authors' analysis.

Table 2. Home Language Reported by Participants (N = 2,399)

ASCL[a]	Home language	*n*	%
4202	Arabic	546	22.8
4206	Assyrian Neo-Aramaic	426	17.8
4106	Persian	399	16.6
4107	Hazaraghi	260	10.8
4105	Dari	209	8.7
5206	Nepali	104	4.3
6100	Burmese and Related Languages, nfd	82	3.4
4207	Chaldean Neo-Aramaic	72	3.0
4102	Pashto	50	2.1
9211	Swahili	38	1.6
5103	Tamil	32	1.3
6101	Burmese	24	1.0
1201	English	23	1.0
4101	Kurdish	15	0.6
5212	Urdu	15	0.6
6199	Burmese and Related Languages, nec	14	0.6
-10.	Confidentialised	85	3.5
-1.	Does not apply	3	0.1
-4.	Not specified	2	0.1
	Total	2,399	100

[a] Australian Standard Classification of Languages (ABS, 2011). *nfd*, not further defined; *nec*, not elsewhere classified. *Source*: Building a New Life in Australia, SPSS, authors' analysis.

Table 3. Participants' Reported English Proficiency before Arrival in Australia Compared to Proficiency at Wave 1 (N = 2,399)

Proficiency	Understanding spoken English				Speaking				Reading				Writing			
	Before arrival		Currently		Before arrival		Currently		Before arrival		Currently		Before arrival		Currently	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Very well	82	3.4	130	5.4	63	2.6	108	4.5	114	4.8	166	6.9	101	4.2	148	6.2
Well	437	18.2	691	28.8	367	15.3	582	24.3	578	24.1	704	29.3	507	21.1	653	27.2
Not well	927	38.6	1,037	43.2	852	35.5	1,008	42.0	732	30.5	880	36.7	796	33.2	939	39.1
Not at all	919	38.3	511	21.3	1,070	44.6	672	28.0	938	39.1	621	25.9	959	40.0	632	26.3
Prefer not to say	6	0.3	3	0.1	5	0.2	3	0.1	4	0.2	3	0.1	4	0.2	3	0.1
Don't know	28	1.2	27	1.1	42	1.8	26	1.1	33	1.4	25	1.0	32	1.3	24	1.0
Total	2,399	100.0	2,399	100.0	2,399	100.0	2,399	100.0	2,399	100.0	2,399	100.0	2,399	100.0	2,399	100.0

Source: Building a New Life in Australia, SPSS, authors' analysis.

Table 4. Participants' Reported Oral English Proficiency before Arrival and at Wave 1 Compared with Gender

Proficiency[a]	Male		Female		Total	
Before arrival	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
No oral English	424	33.1	468	44.0	892	38.0
Low oral English	615	47.9	436	41.0	1,051	44.8
High oral English	244	19.0	160	15.0	404	17.2
Total	1,283	100.0	1,064	100.0	2,347	100.0
Pearson χ^2 (2) = 29.9477 p = 0.000 ϕ = 0.1130						
Current proficiency	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
No oral English	181	14.0	312	29.1	493	20.9
Low oral English	687	53.2	529	49.4	1,216	51.5
High oral English	423	32.8	231	21.6	654	27.7
Total	1,291	100.0	1,072	100.0	2,363	100.0
Pearson χ^2 (2) = 92.2012 p = 0.000 ϕ = 0.1975						

[a] *This measure was derived from combining the English speaking and understanding variables. Source*: Building a New Life in Australia, STATA, authors' analysis.

Table 5. Participant Reported Improvement in Oral English Proficiency at Wave 1 Compared to Gender

Proficiency	Male		Female		Total	
No oral English before arrival	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
No oral English	167	39.8	296	63.3	463	52.1
Low oral English	237	56.4	167	35.7	404	45.5
High oral English	16	3.8	5	1.1	21	2.4
Total	420	100.0	468	100.0	888	100.0
Pearson χ^2 (2) = 51.3879 p = 0.000 ϕ = 0.2406						
Low oral English before arrival	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
No oral English	11	1.8	12	2.8	23	2.2
Low oral English	433	70.5	344	79.5	777	74.2
High oral English	170	27.7	77	17.8	247	23.6
Total	614	100.0	433	100.0	1,047	100.0
Pearson χ^2 (2) = 14.3938 p = 0.001 ϕ = 0.1173						

Source: Building a New Life in Australia, STATA, authors' analysis.

Table 6. Participants' Reported Oral English Proficiency Compared to Level of Difficulty Participating in Tasks

Task and level of difficulty with task	No oral English		Low oral English		High oral English		Total	
Make friends	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Very easy	23	5.3	78	6.8	80	13.0	181	8.3
Easy	103	23.9	418	36.5	284	46.1	805	36.7
Hard	208	48.3	523	45.7	198	32.1	929	42.4
Very hard	97	22.5	126	11.0	54	8.8	277	12.6
Total	431	100.0	1,145	100.0	616	100.0	2,192	100.0
Pearson χ^2 (6) = 122.7372 p = 0.000 ϕ = 0.1673								
Understand Australian ways								
Very easy	13	3.0	57	5.1	74	11.8	144	6.6
Easy	108	24.9	455	40.3	333	52.9	896	40.9
Hard	218	50.4	516	45.7	195	31.0	929	42.4
Very hard	94	21.7	101	9.0	27	4.3	222	10.1
Total	433	100.0	1,129	100.0	629	100.0	2,191	100.0
Pearson χ^2 (6) = 196.1903 p = 0.000 ϕ = 0.2116								
Talk to Australian neighbours								
Very easy	7	1.8	36	3.4	56	9.3	99	4.8
Easy	28	7.0	224	21.3	277	46.0	529	25.8
Hard	223	56.0	589	55.9	211	35.1	1,023	49.8
Very hard	140	35.2	204	19.4	58	9.6	402	19.6
Total	398	100.0	1,053	100.0	602	100.0	2,053	100.0
Pearson χ^2 (6) = 312.5338 p = 0.000 ϕ = 0.2759								

Note. Missing values were excluded from this analysis. *Source*: Building a New Life in Australia, STATA, authors' analysis.

Table 7. Participants' Reported Oral English Proficiency Compared to Level of Knowledge of How to Access Help, Information and Services

Task and level of difficulty with task	No oral English		Low oral English		High oral English		Total	
Look for a job	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Very well	10	2.1	54	4.6	103	16.2	167	7.3
Fairly well	14	2.9	105	8.9	157	24.7	276	12.1
A little	53	11.1	323	27.5	201	31.7	577	25.2
Not at all	401	84.0	693	59.0	174	27.4	1,268	55.4
Total	478	100.0	1175	100.0	635	100.0	2,288	100.0
Pearson χ^2 (6) = 438.9639 p = 0.000 ϕ = 0.3097								
Use public transport								
Very well	62	12.9	252	21.1	297	46.4	611	26.4
Fairly well	88	18.3	378	31.7	198	30.9	664	28.7
A little	123	25.6	388	32.5	102	15.9	613	26.5
Not at all	208	43.2	176	14.7	43	6.7	427	18.4
Total	481	100.0	1,194	100.0	640	100.0	2,315	100.0
Pearson χ^2 (6) = 426.2083 p = 0.000 ϕ = 0.3034								
Get help in an emergency								
Very well	66	13.7	227	19.1	270	42.4	563	24.4
Fairly well	59	12.2	292	24.6	183	29.7	534	23.2
A little	130	27.0	417	35.1	125	19.6	672	29.1
Not at all	227	47.1	251	21.2	59	9.3	537	23.3
Total	482	100.0	1,187	100.0	637	100.0	2,306	100.0
Pearson χ^2 (6) = 363.6424 p = 0.000 ϕ = 0.2808								
Use bank services								
Very well	20	4.1	114	9.6	203	31.7	337	14.6
Fairly well	45	9.3	215	18.1	167	26.1	427	18.5
A little	84	17.4	328	27.5	136	21.3	548	23.7

Not at all	334	69.2	534	44.8	134	20.9	1,002	43.3
Total	483	100.0	1,191	100.0	640	100.0	2,314	100.0
Pearson χ^2 (6) = 394.1961 p = 0.000 ϕ = 0.2918								
Find out about government services/benefits								
Very well	11	2.3	87	7.4	129	20.2	227	9.9
Fairly well	31	6.5	171	14.5	184	28.8	386	16.8
A little	115	24.1	460	38.9	198	30.9	773	33.6
Not at all	320	67.1	465	39.3	129	20.2	914	39.7
Total	477	100.0	1,183	100.0	640	100.0	2,300	100.0
Pearson χ^2 (6) = 367.8886 p = 0.000 ϕ = 0.2808								
Find out about rights								
Very well	24	5.0	102	8.6	131	20.5	257	11.1
Fairly well	39	8.1	176	14.8	179	28.0	394	17.1
A little	108	22.5	465	39.1	192	30.1	765	33.1
Not at all	310	64.5	447	37.6	137	21.4	894	38.7
Total	481	100.0	1,190	100.0	639	100.0	2310	100.0
Pearson χ^2 (6) = 307.9565 p = 0.000 ϕ = 0.2582								
Get help from the police								
Very well	62	12.9	228	19.1	238	37.5	528	22.9
Fairly well	52	10.8	249	20.9	177	27.9	478	20.7
A little	135	28.0	437	36.7	139	21.9	711	30.8
Not at all	233	48.3	277	23.3	91	12.8	591	25.6
Total	482	100.0	1,191	100.0	635	100.0	2,308	100.0
Pearson χ^2 (6) = 298.0523 p = 0.000 ϕ = 0.2541								

Note. Missing values were excluded from this analysis. *Source*: Building a New Life in Australia, STATA, authors' analysis.

Table 8. Participants' Reported Oral English Proficiency Compared to Overall Settlement Experience

Settlement experience	No oral English		Low oral English		High oral English		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Hard/very hard	104	21.7	218	18.1	88	13.6	410	17.6
Good/very good	375	78.3	988	81.9	561	86.4	1,924	82.4
Total	479	100.0	1,206	100.0	649	100.0	2,334	100.0
Pearson χ^2 (2) = 13.0975 p = 0.001 ϕ = 0.0749								

Source: Building a New Life in Australia, STATA, authors' analysis.

Table 9. Multiple Linear Regression Analyses to Predict Self-Sufficiency

Dependent variables	Model 1: Oral English Proficiency		Model 2: Personal Factors		Model 3: Migration Factors	
	Coefficient	*p*	Coefficient	*p*	Coefficient	*p*
Oral English						
No oral English (ref.)	0.000		0.000		0.000	
Low oral English	3.248	0.000	2.006	0.000	1.941	0.000
High oral English	7.642	0.000	5.755	0.000	5.058	0.000
Female			-2.017	0.000	-1.727	0.000
Age			0.135	0.001	0.098	0.019
Age squared			-0.002	0.000	-0.002	0.000
Having a partner			0.086	0.724	0.010	0.967
Education						
Never attended school (ref.)			0.000		0.000	
6 or less years of schooling			0.442	0.256	0.726	0.073
7 to 11 years of schooling			0.097	0.801	0.541	0.201
12 or more years of schooling			0.778	0.048	1.396	0.002
University education			2.015	0.000	2.410	0.000
Lives outside a major city			-0.154	0.700	-0.324	0.435
More than 1 year in Australia					1.604	0.000
Country of birth						
Other (ref.)					0.000	
Iraq					-1.515	0.000
Afghanistan					-0.659	0.111
Iran					-2.342	0.000
Myanmar					-1.372	0.017
Bhutan					-1.270	0.059
R^2	0.2105		0.2676		0.2911	
F-statistic	$F = (2, 2247) = 293.84$		$F = (11, 2224) = 88.85$		$F = (17, 2218) = 64.89$	

Note: p-Values are based on estimations with robust standard errors. *Source*: Building a New Life in Australia, STATA, authors' analysis.