

New Language Acquisition for Refugees: A Key to Effective Transitioning

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***ABSTRACT:** Acquiring a second language has economic, educational, and social impact on individuals and families. When considering the rapid expansion of individuals identifying as refugees in today's world, learning a new language takes on a new role; it is a critical component of refugees' lives. For refugees, acquisition of the new language in their new country goes far beyond the aforementioned benefits; it is a crucial part of positive transitioning to their resettlement in a new country. While there are many components for refugees' successful integration into a new society, learning and using a second language is interwoven into many of these components as a means of attaining effective resettlement. Using Ager and Strang's (2008) domains for refugee integration, this article highlights the role language acquisition plays in some key domains, especially in acquiring employment, in educational opportunities, in healthcare, in development of social connections, and, if desired, in citizenship. In addition to examining these areas, this paper explores the impact of strong second language development and factors that impact the learning of the new language, including those occurring prior to coming to the refugees' new country, experiences occurring during their flight from their native homes, and in their experiences in their native homes prior to becoming refugees.*

***Key Words :** Refugees, Language Acquisition, Integration, Resettlement*

Introduction

In the past few years, many countries in the world have experienced a multitude of refugees seeking asylum within their borders. Furthermore, the number of refugees and displaced persons in the world is significantly increasing by a much larger percentage than in prior years. In 2022, there were 100 million refugees, which was an increase of nearly 11 million from the previous year (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2022). In fact, 3.6 percent of the world population is not living in their native countries (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2022). This figure includes migrants and immigrants, i.e. individuals who **chose** to leave their native country, often for economical or educational reasons. The other group in this data is refugees, that is, individuals who were **forced** to leave their native countries due to war, conflict, famine, etc. (UNHCR 2016, Edwards, 2016). The UNHCR (2023) highlights the importance of clear definitions of the words of refugee and immigrant, because refugees are afforded specific rights and legal protections.

However, Hynie (2009) notes that it can be difficult sometimes to delineate between the two. Often, poor governance may be the underlying cause for both groups leaving the country, although in the case of refugees, significantly worse conditions usually exist. Nonetheless, one of the most important things to take into account when reviewing this data is the actualities of personal change that is occurring with this creation of new homes and new realities. Individuals and families moving into new country face immersion in new societies and new cultures, all of which require a substantial amount of change in their lives. Moreover, this may include experiencing trauma throughout this process. Once they arrive in their new country, there are usually significant efforts to help them, including offering instruction for a new language. The acquisition of new language skills provides an intellectual challenge for refugees, but also requires serious consideration by the host countries as to how to best provide these language learning opportunities for refugees.

Second Language Acquisition: Foundational Considerations

While it certainly is advantageous for refugees to learn the language of their new country, there are clearly some foundational premises that must be considered before engaging in the provision of lessons for refugees. While some of these considerations may apply to all refugees, other components demonstrate the need for some individualization of curriculum and resources specific to the individuals being taught.

First and foremost, care must be taken to avoid language oppression, that is, the eradication of native languages by “physical, mental, social and spiritual coercion” (Roche, 2019). Historically, colonializing countries have used language eradication as part of gaining power and destroying native culture in foreign countries. Examples of this exist in the British banning of the use of Gaelic in Ireland and the use of native languages in African countries (Brent, 2019; Paulson, 2019). This was a dedicated approach to dominating a country and destroying its inherent culture, since language provides the cement for communication and sustenance for a culture. Another example of this can be obtained by looking through history, wherein there are far too many examples of eradication of indigenous peoples’ language as part of a systemic destruction of their culture (Margolis. & Rowe, 2004; Ryser et al, 2020).

While not necessarily referring to colonialization, when refugees resettle in a new country, there are lessons we can learn from errors in the past. Preservation of opportunities and spaces for use of refugees’ native languages should be maintained in order to help with their transitioning to a new home and country. This allows refugees and immigrants to become integrated into a new culture and society as opposed to becoming assimilated. Berry (2001) describes four potential strategies different cultural groups can face when placed in a new society - integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization. Of the four, marginalization causes the most negative mental health outcomes for immigrants (Choy, et al, 2020). Many societies aim for assimilation but refugees do much better in societies that are more geared towards integration. Integration into a society implies that the refugees are able to maintain components of their native culture while also learning, working, building community, and navigating their new lives within a different society. On the other hand, assimilation entails complete immersion into the new society, and can lead to loss of identity

due to gradual eradication of their native culture (Choy, et al, 2020; Hamilton, 2016). Choice of language to be used and learning a new language are intricately interwoven within these concepts.

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, refugee children in the United States are taught with a primary focus of having them become proficient in English as quickly as possible. No doubt, this approach is also taken in many other countries as well. However, this often has a devaluing effect on their native language, and thereby diminishes important links to their family, community, and native culture, as well as impacting some of their other educational development. This could be described as a practice leading towards assimilation. Instead, teachers should encourage students to continue to speak their native languages at home (Hamilton, 2016). This does not negate some use of the second language at home, but encourages continued use of the native language here, an important component of integration (vs. assimilation) for refugees.

Language and Refugee Integration

Indeed, there are many components that assist in successful integration of refugees into their new countries, and it can be argued that language plays a key role in these. In their seminal work on refugee integration, Ager and Strang (2008) identify nine domains that have been shown to be critical components to successful integration. These domains are divided into four categories. A few specific areas will be highlighted that are impacted by solid language acquisition of the new language.

One category that impacts all nine domains is facilitators for integration. Only two domains are in this category – *language and cultural knowledge*, and *safety and stability*. Learning a language has been shown to enhance the acquisition of cultural knowledge (Cherion, 2016). It can also be argued that learning the language of the new country plays a part in safety and stability, and in doing so, becomes intertwined with helping support some other following domains.

In the category of marker and means, language plays an important role in *employment*, *education*, and *health*, and perhaps a smaller role in *housing*. It is not uncommon for well-educated refugees to have to take lower paying jobs initially because a lack of new language skills in the country where they are resettling. Moreover, there may exist problems providing documentation of education and employment experience from their native countries. Not knowing the language of the new country can make it difficult to receive effective, timely healthcare, and may require use of interpreters. Safe, affordable housing may be more easily obtained if fluent in the language of the new country.

Clearly, use of the native language, as well as acquisition of the language in the new country strengthen the domains included in the category of social connections. These domains included *social bridges*, *bonds*, and *links*. This involves connections with friends and family in their community and perhaps in other countries when separated from friends and family through the displacement process. For this domain, maintaining fluency in their native language is critical, especially for younger refugees. Not only does this help the youngsters

maintain their connections with extended family members and others in their community, but it also helps to preserve the culture from which they came. Within this category, there are components of building a network of not-so-well-known individuals who can help each other out as problems arise. This type of communication may be on-line, and may be in their native language or the language of the new country. There is also an element of being able to contact governmental structures and resources – knowledge of the new country’s language would be helpful here, but perhaps not critical if translators are available.

Ager & Strang’s (2008) final category, foundation, may or may not be reached or even desired by refugees, for this involves rights and citizenship. Certainly, knowing their rights is important and knowledge of the new country’s language is most helpful. In most countries, knowing the national language is a component of citizenship, but not all refugees have a desire for citizenship in their new country – they did not choose to leave their home country, and may harbor hopes to eventually return there as regimes change.

Unique Considerations for Refugee Second Language Education

Most nations who accept refugees have assistance programs set up to help with resettlement. Of course, these cannot meet all the individuals needs of refugees, but they can provide a foundation to begin their resettlement. Local agencies in resettlement countries are often key in providing services, including access to language classes (Fike & Androff, 2016; Dubus, 2018). For those who are coordinating or teaching the language classes, there are a variety of factors that should be considered in order to best meet the needs of the students.

Many refugees have experienced much trauma before arriving at their resettlement location. Some of this may have occurred in their homeland, and some as part of their journey to the resettlement country. The trauma may include the death of loved ones and friends, sexual abuse, and lack of family continuity with displacement of family members, and, of course, being forced to leave their homeland often with little warning (McLoughlin, 2020). Moreover, many may be experiencing post migration living difficulties (PMLD) and may need mental health services to help lower stress and anxiety (Chiess, et al, 2021). Stress has been shown to impact memory and learning (Whiting et al., 2021; Willis, 2014), and thereby may make it more difficult to learn a new language. Access to resources to aid in lowering stress can help improve this situation. In addition, as with all students, a thorough assessment of past experiences with language instruction can not only give teachers more knowledge as to placement levels, but also give them insights to determine if there are stressors present from past experiences that need to be considered as well (Kartel et al, 2019).

Often, when immigrants enter a new country, they have had some exposure and/or language lessons for the language in which they will be immersed; immigrants have had time to plan their relocation. This frequently is not the case for refugees, since they have little, if any, time to prepare for their journey, and may not know what resettlement country will become their home. There are gender implications with this as well. Often women are being resettled into countries with less patriarchal societies, and may be fleeing countries that did not value women’s education as much as their new country does (Arvanitis & McLoughlin,

2023; Kosyakova, et al, 2022). Beiser and Feng Hau (2000) found that men frequently arrive with better language skills. However, even if both men and women are new to the language, they will make similar progress in language acquisition for the first few years, when most resettlement countries provide lessons, but when ten years pass, women are significantly behind in language acquisition.

Some of the rationale for this is basic – men may be out using the language at work, whereas women who remain in traditional roles, staying at home and doing childrearing. Thus, they may not be immersed in a second language environment; they live at home, perhaps in a community of speakers of their native language (Beiser & Feng Hau, 2000). Certainly, being immersed in an environment that uses the new language helps with acquisition, but there must be a balance between use of both languages. Interestingly, Posse and Nerghes (2020) note that while refugees were speaking the newly acquired language with others who were not native speakers in their communities, it did not increase integration into the mainstream society – they still encountered “Othering.” Surely, it eased their transitioning and ability to communicate with native speakers much more than if they had no new language acquisition. However, there was a clear sense of being seen as the “other” within the new society.

Since exposure to the new language does help with the development of fluency, having opportunities for women to be employed can support their language acquisition. With some refugee women being thrust into the role of primary breadwinner, learning the new language is critical. Moreover, by learning the new language, women may have a greater opportunity to take on vocational courses and other non-traditional courses taught in the new language that have the potential to improve their economic status, and continue to improve their fluency (Arvanitis & McLoughlin, 2023).

When examining traditional dos and don'ts of helping school aged children learn the language of the new country, consideration must be given to the goal of “integration” versus “assimilation” into a society. As mentioned earlier, a goal of integration as opposed to assimilation is more beneficial for the refugee. Integration encourages that refugees move freely and thrive in both cultures – that of their native country, and their new resettlement home. Assimilation essentially wipes out the vestiges of the culture of native country, and recreates the refugee as a member of the new country, embracing the culture, mores, values, and sometimes religion and leaving their old cultural components behind. It can be argued that a society is much richer and vibrant if composed of groups from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

How does this relate to teaching a second language to refugees? Traditionally, school teachers are inclined to encourage the use of the second language at home; in fact, this often happens – especially between siblings. However, for refugee children, Horgan et al (2022) note that languages can provide both connection to their native culture (birth language), and creation of opportunities and education in their new culture (second language). They have found that younger refugee/migrant children are more inclined to lose the ability to speak their native language especially if not using it regularly at home. Hence, it is very important to provide strong new language programs in the school, so younger children, especially, can

listen, speak, and establish fluency primarily through what is occurring outside of home. Careful attention to balanced language speaking at home is needed through use of both the new and the native language, especially for young children, to prevent loss of fluency in the native language, an important part of the child's heritage.

Conclusion

Teaching a new language to individuals is a daunting task, requiring good teachers who understand their students' backgrounds, have a strong knowledge of best practices for excellent language pedagogy, and a willingness to be flexible and adaptable as the occasions arise. This is especially true for teachers of refugee adults and children. Many of these students have suffered trauma, but show great strength in taking on the stresses of relocation. Their unique backgrounds require teachers to be especially cognizant of the importance of second language acquisition in helping with successful resettlement and integration, not assimilation, into their new society. This process may be unique to each of the refugees, but with proper support and educational opportunities, the benefits for both the refugees and the country where they have resettled will soon become apparent.

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