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The 'Symbolic Violence' of Refugee Language Training in Australia



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Abstract

Reasonable host language proficiency has been shown as a key factor determining successful social and economic inclusion of refugee migrants within their new society. Many countries who provide settlement to refugee migrants thus offer them instruction in the host language of their new country. In Australia, refugee migrants are offered English training in the form of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), and the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program. However, this paper argues that these training programs largely fail to meet the needs of refugee migrants who settle in Australia. Using a qualitative research design, in-depth interviews with eight male Muslim refugee migrants were used to collect data centred on a single research question – *What are the perspectives of male Muslim refugees on the effectiveness of their English training programs in facilitating their settlement and employment in Australia?* The findings are framed using the theoretical notions of Pierre Bourdieu, and suggest that the English training programs set the migrants up for failure, both in what is absent and what is offered within these programs. Most of these migrants remain in a position of social disadvantage in Australian society and are subject to an ongoing cycle of symbolic violence. Policy implications are considered.

Keywords: refugee migrants, host language training, Bourdieu, symbolic violence, Australia

Introduction

Proficiency in the host language of their new country of settlement has repeatedly been shown to be a key factor in the social, educational and occupational outcomes for refugee migrants (Chiswick, 2016; Fleckenstein, et al., 2021; Hugo, 2014). Many Western nations thus offer training in the language of their country to assist these migrants in their settlement into their new society and culture. In this

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respect, the Federal Government of Australia provides two such Language Training Programs (LTPs), namely the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP); and the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program.

This paper reports on the experiences and perspectives of a group of male Muslim refugee migrants within the LTPs offered by the Australian government. This group was chosen for two reasons. First, Muslims are a minority but growing ethno-religious group in Australian society, with most refugees arriving in Australia in the last decade being from Africa, Asia and the Middle East (Department of Home Affairs, 2022). Second, there is relatively little research available specifically related to male Muslims (Malik, 2015; Sav et al., 2013), particularly among those with little education in their first language (Hugo, 2014).

The single research question considered is: *What are the perspectives of male Muslim refugees on the effectiveness of their English training programs in facilitating their settlement and employment in Australia?* Following presentation of the theoretical background and methodology of this research, the findings are analysed and framed using Bourdieu's theory of social practice. The discussion section then draws together the current reality of language training for refugee migrants in Australia, and policy implications are considered.

Context of the English Training Programs

The AMEP and SEE programs are funded by the federal Australian government to assist eligible individuals to improve their English language, literacy, numeracy, and digital skills. From the perspective of refugee migrant participants, both programs aim to enhance their participation in Australian life, particularly towards assisting them to find meaningful employment through improvement of English skills. From this aspect the programs are both complementary. However, each program has its own distinct focus and structure, as summarised and compared in Table 1.

Table 1 *Current structure and focus of the AMEP and SEE programs*

	Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP)	Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program
Target Audience	Primarily eligible migrants and humanitarian refugees.	Australians aged 15 years and over who need to improve their English language, literacy, and/or digital skills.
Eligibility and Duration	- For arrivals before 1 October 2020 – there is no time limit on start or finish dates for participants, nor on hours of tuition. - For arrivals after 1 October 2020 – participants must register and commence within six and twelve months respectively, with completion to be within five years. - Training can be 5–25 hours per week.	- Participants may be referred from employment agencies, or participants may self-refer if they are employed or job seekers. - Training can be 10-25 hours per week for up to two years.
Core Focus	- Providing information about Australian society and settlement. - Improving English language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, digital) towards gaining employment.	Foundation skills training (English language, literacy, numeracy, and digital skills) towards gaining employment or undertaking further education/training.

(Continued)

Table 1 (Continued)

	Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP)	Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program
Delivery Modes and Personnel	There are four delivery modes offered by contracted 'Registered Training Organisations (RTOs)' employing TESOL-qualified teachers: • Classroom based with teacher support • Distance learning with teacher support • Volunteer tutor scheme, with support from trained volunteers • Online AMEP, providing self-paced learning resources.	Several delivery options are offered by contracted 'Registered Training Organisations (RTOs)' employing TESOL qualified and/or vocationally qualified trainers: • Full-time or part-time options • Delivery may be in classrooms, workplaces, and/or online • Workplace-Based Training Projects involving employers and RTOs.
Curriculum and Pathways	• Structured courses leading to certificates in English as an Additional Language (EAL) at various levels (from preliminary to Certificate III). • Other streams include those with a focus on Pre-employment English; Social English; and Youth English. • Work experience may be accessed in some streams, though more frequently employability skills are included in AMEP training.	• Foundation skills training is offered within an accredited vocational curriculum. • Training is preferably integrated and contextualised into a specific vocational qualification (e.g. business, aged care, etc.) • Training is tailored to an individual participant's abilities and goals and is self-paced. • Work experience may be a required component of a given vocational qualification.
Assessment and Outcomes	• Assessment is against the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF), a tool that details standardised benchmarks for core macro-skills in learning, reading, writing, oral communication, numeracy, and digital skills. • AMEP participants undergo English proficiency assessments at entry, during the program, and upon completion against the ACSF or ... • Participants may also be assessed against EAL qualifications/units mapped against the ACSF. • Exit is when participants achieve a 'vocational English level' (ASCF 3). • Participants may also articulate with the SEE program to further enhance their English skills and employability. • If participants fail to engage with the program or fail to attend, they may be exited from the AMEP.	• Participants have an initial pre-training assessment that determines their core skills levels against the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF), goals, and training pathway. • Progress assessments against the ACSF are carried out every 100-200 hours, with participants expected to achieve at least one or two indicators within a core skill level within this training period. • If suitable progress, engagement and/or attendance is suboptimal, a participant may be exited from the program. • Exit outcomes may be improved English core skills, a vocational qualification (or units within such), and/or employment. • Referral back to the SEE program is possible for multiple cycles of attendance.
Support services	Given that the AMEP is a settlement program, it provides • Free childcare for participants. • Pathways guidance from counsellors and teachers.	• Referral to other support services may be offered only when appropriate and available – though a Participant Support Officer is now available to assist clients.
Sources	(Department of Home Affairs, 2025; TAFE Queensland, 2025a; Tynan et al., 2019)	(ACIL Allen Consulting, 2015b; Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2025; TAFE Queensland, 2025b).

The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) has been available to newly arrived migrants in Australia since 1948. As well as English language training, the AMEP also offers services designed to assist migrants in their initial settlement into Australian life. In contrast, the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program in its modern form was first conceived in 2010 as the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program. However, its name was changed in 2013 to the SEE program to shed its perception by clients as only for those with language and literacy deficits. Students within the SEE program may be native English speakers or from non-English speaking backgrounds. The aim of the SEE program is to assist its students to gain work-related skills and qualifications. However, for refugee migrants, the fundamental aim of both programs is to furnish them with enough English proficiency to gain meaningful employment in Australia (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2015a, 2015b).

The AMEP uses vocational English curricula containing several certificate levels suitable for EAL (English as an Additional Language) participants at different English proficiency levels. AMEP participants are assessed against the EAL certificate and units within which they are enrolled, and which are mapped against the ACSF (the Australian Core Skills Framework, an assessment tool that details standardised benchmarks for core macro-skills in learning, reading, writing, oral communication, numeracy, and digital skills). This assessment occurs as they approach completion of a unit within a given certificate. Exit is generally when a participant reaches five years of training or achieves a vocational level of English proficiency (ACSF 3) (Department of Home Affairs, 2025; TAFE Queensland, 2025a; Tynan et al., 2019).

The SEE program provides contextualised English language support for participants as they work towards a vocational qualification offered by the RTO concerned. Periodic assessments against the ACSF are mandated within the contract and must occur around each 100-200 hours of training. Training can be 10-25 hours per week for up to two years, or when clients complete a vocational qualification. Participants who fail to progress over a given time frame, and/or who fail to attend and engage with the SEE program, face being exited. In such cases, if the student has 'mutual obligation' (i.e. they must be engaged in either job seeking and/or education) that they must meet to receive social welfare payments, those benefits may be placed in jeopardy (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2015b; Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, DEWR, 2025). Anecdotally, while attendance and engagement are expected in both the AMEP and SEE programs, it is less strictly applied in the AMEP given the often-traumatic background of the refugee migrants prior to their arrival in Australia.

Theoretical Background

Pierre Bourdieu's main 'thinking tools' of field, capital and habitus are used to frame and better understand the social positioning and perspectives of the participants in this research. His lesser-known notions of doxa, illusio and symbolic violence are also introduced to further highlight the disadvantage experienced by the participants in the social fields in which they participate.

Field, Capital and Habitus

In Bourdieu's view, society consists of a multitude of social fields, with each field being regulated by a set of social rules that define the 'logic of practice' of that field – or put another way, the expected behaviours and social status of people participating in the field of practice being considered (Bourdieu, 1985). People typically seek to improve their social position in any field in which they participate, and to do this they require what Bourdieu terms as 'capital' – essentially a form of sociological currency necessary to function successfully in any particular social field. He defines three types of capital – economic capital, realised in money or financial assets; social capital, realised in social contacts and networks that a person can access in each field; and finally, cultural capital realised in skills,

qualifications, languages (etc.) that are regarded as important in a particular field. Any form of capital – economic, social, or cultural – may become symbolically powerful in a social field, becoming a “legitimate competence” necessary for social progress in the field concerned, and seen as ‘symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 244).

If the participants in this research are considered against this Bourdieusian framework, they must function within several social fields in Australian society – particularly the field of education, where they attend training to improve their English language and gain qualifications. By doing so, from Bourdieu’s perspective, they aim to improve their cultural capital through increased proficiency in English and (thus) potential gain of Australian qualifications and work experience. This in turn may improve their social capital/networks within Australian society and the Australian workplace, and – if they gain employment – finally their economic capital in the form of increased income. In this respect, work experience and qualifications in their preferred field of employment represent legitimate competencies (symbolic capital) necessary to progress in the field concerned.

At this point, Bourdieu’s notion of habitus must be introduced, which he defines as a set of ‘dispositions’ gained from the influence of family, education and ideology (Bourdieu, 1990). This primary habitus is restructured as one moves through life through the impact of employment, culture, further education and so on, producing a secondary habitus. Bourdieu sees habitus as flexible, depending on social context. Habitus influences, but does not absolutely dictate, action in each social situation – and where someone is uncomfortable in that social context, they may react in unexpected ways, exercising agency in what they eventually choose to do (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

If the refugee migrants in this study are again considered, their primary habitus gained from their own family and other sociocultural influences is restructured as they interact within the social fields of Australian life. Attending English training, for example, influences the development of a secondary habitus that corresponds with the expected norms of Australian society. This aligns with Bourdieu’s view of education which he sees as socially reproductive, simply reinforcing the social status quo of (here) Australian society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). For refugee migrants, this may cast them as most likely to remain in a socially disadvantaged position in Australian society due to their lack of capital. However, Bourdieu sees fields as a site of struggle, where people attempt to improve their social position through gain of capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). For example, as will be seen in the Findings section, some refugee migrants choose to exercise agency in their struggle to improve their social position, be this through education, employment or otherwise. However, others accept their disadvantage as taken for granted. Related to this, Bourdieu’s notions of doxa, illusio and symbolic violence are useful tools to consider the different ways people react to their social situation.

Symbolic Violence, Doxa and Illusio

In most societies there is a social hierarchy present in which socially dominant groups will have “the [symbolic] power to impose upon other minds a vision ... of social divisions” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23). It is this exercise of symbolic power by socially elite groups that leads to what Bourdieu terms symbolic violence – “a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling” (Bourdieu, 2001, pp. 1-2). This definition assumes that those subject to symbolic violence unconsciously accept (‘misrecognise’) the social structures underlying their society as normal (legitimate) and indisputable (Bourdieu, 1991).

Symbolic violence is intimately related to Bourdieu’s other concepts. Thus, it requires a social field as its context; agents whose social position in that field depends on their relative levels of symbolic capital/power; and that the habitus of those agents causes them to implicitly accept (misrecognise)

their inferior social positioning as normal. From this perspective, symbolic violence is at the heart of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction – as without it, there cannot be reproduction of the social status quo. This causes Kamali (2021, p. 9) to regard symbolic violence as responsible for “the reproduction of obedience at the level of the social system”; and Burawoy (2019, p. 194) to propose symbolic violence as “the cement that holds society together”.

The above suggests a determinism in Bourdieu's notions, in that irrespective of efforts to improve one's position in a field, these are generally doomed to failure as social positioning never really changes for the socially disadvantaged (symbolic violence). Bourdieu thus introduces further concepts of 'doxa' and 'illusio' to understand and diminish this charge of determinism. Bourdieu defines doxa as the situation where agents in a field “have an uncontested acceptance of ... [their] daily lifeworld” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 73) – or put another way, what agents in a field unconsciously feel might be possible or not possible based on their unconscious ('doxic') acceptance of the social status quo (Bourdieu, 2000). What agents might feel is possible will be influenced by their existing social position, the amount of capital they bring to the field, and how well their habitus is attuned to the social rules within that field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The degree of fit between the field and habitus of an agent determines their 'illusio', defined by Bourdieu as their degree of “investment ... [and] belief in the game [field]” concerned (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 86). In broad terms, doxa tends to reproduce the social status quo whereas illusio allows for at least the hope of change through the exercise of agency (Colley, 2012).

In the traditional notion of symbolic violence based on social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), the socially disadvantaged might be seen as the victims of their own habitus, with their doxic acceptance of their inferior social position as normal (Burawoy, 2019). However, with social mores changing over time due to unemployment, racism, societal violence, and other problems of the modern social world, traditionally stable social structures such as education and politics have lost their sheen of legitimacy. People have come to better understand the origins of their social domination, though remain largely powerless to change them (Bourdieu, 1999). This being the case, Burawoy (2019) proposes habitus in these circumstances as being restructured at a more conscious and reflexive level than in the earlier conception of symbolic violence. He further suggests that within these two perspectives on symbolic violence, there are “two Bourdieus: the man of theory expounding on the depth of misrecognition and the man of practice giving credence to the perspectives of the dominated” (Burawoy, 2019, p 14).

Bourdieu's Concepts Applied in Migrant Research

The use of Bourdieu's concepts as a theoretical framework, particularly that of symbolic violence, is quite common within research in respect to refugee migrants. To illustrate, a brief literature review confined to the Australian context identified several studies within the last few years using Bourdieu's notions to frame the experiences of refugee migrants, Muslims or otherwise. Three examples only are offered here due to space limitations, though these illustrate the wide range of contexts to which Bourdieu can be applied.

Picton and Banfield (2019) report on the experiences of refugee migrant students within a primary school in South Australia. Bourdieu's concepts are used to frame the experiences of these students, demonstrating how the school reward (reproduce) Australian cultural norms, with refugee students being marginalised.

Hourani et al. (2022) report on how refugee women from the Middle East face structural and symbolic violence after resettling in Melbourne. They experience racism, and face barriers to jobs and

services (e.g. welfare, healthcare). This results in potential partner violence and poor mental health. These women come to believe their experiences are due to personal failure rather than institutional racism.

Alkilani et al. (2024) use Bourdieu's notions to frame how refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants experience barriers to employment in the Australian construction industry. Even though these people have skills and qualifications from their own cultural background, these are not recognised within Australia. Migrants often face discrimination, being perceived as 'outsiders' by those within the construction industry.

These three papers illustrate that the notions of Pierre Bourdieu continue to be applied in a range of migrant studies. The notion of symbolic violence (implied or explicitly identified) inherent in these studies is evident, with migrants facing discrimination, restricted access to essential resources, and barriers that hinder their ability to pursue meaningful opportunities (Webb et al., 2002).

Returning to the refugee migrants in this present study – some will be seen to experience 'traditional' symbolic violence in their repeated attendance at their English language training programs, with little or no prospect of employment, and doxic acceptance/misrecognition of their inferior social position as normal. In contrast, a few participants demonstrate a high degree of *illusio* and agency, with some understanding of the 'rules of the game' (logic of practice) as they seek to better their social position in their new society of Australia. This provides the background for the description in the Findings section below.

Method

Participants

This paper is based on a subset of data obtained within a doctoral thesis conducted in Brisbane in 2016. Eight male Muslim refugees took part in this research. The participants were students at a Registered Training Organisation where the researcher had previously been an English teacher. Three criteria were applied in selecting participants in this purposive sample – that they were male Muslims who had arrived in Australia on a humanitarian refugee visa; that they had attended both the AMEP and SEE programs; and that they possessed sufficient oral English proficiency to take part in an interview with the researcher. Such purposive criterion sampling allows for collection of information-rich data from a smaller number of participants, as well as providing for quality assurance (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Patton, 2002).

Participants ranged in age from 30 to 62 years, and came from several countries, including Afghanistan, Burma, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan. They had a range of educational and employment backgrounds in their pre-Australian lives. Length of residence in Australia varied from three to thirteen years. Table 2 summarises the participant demographic data.

Procedure

This qualitative study used in-depth, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to explore the research question. Guide questions for the interviews are given in Table 3, centred around English training and employment. Interviews were conducted first in English and then later with an interpreter to allow participants the opportunity to elaborate on their initial responses in their own language and voice.

While the number of participants was relatively small, it was enough to reach data saturation (i.e. the point at which similar themes are identified by the researcher, and beyond which further data collection

Table 2 *Participant demographics*

Pseudonym (age)	Country of birth	Residence before Australia + residence in Australia at time of study	Education	Employment before Australia	Employment in Australia
Abdi (50)	Somalia	Eritrea = 14 years Australia = 6 years	High school to grade 9	Farmer Labourer	None
Abdullah (34)	Burma	Bangladesh = 19 years Australia = 6 years	No schooling	None	None
Amir (62)	Somalia	Eritrea = 13 years Australia = 7 years	No schooling	Farmer Labourer	None
Hassen (55)	Afghanistan	Nauru = 2 years Australia = 13 years	Four years primary school	Farmer	Fruit picker (3 years) Tiler (3 years)
Hossani (30)	Burma	Bangladesh = 18 years Australia = 5 years	Primary schooling + Electrical Trade Certificate (Bangladesh)	Electrical trade work	Interpreter (6 months) Nil else
Musa (42)	Ethiopia	Kenya = 17 years Australia = 7 years	No schooling	Farmer Cook	Cook (2 years) Halal meat factory (2 years) Chicken processing (1 year)
Sharif (42)	Afghanistan	Iran = 16 years Australia = 4 years	High school completed + Architectural qualification (Iran)	Architectural design	Own restaurant (9 months) Nil else
Youssef (30)	Sudan	Egypt = 4 years Australia = 3 years	High school completed	Farmer	None

produces redundant results) (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003). This is particularly so when participants share a common experience (here, English training programs), and where all interviews are guided by common open-ended questions about a specific research question (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Guest et al., 2006), again this being the case in this research.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, requiring at least a second listening to ensure accuracy. Systematic analysis of the data was performed using the technique which Kvale (2007, p. 117) terms “interview analysis as theoretical reading”, also termed a “generic approach” to interview analysis by Lichtman (2013, p. 258). This involved the researcher performing multiple readings of the transcribed interviews, the aim being to establish high familiarity with the data, and identify specific theoretical themes of interest (Kvale, 2007). The analysis was guided by the concepts in Bourdieu’s theory of practice (i.e. field, capital, habitus, doxa, illusio, and symbolic violence), and how these themes emerged

Table 3 *Guide questions for semi-structured interviews*

English language training programs	• What English training programs have you attended? • How many hours of English training have you completed? • Why did you do the AMEP and SEE courses? • Tell me about what you learnt from these English training programs. • How do you think attending these training programs has helped you? • How did attending the English programs affect your life in Australia and/or that of your family? • What are the problems in these English training programs? • If you were the teacher in these training programs, what would you do differently? • What do you think your English levels are now compared to when you first arrived in Australia?
Employment	• Tell me about your employment background before you came to Australia (e.g. type/s of work, place of work, length of employment, qualifications, etc). • Have you ever worked in Australia? If so, what jobs have you had? • What are the problems you have had in finding jobs in Australia? • Did attending the English training programs help you in looking for a job (e.g. work experience, qualifications, gaining contacts, etc)? • If you were the teacher in these English training programs, what would you do differently to help other refugees find work in Australia?

within the data. Comments relevant to particular themes were made within the transcripts using Microsoft Word, and those quotes highlighted for later consideration. As these themes were compared across interviews, this led to an increasing understanding of the data relative to Bourdieu's conceptual tools, and an integrated theoretically informed commentary relative to the research question.

Findings – Symbolic Violence in English Language Training in Australia

Following discussion of positive comments made by participants in this research about how their English training programs assisted them in settlement, there follows consideration of their concerns about their training programs.

Success is Relative

It must be acknowledged that there were some positives for the participants from attending English language training. However, in this study only three participants offered such positive commentary. Hossani and Abdullah noted that their English training assisted them to settle into Australian life:

[With interpreter] Previously I didn't speak English very well. I didn't know how to get somewhere, from a place to a place. Nowadays, I can manage myself. If I get a job, I think that my English [training] will help me. So, I think my English has a bit enhanced.
[Hossani]

English course very important because ... I can't English before, now little bit. Now 20 per cent, before I am zero per cent [oral English] ... Because is study English class, improve speak, [but] reading and writing no good. [Abdullah]

As Abdullah identifies, he 'improve speak, [but] reading and writing no good'. He remains with only basic proficiency in oral English, and little achievement in English literacy – this despite over 2400

hours of English language training. The third participant to regard his English training as helpful was Abdi. When he arrived in Australia, he noted becoming disorientated by Australian life:

This is Australia. A lot different to before ... When I come here, I cannot find anything, it difficult ... it like helicopter; you know helicopter ... going round and round, nowhere.
[Abdi]

Abdi's disorientation corresponds to what Bourdieu terms an inertia or 'hysteresis' of the habitus where "dispositions [habitus] are out of line with the field and with the 'collective expectations' which are constitutive of its normality" (Bourdieu, 2000a, p. 160). In other words, Abdi is unfamiliar with the 'rules of the game' ("collective expectations") in the fields of Australian life, and he feels like a fish out of water. However, four years later (and after many cycles of English language training), he has changed his perspective:

Now I have address. I have car. Government send me class. We are safe. My family have safe. Wow! ... So I cannot find anything once, so what, now I can. My helicopter is landed! [Abdi]

The safety of his family is obviously of great importance to Abdi ('Wow!'). However, to use his analogy, Abdi's helicopter may have landed, but he remains unskilled and unemployed, again despite hundreds of hours of English training. All these positive comments offered by the participants in this research pertain to only their initial settlement into Australia. All go on to subsequently raise concerns about several aspects of these programs.

Concerns About English Language Training

All participants are Muslim, but they demonstrate diversity in their origins, and prior educational and other pre-Australian life experiences. However, the Australian English Training Programs (ETPs) fail to recognize this diversity, instead offering a one-size-fits-all program. Due to this, two major problematic themes emerged from the responses of the refugee migrants in respect to their ETPs. First, there is a lack of structure and focus on the employment needs of the migrants in their ETPs; and second there is a flawed pedagogical basis to the ETPs.

Lack of Structure and Lack of Focus on Employment in the ETPs

Several participants expressed concerns about the lack of structured training hours within their ETPs. Thus, Amir, a 62-year-old Somali farmer who has never attended school and is illiterate in his first language, notes that:

[My English proficiency], it is still no good ... [I] need more time. (Amir)

Amir has attended over 2400 hours of English training but remains with only basic oral English proficiency. This is comparable to Abdullah, a 34-year-old Burmese who has had no schooling and has never had a job. He has also attended over 2400 hours of training, and as noted earlier, he stated: *'Because is study English class, improve speak, [but] reading and writing no good.*

Amir and Abdullah have thus gained linguistic (cultural) capital in English adequate only for basic oral communication, but not for employment.

Another participant is Musa, a 42-year-old Ethiopian farmer and cook. He has never attended school, and is illiterate in his first language, but makes the astute observation that:

[Refugees] never go to the job place and never go to schools ... when they come here, like the baby, is very hard for them ... you can see in the class too ... like had 800 or 500 [training hours], maybe twice, when he doing, he can understand a little bit ... They need two years or something ... but some people really need a little bit more I think. (Musa)

Migrants such as Amir and Abdullah who lack linguistic and cultural capital are thus ‘like the baby’ in Australian society, and ‘need a little bit more’ time to improve their English proficiency and gain work in Australia. However, they have failed to gain this even after thousands of hours of language training, and thus remain in a disadvantaged social position in Australian society. This situation is further exacerbated due to a failure of the ETPs to provide a focus on training for employment in the Australian workplace.

Successful learning of an additional/host language also requires a supportive and motivating context in which to practice that language (Firth & Wagner, 1997; Larsen-Freeman, 2007), with regular and frequent opportunity for interaction with native speakers (Young-Scholten, 2013). From a Bourdieusian perspective, optimum language learning assumes that the habitus of the learner is aligned with, and understands, the social rules (logic of practice) of the field concerned. Unfortunately, the ETPs appear to teach English without any significant focus on the expectations (rules) of the Australian workplace. Abdi, for example, a 50-year-old Somali farmer and laborer with education to early high school, comments that:

I want any job ... Farmer, cleaning, any ... this is better than just English here [ETPs] for just talk ... I look for a job, but I don't know how to look. (Abdi)

Amir has a similar opinion:

You say the English class they help you to get job ... I never seen ... English class teach letters and numbers, I never see someone they talk to the job. (Amir)

Hossani and Youssef (a 30-year-old Sudanese farmer who finished high school) further comment on this issue:

You have to teaching about the job ... what kind of job can people easy to do. (Hossani)
I have to find a place where I can do a job there and have some training, and then I can get the job. (Youssef)

Sharif, a 42-year-old Afghani, is the only participant in this research who has a professional background, having gained a qualification and work in architectural design during his 16 years as a refugee in Iran. He notes that the ETPs offer only:

... a little writing, a little listening, a little speaking. Good, but for refugee, something confusing, different to systematic teaching ... just sheets of papers ... every day a lot of paper. (Sharif)

The ETPs thus generally fail to offer teaching of basic job search or work skills that might improve the employment prospects of these refugee migrants. This consigns the majority of these people to unemployment and social disadvantage. In Bourdieusian terms, education in the form of the ETPs reproduces the social status quo, and thus represents symbolic violence in action (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

This situation is further exacerbated by failure of the ETPs to recognise the cultural capital of the refugees gained from their pre-Australian life experience, representing a basic flaw in their pedagogical basis.

Flawed Pedagogical Basis of the ETPs

The pedagogical construct of the ETPs regards refugee migrants as lacking any cultural capital that might be useful in the Australian workplace. For example, Sharif, in elaborating on his independent search for work, notes that:

Because before I have 14 or 15 years' experience for that job ... building [architectural design] ... I think I can easier here continue my job ... [but] if I can't have the job I like, I have [work] experience, doesn't matter the job. First thing, I try to find that job I like. ... Now if I can't that job, doesn't matter which job, any. (Sharif)

Sharif assumed his previous cultural capital in architectural design (i.e. a qualification and work experience) gained as a refugee in Iran would be valuable in the Australian workplace. However, the social rules of the Australian workplace are determined by those with symbolic power/capital in the fields of education and employment – and non-Australian qualifications and work experience are not generally recognised as legitimate; rather such qualifications and experience must be gained in Australia. This is reflected in the ETPs, which fail to recognize and build on the existing capital of refugee migrants. This is echoed in a remark by Hassen, a 55-year-old Afghan farmer who completed only four years of primary school:

[With interpreter] In Australia, you must have a certificate for anything, any skill that you want, any job that you want to do, and it's very difficult to get a certificate from here. (Hassen)

Many jobs in Australia now require a vocational qualification (inclusive of work experience) before employment in the field concerned can be gained. These provide the holder with the 'legitimate competence' (symbolic/cultural capital) necessary for employment in the field concerned (Bourdieu, 1986). However, it is very difficult for migrants with poor English proficiency to gain this Australian cultural and symbolic capital. Still, just because the ETPs devalue the migrants' pre-Australian cultural capital, such skills are still present within these people. As Musa comments:

[Even] if they do not know English . . . they know the job what's going on . . . maybe little bit different from Australia, but everyone doing something ... really if you go to course or job place . . . they can catch [up]. (Musa)

Even if migrants 'do not know English', they still 'know the job what's going on'. The earlier remarks by Sharif echo this: 'I have [work] experience, doesn't matter the job'. Refugee migrants have pre-existing work skills which the ETPs should be building on through employment-focused training – preferably with experience in a real workplace. As Musa notes, 'really if you go to course or job place . . . they can catch [up]' – in other words, the migrants can be trained and can catch up with other Australian workers.

Musa himself demonstrates that migrants can be trained in appropriate circumstances. He attended the AMEP for only about 500 hours before voluntarily leaving to find employment. In fact, Musa has had constant employment since arriving in Australia – receiving training as a cook in a restaurant; in a meat processing works; and in a chicken processing factory. On one occasion, Musa did return to the SEE program to try and gain a formal vocational qualification:

If I try to do like [vocational] course for good job ... I can't do with my English ... for that I decided let me back to do the English classes. (Musa)

Musa chose to return himself, not forced to do so by government regulations under threat of loss of social security benefits, as may happen if migrants fail to attend their ETPs. However, Musa only attended the SEE program for a few weeks, then left again after recognising and creating an opportunity for work within his own community as a family day care worker, noting:

That very slowly [SEE] course not for me. I need the job. (Musa)

Musa gained employment using his own initiative, and moved into a better social position, at least economically. As well as Musa, other migrants in this research also demonstrated *illusio* and agency in their response to the symbolic violence within the ETPs. Thus, Hassen gained intermittent work as a fruit picker and tiler; Sharif was self-employed for nine months running a restaurant with a friend from his own community, but finally failing and forced to return to language training; and Hossani gained work as an interpreter, but only for six months, before having to return to a language training program. It is also notable that none of these employment opportunities were gained from attending ETPs, but rather from links within their own community (Musa, Hassen and Sharif), and/or from their job agency (Hossani). Unfortunately, for Hassen, Sharif and Hossani this work was only casual or short-lived.

The *illusio* and agency demonstrated by these four migrants may be seen as falling within the evolving view of symbolic violence proposed by Burawoy (2019), with more credibility given to the viewpoints of the disadvantaged and refusing “the perspectives of the powerful” (Skeggs, 2004, p. 25). These migrants “far from being unwilling dupes of ideological indoctrination ... are self-reflective, and they strategically accommodate and resist the ideologies of their education [i.e. their ETPs]” (Schleef, 2006: 4) – demonstrating a more balanced and realistic understanding about their social reality, and actively trying to improve it. In this respect, Musa, with ongoing employment in several fields, appears to have a *habitus* particularly attuned to the rules of the Australian workplace, with a high degree of *illusio* and agency. Hassen, Sharif and Hossani demonstrate a lesser degree of *illusio* and agency, with their understanding of the logic/rules of practice in the field of Australian employment apparently less than Musa given their only brief success in the Australian workplace.

The remaining four migrants in this research – Amir, Youssef, Abdi, and Abdullah – have never been able to find employment in Australia, and rather appear to accept/misrecognise their social position as inevitable and normal, the traditional view of symbolic violence. Whatever the case, the result for all but Musa is a repetitive cycle of attendance at ETPs, or threat of loss of their social security payments. It may be noted in relation to this that refugee migrants rarely find continuing employment, and rarely reach the outcome/exit requirements of their English training programs. Furthermore, sometimes their program attendance may be irregular. However, it would be most unusual for a refugee migrant to be exited from their English training due to these factors. Thus, their cycles of attendance continue, and the social status quo is reproduced, ongoing symbolic violence.

Discussion

The results from this research suggest that the language training offered to refugee migrants in Australia fails to provide for their needs in two main respects – in their problematic structure and lack of focus on employment; and in a flawed pedagogical basis that fails to recognize or build on the existing capital and skills of the migrants. This results in their being denied linguistic resources, treated as inferior, and thus limited in their realistic aspirations, employment or otherwise – which combine into an overall experience of symbolic violence (Webb et al., 2002).

These failures, however, represent only the perspectives of the refugee migrants. Unfortunately, the training programs generally meet the contractually-mandated learning outcomes for their students (as outlined in Table 1), and within the funding available – and thus they are typically judged as ‘successful’ by the governmental authorities who manage these programs based on these learning outcomes (see Table 1). In reality, the migrants are left with only marginal gains in their Australian cultural and linguistic capital, but not to the degree where they ever become fully legitimate in Australian culture. Thus, for most participants in this research, their ETPs set them up for failure, both in what is absent and what is offered within these programs, ensuring these migrants remain in a position of social disadvantage in Australian society. This is symbolic violence at its worst and may be considered as a form of veiled institutionalised discrimination and racism.

The Changing Face of Australian ETPs

Until 2021, the AMEP offered migrants a base 510 hours of English training, and the SEE program 650 hours. Refugee migrants would usually transition to the SEE program at the end of their AMEP hours. However, while it was generally agreed among the program providers and other interest groups that these English training programs assisted refugee migrants to settle into Australian society, concerns were frequently raised about the general failure of both programs in assisting the migrants to gain employment (Australian Council of TESOL Associations, 2019; Pe-Pua et al. 2010). In response to this, the federal government contracted evaluation reports of both programs (ACIL Allen Consulting 2015a; 2015b), leading to the revised business models in 2017 referred to earlier in this paper, and their current structure as outlined in Table 1 (DEWR, 2024; Department of Home Affairs 2021).

Response to the new business models was generally lukewarm, with many challenges remaining. Key criticisms include issues with the curricula, overall reduced funding for the programs, insufficient training hours, and a lack of alignment between the two programs. With every change, the government has also increased the administrative and compliance burden on already-stressed TESOL teachers and vocational trainers in these programs, but with little in the way of improved outcomes for refugee migrants (ACTA 2019; Refugee Communities Advocacy Network, 2021; Tynan et al. 2019).

Further reports continue to echo these concerns. Button (2019) notes continuing tension between the settlement and employment aims of the AMEP; and declining morale among AMEP and SEE teachers over these continuing issues. Collins et al. (2019) report on the settlement experiences of 233 recently arrived refugee families in Australia – the main problem for them was finding meaningful employment, with low levels of English proficiency being a significant contributing factor. Language training providers also reported continuing issues with overcrowded classes, inflexible delivery, and conflicts between student attendance requirements and their need to find employment.

Another related issue is that in recent years refugee migrants arriving in Australia are those from contexts where they have experienced interrupted (or no) education, and thus low-level literacy skills in their first language (Edwards et al., 2018). For these groups of adult learners, research has shown that simply increasing their English training hours is unlikely to produce any significant gains in their English literacy. They can only aspire to gain a basic oral fluency in English (Kurvers et al., 2010; Young-Scholten, 2013). This is the case for most of the refugee migrants in this study.

A report for the Australian Government centred on the AMEP prepared by Shergold et al. (2019, p. 7) proposed that “greater effort should be focused on ensuring that language acquisition can occur concurrently with workplace experience and continue to develop once refugees are in employment”. There were some case studies described in that paper where migrant language training was linked to subsequent successful employment. However, these initiatives were in local geographical regions, and

usually time-limited due to budgetary restrictions – and therein lies a major problem. To operationalise such programs requires adequate and continued funding. While the government has increased the overall funding to the AMEP and SEE programs in recent years, this is generally to expand the program to reach greater numbers of the unemployed. Program providers have seen no real increase in their actual payments per client, and funding is inadequate for what the providers are now expected to achieve in delivery of these programs. There has also been a report on the AMEP by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO, 2024) that noted several problematic issues in respect to the administration of AMEP contracts – including ineffective design and management of AMEP contracts; and that key performance indicators have not been met.

As can be appreciated from the foregoing, the English language training programs in Australia face several continuing problems, and in many respects do not meet the needs of refugee migrants. Data detailing specific outcomes for refugee migrants within the AMEP and SEE programs is scarce. However, it is known that only around seven per cent of AMEP clients ever reach the AMEP exit benchmark of vocational English proficiency (ACSF 3) in all macroskills (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2015a; Shergold et al., 2019). This is suggested as related to a significant gap between program participation and desired outcomes – in turn related to issues faced by the refugees such as pre-arrival trauma, disrupted schooling, lack of digital literacy, and cultural problems. All these factors can negatively impact on the refugees, making it harder for them to attend and complete their English language training, and thus improve their English proficiency (Refugee Communities Advocacy Network, 2021).

In both the AMEP and SEE programs, specific data on the return rates of refugee students, as well as their final English proficiency outcomes, are not identified (except as above for the AMEP). Suffice to say that the pre-arrival and settlement problems faced by refugee migrants may also impact their attendance within the SEE program. Additionally, there are issues with migrants transitioning to the SEE program – in that this program requires participants to have ‘capacity to benefit’ from training (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2015b) – and AMEP clients not at a vocational English proficiency level may be deemed not to have that capacity to benefit, and thus are confined to the AMEP.

This research suggests that current English training programs in Australia do not meet the needs of their migrant clients, particularly in their failure to assist migrants to find meaningful employment. The inappropriate structure and delivery of these programs reflect federal government policies that relegate most of these people to living on social benefits during their lives in Australia. Against this background, fundamental policy changes to the AMEP and SEE programs need to be considered.

Limitations and Future Research

It is acknowledged that this research used a small sample size of only one demographic group (eight male Muslim refugee migrants) within a single urban location (Brisbane). The study is also cross-sectional, from only a single point in time. These aspects limit the generalisability of the findings to other groups of migrant refugees. Future research using a larger and more diverse sample (e.g. Muslim women, different cultural groups, different locations, etc.) would provide broader perspectives and greater generalisability of the findings. Longitudinal studies over time would also add to the value of such research from the perspective of long-term settlement and employment outcomes. Nevertheless, some general conclusions can be drawn from this research.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

While there have been some encouraging changes in the additional language training offered to refugee migrants in Australia, these changes appear to be sporadic rather than organised, and inadequately

funded. The changes also appear to be disjointed and not always based on sound second/additional language theory. Until a more systematic approach is adopted and mandated and is in control of language teachers and trainers rather than subject to the whims of the politicians of the time, few migrants will gain their desired employment outcomes.

Essentially, policy change as a minimum should include:

- Adoption of long-term planning and ongoing funding for language training programs, as well as “policies, strategies . . . and pedagogical approaches that flexibly meet the needs and challenges” of these migrants (Hanemann, 2018, p. 59).
- Moving towards a teaching environment that builds on the skills and strengths of these migrant people, rather than treating them as empty vessels to be filled with non-contextualised English language training.
- Providing a focus on teaching of skills and knowledge valued in the Australian workplace, with associated work experience and, if possible, a vocational certificate outcome.

This paper closes with a quote from Bourdieu.

Those who talk of equality of opportunity forget that social games ... are not 'fair games'. Without being, strictly speaking, rigged, the competition resembles a handicap race that has lasted for generations (Bourdieu, 2000, pp. 214-215).

If the opinions voiced by the refugee migrants in this research were heeded by policy makers and providers of English training in Australia, then some of the difficulties these people face could be more successfully addressed. Their ‘handicap race’ would then reduce, and their training programs might become transformative rather than reproductive of the social status quo – a place of opportunity rather than symbolic violence.

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