



**Hopes Fulfilled or Dreams Shattered?
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Background Paper

**Young Refugees in Australia and their English
Language Needs**

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**This background paper has been prepared to inform discussion
at this conference and does not necessarily represent the views
of the Centre for Refugee Research.**

List of Acronyms

AMEP – Adult Migrant English Program

AMES – Adult Migrant English Service

CMYI – Centre for Multicultural and Youth Issues

CRC – Convention on the Rights of the Child

DEST – Department of Education, Science and Training

DIMIA – Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs

ESL – English as a Second Language

LLNP – Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program

NAP – New Arrivals Program

PPV – Permanent Protection Visa

PTSD – Post traumatic stress disorder

RCSC – Refugee Claimants Support Centre

SELLEN – South East Local Learning Employment Network

SPP – Special Preparatory Program

TAFE – Training and Further Education

TPV – Temporary Protection Visa

UN – United Nations

UNDHR – UN Declaration of Human Rights

UNHCHR – UN High Commission of Human Rights

Young refugees in Australia and their English language needs

Introduction

Under the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention and the subsequent 1967 Protocol, a refugee is defined as any person who is outside his or her country of nationality and is unable or unwilling to return because of a well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion (UNHCHR). This essay is about young refugees in Australia. It concerns not only youth in Australia who have been officially recognised by Australian law as refugees, but also other young people who may have had refugee-like experiences of persecution, including those who are classified as asylum seekers and are still waiting for official refugee status. Youth is defined in this essay as ages 12 to 25 years inclusive; this definition being well accepted in the youth policy field in Australia (CMYI 2005).

Article 26 of the UNDHR states that, “everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages” (UN 1948). Moreover, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that higher education be made “accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means” (UN 1990). In order for young refugees to progress effectively through the Australian education system and thereby enjoy their right to access primary and higher education they need to be equipped with sufficient English language skills. While the needs of a 12 year old can differ greatly to those of a 25 year old, young refugees across the age spectrum must be competent enough in English to make a successful transition into mainstream education, or enter into training or employment. There is evidence that young refugees in Australia value education very highly and want to excel in their studies (Coventry et al. 2001 p24). Others are keen to find employment so that they can send money to family overseas or help their family in Australia repay debts associated with their migration (CMYI and SELLEN 2004 p27). One of the major difficulties faced by this group in finding casual or part time employment is poor language skills (CMYI and SELLEN 2004 p27). In addition to teaching English language so that students can transition into the regular education system, ideally the English as a Second Language (ESL) classes should equip students with curriculum knowledge and general school behaviours (CMYI and SELLEN 2004 p7). As an important part of the adaptation process, ESL classes have the potential to positively influence the resettlement experience of young refugees in Australia. ESL classes provide an opportunity for young people to build friendships and connect with and participate in the broader community.

Background

Needs and Challenges

Young refugees have particular needs and face different challenges from other young migrants in Australia. The refugee experience impacts upon every part of the resettlement process; including upon the acquisition of the English language. There has been a marked increase in the number of refugees in Australia who have spent a large part of their life in refugee camps and who, as a result, have had severely disrupted or no formal schooling. According to the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA), in 2002-2003 there was an overall decrease in the education levels of humanitarian entrants compared to 2001-2002 (DIMIA ndf p 20). Forty-two percent of all entrants assisted had poor to nil reading ability in their own language. Only 27% of all entrants had good to very good reading ability in their own language with 31% not stating their reading ability (DIMIA ndf p20). This increase has also been observed by ESL service providers. One provider estimated that the proportion of new arrivals currently coming through the system, who have had severely disrupted schooling, is the highest it has been in over ten years (CMYI and SELLEN 2004 p29).

The ESL needs of a young person who has not had a background of education, or who is not literate in their first language, are clearly different from those who have had equivalent schooling in their country of origin. Methodology emerging from various case studies of learners with limited first language literacy emphasises the need to focus on the learners' immediate personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, familiar topics and concrete, real world material rather than abstract and decontextualised themes (Chou Allender ndf p10). Moreover, learners who have had limited previous experience of formal education have difficulties managing information input, organising learning material, following verbal and written instructions and processing large chunks of new language (Chou Allender ndf p11).

A substantial number of refugees arriving in Australia are survivors of torture and other traumatic experiences (Chou Allender ndf p12). After having experienced displacement and trauma, they then face the task of having to adapt to a new environment and, in many cases, have to simultaneously acquire a new language. It is the multiplicity of losses and stressors in addition to traumatic experiences at a time of overall change, that creates the complex situation, which constitutes the refugee experience (Ministry of Education NZ 2005 p7). Young refugees are therefore potentially 'at risk' for less than optimal outcomes at school, and might also have specific mental health needs.

Moreover, the years from age 12-25 are a significant period of transition in a young person's life incorporating greater independence and responsibilities at a time of dramatic emotional and physical change (CMYI 2002 p11). For youth with a refugee background the impact of these changes will be even more significant. The challenges and stresses of the transition to adulthood are compounded when a young person is also dealing with settling into a new country and coming to terms with the upheaval and trauma of their past. According to the Refugee Resettlement Advisory Council, refugee youth are likely to have experienced some or all of the following: forced exit from their country of origin;

profound disruption before arrival in Australia, including extended periods of discrimination; conflict and human rights abuses in their countries of origin, often followed by a period of uncertain status in a country of asylum— in some cases in a refugee camp; exposure to traumatic experiences such as loss of or separation from family members; torture or life-threatening events; and prolonged periods in countries where service infrastructure— for example, health and education infrastructure— is poorly developed or disrupted as a result of conflict (Refugee Resettlement Advisory Council 2002 p14).

As a consequence of torture or other traumatic experiences, some refugee youth may suffer grief, anxiety, depression, guilt or symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, which may persist long after settlement in Australia. This can interfere with the settlement process both directly and indirectly— for example, by affecting a person's capacity to trust and form relationships with family, teachers, peers and the broader community (Refugee Resettlement Advisory Council 2002 p4). Those refugees who are survivors of torture and trauma may display chronic psychological symptoms such as memory impairment, short attention span, severe anxiety and limited concentration which may impede learning (Chou Allender ndf p 12).

Learning English as a migrant in Australia may be a difficult experience due to financial problems, unemployment and experiences of racism and discrimination all of which can affect language learning (Chou Allender ndf p 12). Due to such experiences, young refugees may lack confidence and self-esteem as learners and have problems with their motivation to learn and their attitudes towards the English language. Experiences of racism and discrimination are a serious concern in Australia's current political climate. The Howard government's border protection policy has encouraged racism and xenophobia in the general population. Refugees and asylum seekers have been falsely demonised as illegal immigrants, queue jumpers, economic refugees and potential terrorists. This kind of rhetoric came from senior government officials and the media supported such thinking with no concern for the effect that such generalised vilification might have had on the harmony of Australia's multicultural society (Roach 2002).

For some asylum seekers, trauma may have been exacerbated by detention in Australia, and by their precarious legal situation. Toni Chang, coordinator of ESL classes for asylum seekers at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre in Melbourne, commented that

“in ESL classes we try to create a welcoming atmosphere in which students can relax, socialise and feel that they are supported by friends. Even so, students find it hard to focus on learning, particularly when a Refugee Review Tribunal hearing is imminent” (Chang, pers. Comm. 17/09/2005).

The topics covered in classes may also differ for people who have come from a refugee background. Questions about a student's home country, past history and family members – topics typically covered in ESL classes for migrants – are best avoided due to the distress related to such themes. Moreover, those refugees who are faced with uncertain

visa status in Australia, need to understand legal terminology. Interpreters are provided for court hearings, but for some young asylum seekers who are anxious about the proceedings, some comprehension of the legal process can help to alleviate their feelings of powerlessness. Words such as “bridging visa”, “application”, “appeal”, “apply”, “accept” and “reject” may be some of the more useful legal vocabulary taught (Chang, pers. Comm. 17/09/2005).

Service Provision

ESL classes available to young refugees depend upon their visa category and their age. DIMIA divides Australia’s humanitarian program into two resettlement categories – offshore and onshore. The offshore program consists of permanent visas (Refugee and Special Humanitarian Program categories), and temporary humanitarian visas (subclasses 447 (Secondary Movement Offshore Entry (Temporary) and 451 (Secondary Movement Relocation (Temporary)). The onshore protection program exists for those people already in Australia who have arrived on temporary visas or in an ‘unauthorised’ manner and who have then been found to be in need of Australia’s protection under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. The onshore protection component consists of the Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) and the Permanent Protection Visa (PPV) (DIMIA 2005).

Asylum seekers are people who have applied for recognition as refugees under the UN Convention but whose cases have yet to be determined (CMYI 2005). TPV holders have been granted refugee status after making an onshore application. However they only have temporary protection guaranteed and do not have rights of return or family reunification rights (Refugee Council of Australia ndf). Refugees who have TPVs are excluded from some key settlement services, including federally funded English language programs or translating and interpreting services (Marston 2003 p 18).

The Special Humanitarian Program visas can also be problematic for young refugees needing to access English language services. These visas require refugees to pay for their own airfare and medical expenses and often involve families incurring debts of \$11,000 or more (Heath 2003 p.23 cited in CMYI & SELLEN 2004 p 15). This trend has implications in terms of placing increased pressure on young refugees to repay debts, and may result in young people wishing to move out of English language schools/classes and into the workforce as quickly as possible, regardless of whether they have acquired the language skills necessary to be able to find long-term, secure employment (CMYI & SELLEN 2004 p15).

Eligible young refugees are entitled to attend free full-time ESL classes in government primary or secondary schools or English Language Centres through the New Arrivals Program (NAP). These School or Centre programs are provided for students who are permanent residents and who have been in Australia for less than six months and plan to attend primary or secondary school following completion of their course (NSW DEST

2004 p15). The ESL NAP is available for a six month period. However students from humanitarian or refugee backgrounds, or who have had interruptions to previous schooling may be permitted to stay for up to a year. Educational jurisdictions in states and territories receive once-only per capita funding for each eligible new arrival student from the Commonwealth government (CMYI & SELLEN 2004 p6). The program aims to introduce students to schooling in Australia and prepare them for the English language demands of mainstream schools. Students over 18 are not eligible to enrol (DEST 2005).

It is essential that refugee youth continue to receive ESL support after their transition into mainstream education in Australian schools (CMYI & SELLEN 2004). ESL students need to simultaneously learn English, learn in English and learn about English in order to successfully participate in informal social interactions as well as more formal and academic contexts. In NSW, ESL education is provided in primary schools, high schools, Intensive English Centres (IECs) and the Intensive English High School (IEHS). ESL programs include intensive and post-intensive English language support to both newly arrived and continuing ESL students from Kindergarten to Year 12. The ESL Targeted Support Program provides specialist ESL teachers, in addition to the school's normal staffing allocation, to primary and high schools which have sufficient numbers of identified ESL students (NSW DEST 2004 p5).

Young refugees who are of post-compulsory school age (16+) or who are over 18 years may be entitled to access ESL programs through the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). AMEP, a government funded program, provides 510 hours of English classes free of charge to assist new migrants and refugees to settle into their life in Australia (DIMIA 2005). Applicants must register within three months of arriving in Australia or gaining permanent residence, or else they risk losing this entitlement (DIMIA 2005). Through the AMEP there are a number of different options regarding teaching and learning settings. Students may choose a formal course of tuition, either centre-based or in a community setting, or through a structured distance learning course. Informal tuition options include home-based language assistance from a trained volunteer tutor through the Home Tutor Scheme, or independent study (with teacher support if required) in an Individual Learning Centre (DIMIA 2005).

Additional hours are also available to some humanitarian entrants who qualify for special assistance under the Special Preparatory Program (SPP). The SPP offers tuition in a specially tailored, supportive environment to eligible humanitarian entrants who have been assessed as having special needs arising from their pre-migration experiences, for example, torture, trauma or low levels of schooling. The SPP helps clients become familiar with the learning process before they go on to the more formal environment of the AMEP (DIMIA 2005).

A final avenue of government-funded ESL training available to some young refugees is the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP) run through Centrelink. Youth aged 15 to 20 years who are registered and eligible for either Job Network assistance or Job Match services and who require further ESL assistance may participate in this program. Training is provided in small groups for between 6 and 20 hours per week and

for up to one year, depending on the needs and availability of the student, and students must be registered as a job seeker with Centrelink (AMES 2004).

Challenges and gaps in the current system

In the process of researching this paper it became evident that there is quite a complex web of ESL services available in Australia. There is a list of government funded AMEP providers available on the DIMIA website (DIMIA 2005). However, there does not seem to be any comprehensive national database of ESL providers including the community organisations which provide language training for asylum seekers and other refugee youth ineligible for the NAP and other programs. The ways in which ESL programs operate can vary between schools, depending on the numbers of both newly-arrived and continuing ESL students, their English language learning needs, their distribution in different classes and years and the number of ESL teacher positions allocated to the school (NSW DEST 2004 p6). For a newly arrived refugee youth without guidance, finding the most appropriate educational pathway may be quite a difficult task. The concern that while there is a vast range of educational options, there is a lack of information and support available to assist people plan a structured pathway between courses has been addressed by the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues through a guide explaining the education and training system in Victoria (CMYI 2003). It is unknown if other such resources are available in other states and territories.

The system, moreover, does not address the needs of all refugee youth. Government funded ESL services and support programs are only available to those young refugees who meet the eligibility criteria. TPV holders and asylum seekers have limited, or no, access to these programs and depend on services provided by community and church groups. The 45 day rule which was introduced in 1997 removes work rights and access to health care for refugee claimants who do not apply for protection within 45 days of their arrival in Australia (RCSC ndf). Refugee youth affected by this rule have particular problems accessing much needed services. One refugee service provider commented that

“suffering the effects of torture and trauma and the need to constantly be on the move to secure housing, food and healthcare prevents asylum seekers to participate meaningful in ESL classes. As most have no access to transport (those affected by the 45-day rule and loss of work permission) they have no way of getting regularly to classes, or purchase course material. Many do not have access to money and so cannot provide for their own food for the day. This includes children” (Pers comm. 2005).

TPV holders face similar difficulties in successfully accessing ESL and other services. Research shows that refugees forced to live in a mental and material state of limbo pay a very high price in terms of individual well being, family separation and employment possibilities (Marston 2003). ESL teacher Dijana Sabanovic says

“When we sit together in class, it is not only English that keeps this group together but also our struggle to become part of society. This can be hard when many are not sure how long they will stay in Australia or when they are going to see their loved ones again” (Fitzroy Learning Network 2002).

According to Coventry et al., services and support for young refugees in Australia should not be completely dependent upon their visa status, as many migrants who have arrived on non-refugee visas (e.g. family reunions) share the refugee experience (Coventry et al. 2003 cited in CMYI &SELLEN p14). Other migrant young people may have had a refugee-like experience of torture and trauma, persecution, violent civil discord, or periods spent in camps or third countries. The families of second-generation young people may also have had this experience.

The NSW Department of Education and Training 2004 document ‘Ethnic Affairs Priority Statement’ details how many students were enrolled in the NAP and AMES. The report outlines the number of resources, training and amount of funding put towards ESL programs in government schools (NSW DE&T 2004). However, it seems that there have been no comprehensive evaluations of ESL programs in Australia. The only such report that was found in the course of this research was a review of Government funded ESL programs catering for newly arrived young refugees. This study was conducted in the City of Greater Dandenong in Victoria by the Centre for Multicultural and Youth Issues (CMYI) and South East Local Learning and Employment Network (SELLEN). The report produced: “Pathways and Pitfalls: the Journey of Refugee Young People in and Around the Education System in Greater Dandenong” provides a snapshot of ESL provision in this area (CMYI &SELLEN 2004). One of the report’s major findings was that many young people who are exiting the ESL New Arrivals Program are struggling to cope with mainstream education. Moreover, it was suggested that ESL in mainstream schools, which is designed to carry on the English learning process that is started in the ESL NAP often did not adequately cater for the complex learning needs of newly arrived refugee young people, particularly those who have severely disrupted schooling (CMYI &SELLEN 2004).

The biggest comment or concern raised by service providers in the report, was the limited time that young people were spending at the ELS and Centres in the ESL NAP. This was generally seen as a result of deficiencies in the structure and implementation of the ESL NAP and on the attitudes and expectations of the young people and their families resulting in the premature transition of young people into mainstream schools (CMYI & SELLEN pp25-28). It was found that setting six months as a standard timeframe for NAP creates expectations and pressures about what young people should be able to achieve. One provider commented in the report that

“we think that some young people should stay longer, but we’ve got so many students waiting to come in and we only receive funding from the government for a certain number of months, so we have no choice” (CMYI & SELLEN 2004 p 27).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The report 'Pathways and Pitfalls' identified a general lack of comprehensive data and research available on the outcomes of the ESL NAP (CMYI & SELLEN 2004 p4). Indeed, there is a need to better evaluate all of the ESL programs available to young refugees in Australia to determine whether they are achieving their goals and enabling young refugees to successfully pursue further education, training or employment. Moreover, better coordination and communication between English language service providers may help to simplify the system for young refugees so that they are able to make informed choices about the kind of English language training that is most appropriate for their varying needs.

Although beyond the scope of this paper, the consequences of denying settlement services, including English language services, to some young refugees jeopardises their chances of successful resettlement in Australia. All refugee youth are not considered equally, and those affected by the Australian government's policies of mandatory detention and/ or the TPV regime suffer serious set backs in their ability to successfully resettle in Australia. These kinds of policies are symptomatic of the current government's attitude towards and their treatment of refugees – policies which fly in the face of the good work and progress being made with regards to ESL services by government and non governmental organisations alike.

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