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Language and culture learning needs of adult refugees

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Abstract
Refugees suddenly face life transitions and challenges such as the need to learn a new language, learn the rules of a new culture, endure traumatic situations, and loss; all of these are factors that impact their integration. This article describes the language and culture learning needs of adult refugees resettling in the United States suggests best teaching practices to meet their unique learning needs.

INTRODUCTION

The United States has a long history of embracing refugees and continues to be one of the world's major resettlement nations with the largest resettlement program (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, [UNHCR], 2022). Through resettlement, refugees are transferred from an asylum country where they cannot meet their specific needs, to another country that has agreed to accept them and provide them with permanent residence. Resettlement is reserved for the most vulnerable and individuals who fit in at least one category of vulnerability including medical needs, women and girls, children, and tortured or abused survivors. Recent data (Monin et al., 2021) show that for the fiscal year 2020, 35% of refugees were accepted from Africa, 35% from Asia (including the Near East/South Asia and East Asia), 22% from Europe, and 8% from Latin America and the Caribbean. The top countries of origin were the Democratic Republic of Congo (24.3%), Myanmar (17.9%), and Ukraine (16.3%).

In the United States of America, The Department of State resettles refugees once the U.S. Department of Homeland Security grants them refugee status. The Department of State, non-profit organizations, national voluntary agencies, and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (2022) help refugees to relocate, integrate, and reach their full potential by providing them with services from the first day of their arrival. Cultural orientation, language education, vocational training, and programs to encourage access to education and work are among the many services provided by governmental and non-governmental organizations. But the need for improving the quality of the services, and equal access to all refugees continue as the number of refugees steadily increases and causes disparities in terms of availability and accessibility of resources and support (Morrice, 2021; United Nations Educational Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2019). Given the scope of services

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to meet the increasing demand for refugee education and recently the COVID-19 pandemic's adverse impacts on refugees (Rafieifar et al., 2021), it seems that more attention is required to explore, understand, and provide for refugees.

A growing body of literature has been investigating refugee education to gain a better understanding of the refugee experience (Cun et al., 2019; Higgins & Misawa, 2022; Kisiara, 2021; Perry & Mallozi, 2017). The literature focuses on a variety of areas such as the effects of trauma on learning (Finn, 2010; Gordon, 2011), community engagement through English as a Second Language (ESL) programs (Chao & Kuntz, 2013; Chao & Mantero, 2014; Cun et al., 2019; Han, 2011), language and identity (Chao, 2020; Perlman, 2020), and teaching (Bousalis et al., 2021). However, as stated by UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report 2019 (UNESCO, 2019), the unique needs of adult migrants and refugees are often overlooked, and education alone is not adequate in itself either. Refugee migration has an involuntary nature compared to other immigrants' and sojourners' reasons to migrate. At the heart of the common refugee experience of forced migration, living in refugee camps, resettlement journeys, and trauma also has a significant effect on individuals and their communities (Perlman, 2020). Refugees suddenly face life transitions and challenges such as the need to learn a new language and culture, endure traumatic situations, and loss; all of these are factors that impact their integration (Bemak & Chung, 2017; Finn, 2010; Sheikh & Anderson, 2018; Ward et al., 2001). Refugees vary culturally, linguistically, and ethnically from most U.S. populations (Chao, 2020), and they differ among themselves in terms of their English proficiency. Thus, fostering effective integration is a critical effort for both the refugees and the host communities (Thomsen & Weilage, 2021). While refugees navigate through the diverse cultural frames of references, dramatic changes in living conditions, and language, they interact with the members of the host communities in various realms of life such as education, social, and economic domains, which creates a mutual adaptation process.

Recently, the COVID-19 outbreak has substantially exacerbated the vulnerability of refugees. While this pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of the education system in general, inequality and the digital gap have become more visible (Rafieifar et al., 2021). Those who were already marginalized felt the digital gap even more acutely since they lacked access to computers and the internet, as well as the skills and support from their families to continue their education at home. The worldwide disruption of education has also highlighted the necessity and importance of the provision of lifelong learning opportunities for all. This article describes the language and culture learning needs of adult refugees resettling in the United States and suggests best teaching practices to meet their unique learning needs.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE LEARNING NEEDS

Language and culture create an intricately "woven tapestry" that includes deliberate, self-regulated culture and language learning strategies for acquiring specific skills and general proficiency (Oxford & Gkonou, 2018, p. 405). Refugees come to the language classes with their varying cultural viewpoints, understandings of how to fit in the dominant culture, diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds as well as migration-related experiences that need to be addressed. In this section, the first paragraph discusses the impact of traumatic migration experiences on learners. The second paragraph explores the instructional needs of refugee learners who lack literacy or formal education experiences. Finally, the last paragraphs highlight the role of language and culture learning in refugee adaptation to the host country, integration, and community engagement.

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Refugees are thought to be the group most impacted by traumatic migration experiences (Ward et al., 2001). In most situations, studies comparing refugees to immigrants or sojourners (Berry et al., 1987; Pernice & Brook, 1994) show that refugees have more difficulty adjusting. Depression and post-traumatic stress disorder are the most commonly diagnosed diseases that are likely to emerge from refugee experiences. Personality problems have also been highlighted as probable outcomes of the immigration and resettlement process (Ward et al., 2001). Trauma-related symptoms can also include emotions of low self-esteem, self-confidence, issues of memory and concentration, feelings of fatigue, despair, and somatic complaints and stress all of which can interfere with a person's ability to learn (Gordon, 2011; Isserlis, 2000). Research on the influence of trauma on adult ESL learners (Finn, 2010; Gordon, 2011; Housel, 2020; McDonald, 2000) indicates that trauma should be taken into consideration and addressed in adult refugee education as a crucial factor affecting adult learners' learning experiences.

Most refugees who attend ESL programs do not speak English fluently or have low literacy levels. Therefore, completing, submitting, or following governmental paperwork and necessary procedures are some of the challenges encountered by refugees (Cun et al., 2019). Refugee adult learners who lack literacy or have no formal education experiences have different instructional needs than those of learners with basic literacy and formal education (Perry, 2013). For example, Bigelow and Schwarz (2010, p.12) explain that lack of orientation to the texts, phonemic awareness skills, lack of confidence, or social status in their community are among the issues experienced by adult learners with low literacy levels.

Language study is specifically vital for refugees, whether they are in a transition country or their eventual destination. It is considered the first step toward obtaining social, medical, and political information and economic and social integration (Adamuti-Trache, 2013; Chao, 2020). Language acquisition allows them to find jobs, cope with everyday challenges such as dealing with their children's schoolwork, and communicate with landlords, teachers, or healthcare providers (Kisiara, 2021). Besides the social and economic aspects, Hou and Beiser (2006) suggest gaining language proficiency has a significant impact on the well-being of immigrants as well. It prevents the elderly from solidarity and problems caused by children getting by in the language before their parents. Therefore, understanding language learning needs becomes crucial not only for the integration of refugees but also for improving their well-being.

Improved intercultural connections allow for an effective sociocultural adaptation process strengthened by communication, social engagement, and understanding of the norms and values of the host society (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). Adult refugees experience a variety of challenges such as adapting to a new culture, transitioning into employment, and studying in their host community as they experience occupational and professional downgrading (Adversario, 2021; Guo, 2015). Acculturation refers to the binary process of changes that occur on cultural and psychological levels as a result of the interaction between people from various cultural groups (Berry, 2005). Language proficiency and knowledge of culture have been identified as important aspects of the acculturation process (Masgoret & Ward, 2006; Ward et al., 2001). Culture learning involves culturally required social knowledge and abilities necessary for survival and flourishing in the new society. As Morrice (2021) suggests, refugees must understand their new social environment and determine how to adapt to it by analyzing their preconceptions and determining a path of action as they acquire new information and skills.

Acquiring necessary language skills, effective integration, and involvement in the host community are closely related. As language proficiency improves, intercultural engagement and involvement in daily tasks increase (Dudley, 2007; Masgoret & Ward, 2006).

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However, several factors affect the attitudes of refugee learners toward participation in adult English language learning programs. As most adult refugees need to earn a living, work and family responsibilities might interfere with the program schedules (McHugh & Doxsee, 2018; Perry & Mallozi, 2017). Issues of childcare and transportation, course availability, and expensive fees are the other reasons influencing participation in language programs. Cultural and gendered expectations (for example, mothers take care of children, and fathers work) result in limited involvement in the programs as well (Frye, 1999; Perry & Mallozi, 2017). Therefore, as Perry and Mallozi (2017) suggest, while some challenges and obstacles seem to be structural, some can be considered cultural, tied to the community's views, values, and customs regarding the participation of refugee adult learners in the programs. Understanding the circumstances related to the refugee context becomes crucial to improving the policies and approaches to refugee education.

PURSUIT OF LIFELONG LEARNING

The pursuit of lifelong learning opportunities to achieve self-sufficiency and sustainable living conditions is relevant in adult refugee education (Morrice, 2021). The need for a worldwide lifelong learning effort is also addressed in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations Committee (UN, 2022). In particular, goals number four and eight, "Quality Education" (p. 34) commits to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all" and "decent work" (p. 42) aim to develop labor rights and safer work conditions (UN, 2022). According to the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) Director Atchoarena (2018), global problems such as mass migration and forced displacement, poverty, and inequality threatening democracy require holistic solutions. A comprehensive vision of lifelong learning needs to be adopted and incorporated into people's everyday lives and endeavors to ensure their learning needs are addressed.

Lifelong learning aims to promote self-reliance (Morrice, 2021). It may help refugees make up for knowledge and opportunities they lost earlier, paving the way to self-sufficiency, and supporting sustainable and decent lives. Chapman et al. (2006) explain three interactive components of lifelong learning: (1) Learning for a highly skilled qualified labor force, (2) democratic and embracing society, and (3) living a meaningful life. According to this viewpoint, developing one's intelligence and skills throughout one's life is essential to grow and develop as a person who is a member of the participatory democracy, and a productive force for economic growth and development.

Lifelong learning changes a person in various ways (Jarvis, 2006). While the person's self-confidence and mental and emotional states improve, the world and events might also gain new meanings. A person may also change through gaining experience, learning how to deal with comparable issues and circumstances, and growing in intelligence. In that sense, lifelong learning adopts a holistic approach that incorporates the financial, sociocultural, and other resources required for learning both in formal education settings and in the community (English & Mayo, 2019). Morrice (2021) suggests the provision of lifelong learning for refugees requires giving an ear to their aspirations for meaningful and self-reliant lives as a starting point. Equality of education and employment for refugees should prioritize accessible language education to increase opportunities to engage in the host community and secure employment. It is necessary to take action to improve their job prospects and availability and accessibility of social, medical, and educational resources and means to help them become self-reliant for a sustainable future.

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BEST TEACHING PRACTICES

The following section suggests teaching practices that can improve the accessibility of adult refugee programs, learning environments, and content, as well as promote lifelong learning for adult refugee learners. The first paragraph speaks about the need to conduct proficiency tests for the placement of the learners into the programs according to their level. The next one highlights developing customized programs tailored to the learners' goals, aspirations, and backgrounds. Following that, the importance of community support and collaboration are emphasized in addressing the specific needs of refugee learners. In the last paragraphs, the role of information technology and communication tools (ICT) tools in program designs and the requirement for professional development on trauma-informed instruction in teaching refugee learners are highlighted.

Programs should use a placement test before assigning refugee adult learners to the different courses and language levels they provide. Offering separate English classes where literacy and basic skills are introduced at the learners' pace can be beneficial. Programs should tailor differentiated instructions based on literacy demands and prior education experience, rather than combining various levels in one classroom (Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010; Tshabangu-Soko & Caron, 2011). While some adults with minimal or no schooling experience need to learn primarily literacy skills, some might need contextualizing and relevant curriculum for their objectives, roles, and responsibilities such as citizenship and civic involvement (Benseman, 2014). Considering such diversity, sustainable language instruction designs customized to the learners' specific learning needs and goals become crucial besides placing them according to proficiency levels.

Vanek et al. (2020) suggest establishing local and statewide collaborations to support refugees' integration into their environment and workplace as available adult education programs fail to address the needs of English language learners with low proficiency levels. Through such collaborations, educational organizations and adult educators should create contextually relevant curricula that would take learners' aspirations, social roles and responsibilities, unique needs, and background into account. Issues of social justice including education, and the economy should become part of the curriculum in these programs (Vanek et al., 2020) which would also serve the purpose of lifelong learning to create a democratic society.

The use of ICTs can be replicated and adapted further in adult education programs for refugees in different conceptual designs. ICTs blended with face-to-face education can help provide open, accessible, flexible, affordable, and environmentally friendly learning possibilities. Specifically, the use of mobile technologies can help deliver digital content, provide teacher training, and management of educational information (Joynes & James, 2018). Creating mobile applications and web-based platforms to support language development, well-being, and community building, and to provide solutions to the obstacles to accessing language programs could be considered. The use of digital technology for learning tools and resources, courses, group activities, and tracking applications for well-being and language improvement and accomplishments are among the practices that can be adapted to adult education programs.

The inclusion of refugee learners in the program design process would provide ample opportunity for adult refugee learners to learn language and culture and improve their competence thus allowing for improved democratization in various ways by supporting lifelong learning. Program development and teaching process could benefit from the culture and abilities that learners bring along with them to the learning environment. Inquiring about their interests, opinions, and perspectives fosters active participation and promotes interaction and engagement of the learners (English & Mayo, 2019). Adult

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educators can help learners set goals, identify what they need to learn based on their circumstances, and acquire self-directed learning skills. Self-directed learners take ownership of their learning and evaluation methods (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Education programs need to equip the learners with the necessary tools and resources to become autonomous to use lifelong learning skills outside of classrooms as well.

Another important aspect to consider is that adult education program practitioners frequently have little training or expertise in teaching adults who have experienced trauma. Teachers should receive professional development training to gain an understanding of adult learning principles. In addition, it would be beneficial to receive targeted training about trauma related to issues that adult refugee learners may be experiencing. Such training should focus on feelings of loss, grief, and anxiety about the future. As Housel (2020, p. 13) suggests, pre-service and in-service teacher training programs for teaching adults with experiences of trauma should aim for teachers' self-assessment and awareness for behavioral changes and improvements in classroom management as well as modifications to the curriculum.

Isserlis (2000) offers suggestions for making classrooms safer for adult learners who have been subjected to trauma. The author recommends using a learner-centered approach to foster community among learners by allowing them to choose how much personal information they want to reveal or how much they want to participate in classroom activities. While establishing a meaningful, real, and trustworthy connection with learners, it is necessary to consider developing knowledge of the learning environment, past experiences of the learners, and the background context (Taylor, 2009). Building authentic relationships is crucial because it encourages conversation, openness to one another, and mutual understanding.

Addressing the democracy and inclusion purpose of lifelong learning, instructors should frame cultural conversations regarding legal issues and social norms as well as the learners' rights to safety, freedom of expression, gender equality, and respect, rather than imposing the culture of the host country dominantly (Shufflebarger Snell, 2020). To minimize the problems of access and increase participation, instructional communication technologies should be tailored towards adult refugee language and culture learning needs, used as supplementary resources, or the primary source of instruction when necessary.

CONCLUSION

As the need for lifelong learning opportunities for refugees is acknowledged, the role of adult educators in helping refugees meet their learning needs and reach their potential to be recognized as assets to their host communities is emphasized. The best practices discussed in this chapter include both macro and micro-level strategies to achieve the promise of a lifelong learning perspective. The design of English language learning programs requires special attention since refugees come to the learning environment with various levels of literacy or prior education, different socio-cultural backgrounds, and experiences of trauma. English language teachers need specialized training and trauma-informed teaching practices to be able to respond to the language and cultural needs of adult refugee students. At a macro level, local and regional collaborations with institutions and various shareholders such as advocacy groups and community-based organizations to improve language and culture programs could be considered. Admission and placement protocols for learners and professional training and orientation opportunities for adult educators are also among the macro-level strategies to be implemented. At a micro-level, it is important to focus on the abilities and necessities required for refugees to attain

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their objectives of leading a sustainable and fulfilling life for themselves and their families. Teachers of refugee learners in language and culture programs need to shift their teaching to more communicative and culturally responsive instruction. Programs could implement inclusive and learner-centered teaching practices and resources supported by ICT tools to address the diverse needs and goals of refugee learners. By creating a learning environment with a holistic approach that considers learners' background, experiences, goals, and needs, adult educators can create an empowering and safe atmosphere where learners grow to contribute and become self-reliant, actively participating members of the host communities.

In terms of directions for future research, further work could investigate the existence of varying national structures, state-level regulations, and policies and their consequences on the provision of lifelong learning opportunities to meet specific learning needs and goals of refugees.

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