



Life in a New Language

Ingrid Piller · Donna Butorac · Emily Farrell
Loy Lising · Shiva Motaghi-Tabari · Vera Williams Tetteh

IS IT AS SIMPLE AS LEARNING ENGLISH? CHALLENGES ADULT MIGRANTS FACE AS LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN AUSTRALIA

Review of

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Nora Duggan*

Keywords: migration; language learning; identity; multilingualism; monolingual norms.

ÉS TAN FÀCIL COM APRENDRE ANGLÈS? DIFICULTATS QUE ELS ADULTS MIGRANTS AFRONTEN COM A ESTUDIANTS DE LLENGUA A AUSTRÀLIA

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* Nora Duggan, Department of Linguistics, Stockholm University. nora.duggan@ling.su.se.

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Life in a new language provides a snapshot of the lived experiences of migrants in Australia, particularly their language learning journeys. Learning a new language as an adult migrant differs significantly from acquiring it as a child or in a classroom setting, as the stakes are much higher for the former. The book draws on data from six ethnographic studies conducted over a period of 20 years, examining migrant experiences with learning English in Australia. By selecting stories from a large dataset consisting of 130 participants from 34 different countries, the book explores the diversity of their lived experiences navigating a new country and, for many, a new language. The book aims to reach an audience beyond academia.

Australia is often regarded as a diverse country, with 30% of its population born overseas. As cited in the book, “immigrants and their descendants today make up over 96% of Australia’s rapidly growing population”. However, despite this diversity, the country has historically positioned itself as a predominantly white, English-speaking nation. In 1947, Australia became the first country in the world to introduce a national language teaching scheme for newly arrived migrants, designed to help them assimilate into an English-speaking society. While this scheme remains in place today and is considered one of the most generous of its kind, migrants continue to face significant challenges in language learning. This book examines these challenges, offering a critical perspective through the personal stories of its participants.

The essay begins by providing a background to Australia’s migration history and policies, including the development of its language-teaching scheme and the expectations around it today. Chapters 2 to 7 are organised thematically, focusing on the lived experiences and following an almost linear timeline, from learning English before arriving in Australia to the process of building a sense of belonging in a new “home”. Chapter 8, the final one, presents arguments for the need for structural changes in order to better support migrants and ensure their well-being.

The book begins with a story about Yumiko, who arrived in Australia as a teenager from Japan. She struggled to order an apple juice, and the staff’s disgruntled response made her lose her confidence in speaking English. This short anecdote sets the tone for the book as a whole, focusing on migrants’ stories to explore the challenges they face with English as a new language in Australia. In addition to providing a brief overview of Australia’s migration history – rooted in colonialism, where English-speaking migrants are placed at the top of a hierarchy – the first chapter explains how English became a marker of migrant belonging, despite being a migrant language itself. This chapter also discusses English as both a legal instrument of migration management and a form of human capital.

Chapter 2 delves into migrants’ experiences learning English before arriving in Australia and the shock they experience upon realising that Australian English differs significantly from the language variety they learnt in their home countries. The chapter also explores the ideologies that are associated with learning British or American English. An instance of this ideology, as the authors point out, is that while a number of participants claimed to have learnt either British or American English, they did not, in fact, speak either variety. Although numerous varieties of English exist, British English and American English are positioned at the top of the linguistic hierarchy of this language. However, the authors argue that communication issues stem not primarily from differences between national varieties of English, but rather from multiple factors, including the contrast between learning English from textbooks and acquiring it naturally. This chapter also addresses the issue of funnelling English-speaking migrants from Africa into language-learning classes because African varieties of English do not “align” with Australia’s English proficiency tests.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus to the participants’ experiences in the Australian labour market. Across all six studies, participants shared common experiences of struggling to find work. Barriers to finding employment include linguistic proficiency, educational qualifications, and lack of local networks. Employment is not only a means of financial stability but is also often seen as a symbol of belonging to the new country. A key figure in this chapter is Franklin from Somalia who spent five years searching for work. His strenuous journey started upon arrival when he was immediately enrolled in English-language classes by his refugee resettlement

case manager, without taking into consideration his prior education in English and experience as an English language teacher. His story highlights a broader issue – the blanket assumption among decision-makers that these migrants have an English-language deficit. Other challenges discussed in the chapter include skill wastage due to underemployment, lack of confidence in English ability, and fear of rejection. Social networks emerge as a critical factor in securing jobs, as they provide access to opportunities that might otherwise be unattainable.

Chapter 4 expands on the idea that language learning extends beyond simply learning English. Linguistic dexterity involves understanding the nuances of Australian English, cultural norms in communication, and what is considered acceptable or unacceptable in different contexts. Not having these skills can lead to misunderstandings, some of which may have serious consequences – such as unknowingly signing up to work for a scam operation or experiencing feelings of shame. The chapter illustrates how developing this linguistic dexterity is not straightforward, as few opportunities exist to interact with native speakers. When such opportunities arise, some struggle to create and sustain engaging conversations without the use of previous histories, having shared histories, or knowledge of the new environment. The authors also highlight an important dynamic: individuals in positions of power often opt out of sharing the communicative burdens, leaving it to migrants, who typically have fewer linguistic resources.

Chapter 5 centres on the family, focusing on how migration reshapes family dynamics. Not only are family relationships redefined and boundaries redrawn, but also responsibilities shift due to cultural differences, work demands, and language skills. Tasks, such as sharing housework and childrearing, that may have been previously shared among multiple family members, now fall on just one or two adults, adding stress and creating tensions as they struggle to cope with juggling several things at the same time. The chapter also discusses family language policies, including decisions about which language to speak at home and the complexities of raising bilingual children, particularly when the former may be more proficient in English than their parents.

Chapter 6 addresses an often overlooked aspect of migration: experiences of discrimination based on race or nationality. The chapter explores experiences of micro-aggressions, such as micro-assaults, micro-insults, and micro-invalidations, and their impact on migrants' sense of belonging. These experiences result in feelings of being othered, unvalued, and unsafe. The authors highlight the issue of blaming language skills or "hard to understand" accents as a way of masking racism. As a coping mechanism, many migrants adopt avoidance strategies to navigate hostile encounters while seeking a sense of inclusion in the new country.

Chapter 7 explores identity and belonging in the new country, examining how migrants create a sense of home in a new space. The authors describe home as a subjective, emotional space where connections exist. Migration disrupts these connections, requiring individuals to figure out their identity and sense of belonging in the new space. The chapter discusses participants' feelings of losing their old self, and constructing their new self – a process that can be discomforting or liberating.

The final chapter, titled "Rethinking language and migration", calls for structural and political change to improve migrants' well-being. The authors stress the need for a better understanding of the challenges that come with migrating to a new country with a different language. Discourses on language learning and integration – not only in Australia but across many countries in the Global North – tend to oversimplify the severity and hardships involved in adjusting to a new cultural and linguistic space. Even though Australia is considered a multicultural country, shaped greatly by globalisation and transnationalism, people often adopt a deficit lens toward multilingual migrants. Instead of recognising them as multilingual individuals with international experience, their language skills are often framed as "deficit English" with a lack of "local knowledge". These deficit perspectives greatly impact migrants' ability to build a sense of belonging in the new country. The authors argue that shifting these perspectives is crucial, and this responsibility lies

with Australian society as a whole. As pointed out, “we need a whole-of-society recognition that linguistic diversity is a key facet of Australian society and mediates well-being”.

Additionally, the chapter highlights the need to address labour exploitation, which undermines the value of work and workers. Migrants in these types of labour-exploited jobs are often in a vulnerable situation, in which they cannot speak out for fear of retaliation. The authors critique the capitalist tendency to prioritise the national economy over individual well-being, a mindset that fosters exploitative working conditions, especially for migrants. They call for structural changes, including more learning-on-the-job opportunities and tailored bridging qualifications to help migrants transition into the workforce more effectively. Furthermore, the chapter stresses the need for culturally sensitive migrant support services, particularly during the initial settlement phase, to ensure that new arrivals receive the assistance they need.

Together, these eight chapters provide a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of migrants’ experiences with language learning in Australia. By structuring the book around key themes – language learning, employment, family dynamics, discrimination, and sense of belonging – the authors effectively illustrate the multifaceted challenges migrants face. The book’s greatest strength is its use of rich, personal stories that humanise the participants – an impressive feat given that the data come from academic research work. The authors show an ability to balance individual narratives with critical analysis, highlighting systematic barriers while also acknowledging migrants’ agency and resilience. As the authors point out, this is a key advantage of ethnographic research as it brings personal narratives to the forefront. As ethnographers, we have a great responsibility to handle the stories entrusted to us with care and integrity. This book demonstrates that commitment. A particularly striking example is the mention of Franklin, who first appeared in Chapter 3, and who participated in the research to share his experiences of searching for work for five years in the hope that his voice would be heard by those in “government offices”. The authors treat his story with sensitivity, not merely retelling it for the sake of sharing but using it to illustrate the complexity of issues migrants face in the labour market that are often not highlighted.

Despite having six authors, the book maintains a cohesive voice, reading as if written by one person, which is a strength in itself. Additionally, four of the six authors have first-hand experience of migrating to Australia as adults, reinforcing the book’s authenticity and ensuring that migrants remain central to the research. The aim of the book is to reach an audience beyond academia, and although finding a balance between academic rigour and readability is not easy, the accessible language in this book is commendable. However, managing a large volume of data presents some challenges to readability. Some participants reappear throughout the text, requiring the reader to recall details from earlier chapters – for instance, those introduced in Chapter 2 do not appear again until Chapter 5. This can be demanding, though the inclusion of a participant list is a helpful reference.

I would like to focus on one of the key arguments raised in the book, which is the need for data sharing, particularly in ethnographic studies. The book itself is the result of data sharing, drawing from six ethnographic studies on migrants in Australia. The authors argue that research on migration should not rely solely on quantitative studies, since numbers and statistics often fail to capture the complexities of everyday life for migrants. Migrants’ voices can be rendered invisible in census data and surveys as, while valuable, these types of data do not shine a light on the lived experiences. Solely using quantitative data may not provide a full picture of the most pressing issues migrants face, and yet such data heavily influence policy-making and public debates. The authors advocate the need for greater sharing of ethnographic data, as they have the unique advantage of humanising the people studied. In this case, migrants’ stories are given a platform, making their experiences more tangible and impactful.

Although ethnographic studies typically involve a smaller size of participants than large-scale surveys, the depth of insight they can offer can be far more meaningful. That being said, this book was made possible in part by having at least one researcher – Ingrid Piller – who has worked on all six studies. This raises an

important question: to what extent can ethnographic data be shared across different researchers? The issue is not only logistical but also ethical, particularly when dealing with visual data such as films. In some research, ethical approval may only be granted if anonymity and participant confidentiality are guaranteed. Additionally, for data sharing of ethnographic studies to be effective, they must be easily accessible and systematically organised. However, it is common for individual researchers to have their own unique ways of categorising and structuring data, making the standardisation needed for easy access challenging. Despite these challenges, the book makes a compelling case for the need for sharing ethnographic data, as doing so not only strengthens the arguments made but also ensures that research participants are humanised – something that is often lost in large quantitative datasets.

To conclude, as mentioned in the introduction, Australia was the first country in the world to introduce a language learning scheme. Moreover, state-subsidised language education programmes tailored to adult migrants are few and far between around the world, making Australia a pioneering country in this regard. However, despite these efforts, the book highlights numerous challenges migrants continue to face. The prevailing belief among policymakers and the public that language learning is the primary solution to integration issues is overly simplistic. This belief consequently places an undue burden on the migrants themselves, expecting them to adapt without fully acknowledging the structural barriers and personal hardships they encounter, such as limited job opportunities, labour exploitation, discrimination and racism, and lack of accessible support services. Although this book focuses on Australia, its insights are highly relevant to other countries where similar deficit-based attitudes toward migrants persist. By shedding light on these issues through personal stories, the book challenges dominant narratives and offers a critical perspective on migration and language policies. Ultimately, it offers a valuable contribution to research on the impact of enforcing monolingual norms in multilingual and multicultural societies. Hopefully, the book will reach the hands of politicians and policymakers responsible for migration and integration policies, encouraging a consideration in their decision-making of the nuances of everyday life for migrants living in a new country with a new language.