

# English language learning barriers of Afghan refugee women in Australia

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This study explores the critical barriers to English language learning for Afghan refugee women in Australia. Using data from 23 individual interviews and five focus group discussions, these show that although the participants received formal support from the Australian Government, the majority still struggled to learn English effectively. A thematic analysis of the interview responses revealed that the major barriers to English acquisition were pedagogical and socio-cultural, and included issues of self-esteem and motivation. The findings of this study have the potential to inform language support programs for refugee women, particularly when considering the sociocultural, emotional and educational needs of female refugees learning English, and the need for provisions such as childcare to facilitate their participation in language learning classes.

## KEYWORDS

Afghan women, Australia, English language learning, migration, refugees

این پژوهش به بررسی موانع اساسی یادگیری آموزش زبان انگلیسی پناهندگان زن افغان در استرالیا می پردازد. داده های به دست آمده از 23 مصاحبه ی فردی و گروهی در این مطالعه نشان داد که با وجود دریافت حمایت های رسمی از طرف دولت استرالیا، اکثر شرکت کنندگان برای یادگیری زبان انگلیسی با چالش مواجه بوده اند. تحلیل موضوعی پاسخ ها به سوالات مصاحبه نشان داد که اکثر موانع برای یادگیری زبان انگلیسی، چالش های اجتماعی-فرهنگی و آموزشی مانند مشکلات انگیزشی و اعتماد به نفس بوده است. نتایج این تحقیق می تواند اطلاعات مفیدی برای برنامه های حمایتی آموزش زبان انگلیسی، به ویژه برای مسایل عاطفی، فرهنگی-اجتماعی

و نیازهای آموزشی زنان پناهنده برای اموری مانند امکانات نگهداری از کودکان آن ها برای شرکت در کلاس ها، در بر داشته باشد.

کلید واژگان

زنان افغان، استرالیا، یادگیری زبان انگلیسی، مهاجرت، پناهندگان

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Women are active and positive change agents—when given the proper resources—and are capable of improving their lives and the lives of their children, families and communities. (The UN Refugee Agency)

While linguistic and cultural diversity enriches a society as a whole, for the individual migrant, learning to communicate in the language of the host country is vital “for economic, political, social and cultural integration” (Hou & Beiser, 2006: 155). However, language acquisition, together with cultural adaptation has always represented one of the major challenges facing adult migrants (Schott & Henley, 1996). Non-English-speaking migrants who have struggled to learn English have often faced a perception of discrimination or, at the very least, have not been able to make full use of facilities and opportunities in the host country (Durieux-Paillard & Loutan, 2005).

In Australia, Afghan women have been among the largest groups of refugees receiving Women at Risk visas in the past decade (Refugee Council of Australia, 2018). Attaining English language proficiency is one of the greatest challenges that these women face (Watkins, Razee, & Richters, 2012). Despite the general advantage enjoyed by women in verbal cognition (de Frias, Nilsson, & Herlitz, 2006), migrant men, as a group, have been found to achieve significantly better levels of language proficiency (Watkins et al., 2012). One possible reason is that migrant women have had less access to the services and facilities provided by host countries (Firdous & Bhopal, 1989; McLachlan & Waldenstrom, 2005; Small, 2002).

Recognizing the significant role that women have played in successive waves of migration to Australia, this study focuses on understanding the barriers to language acquisition faced by Afghan refugee women settling in the state of Victoria. To achieve this aim, the study focuses on the perceptions of Afghan refugees of the significance of learning English, and the difficulties faced in do so, in order to better understand ways in which English language learning could be improved for female refugees in general, and Afghan women in particular.

The article begins with an outline of the history and demography of Afghans in Australia and an explanation of the specific language programs in which they have participated. The article then moves on to outline of the methods used followed by a presentation of the results and discussion. The article concludes that the generic nature of English language programs in Australia, which generally do not cater well for the challenging circumstances faced by refugees, present a considerable barrier to the success of their English language learning.

## 2 | AFGHAN REFUGEE WOMEN IN AUSTRALIA

Most Afghans in Australia arrived as refugees following the outbreak of renewed conflict in Afghanistan in 1979. The vast majority of migrants arrived in the past two decades, with the largest proportion migrating in the last decade. This is reflected in the two-thirds increase in the population of Afghans between the 2011 and 2016 censuses. It is also reflected in the fact that more than 90% of the community was born outside of Australia. The Afghan

population in Victoria at the 2016 census was 55,000, with more roughly 40% living in the Greater Melbourne Area.

In 1989, the Australian federal government introduced a special visa program intended to provide protection to women, the Women at Risk visa. Data from the Department of Social Services show that during 2012–2013 the majority of at-risk refugee women who came to Australia were from Afghanistan's Hazara minority. In 2011, more than 41% of Afghan migrants were Afghanistan-born women, the majority of whom were 25–44 years old (Department of Social Services, 2018). The majority of these migrants (64%) had not finished high school and more than half of them were assessed to have no or poor English language proficiency (Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing, 2011). The majority of these women also had little or no formal education (Department of Social Service, 2013).

Afghan society traditionally has strict gender segregation, with women largely confined to domestic roles (Department of Social Services, 2013). In a patriarchal sociocultural context, most women in Afghanistan marry according to the wishes of their father or other male blood-relative (60–80% of marriages in Afghanistan are estimated to be arranged in this fashion), with the expectation that they will raise children, maintain the household and take care of elderly relatives (Department of Social Services, 2013). Since the 1979 Soviet invasion, few women in Afghanistan have had the chance to receive formal education. The occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union and subsequent conflicts resulted in severe disruptions to the education system. When the Taliban ruled much of Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, girls over the age of eight were banned from attending school. A severe lack of infrastructure further restricted many women's access to education. As a result, only around 12% of women over the age of 15 were literate in 2012 (Afghanistan Online, 2019).

Several particular manifestations of stress in refugees and asylum seekers are mentioned in the literature. These include migration stress, which is defined as stress resulting from being suddenly forced to move from one's home; and acculturative stress, which arises from being removed from a familiar environment and suddenly immersed in new cultural and social settings that feel foreign. An even more acute form of stress is traumatic stress resulting from experiencing or witnessing violence and suffering, an experience common to many refugees, especially those who have fled conflict zones (Bogic, Njoku, & Priebe, 2015; Davidson, Murray, & Schweitzer, 2010; Gerritsen et al., 2006; Liliee, Thambiran, & Laugharne, 2015). Many refugees who experienced traumatic stress have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; see, Alpak et al., 2015; Betancourt et al., 2015; Miller, Omidian, Rasmussen, Yaqubi, & Daudzai, 2008; Shawyer et al., 2014; Steel, 2011; Yaser et al., 2016). The American Psychiatric Association (2009), lists symptoms of PTSD as including flashbacks, nightmares, headaches, difficulty concentrating, and memory impairment. It notes that PTSD can result in an individual suffering from excessive levels of guilt and depression, low levels of self-esteem and confidence, difficulties in concentrating on tasks and beginning new tasks, lack of trust in authorities, and debilitating anxiety (Kerka, 2002).

In addition to challenges associated with having little formal education, most Afghan refugees also have to contend with trauma associated with the environment from which they fled, and their journey to safety (Oliff, 2010), most having witnessed violence, including the deaths of family and friends, separations, threats, sexual assault and so forth (de Lambert, 2018; Neuner, Schauer, Klaschik, Karunakara, & Elbert, 2004; Nickerson, Bryant, Steel, Silove, & Brooks, 2010; Renner, Laireiter, & Maier, 2012). For many this trauma has severely impacted their mental health (Alemi, James, Cruz, Zepeda, & Racadio, 2014). Not surprisingly, research shows that all forms of stress associated with migration, but particularly PTSD, can retard academic development in general and, more specifically, can hinder language acquisition (Saigh, Mroueh, & Bremner, 1997). There are a significant number of studies that examine mental health issues among Afghan refugees in particular (Alemi et al., 2014; Cheng, Wahidi, Vasi, & Samuel, 2015; De Anstiss and Ziaian, 2010; Iqbal, Joyce, Russo, & Earnest, 2012; Omeri, Lennings, & Raymond, 2006; Reiggs et al., 2016; Rintoul, 2010; Slewa-Younan, Yaser, et al., 2017; Slewa-Younan, Guajardo, et al., 2017; Sulaiman & Thompson, 2012a, 2012b; Yaser et al., 2016).

### 3 | ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING PROGRAMMES FOR REFUGEES IN AUSTRALIA

Many of the women we interviewed associated employment with a sense of “being settled”; but finding a job for this group of migrants entails overcoming a number of challenges, the most important of which is obtaining proficiency in English (Alemi et al., 2014). English language proficiency plays a vital role in social engagement and gaining employment for migrants and refugees in English-speaking countries (Cobb-Clark, 2000; Khoo & McDonald, 2001; Law, 2012; Smart, Maio, Riseco, & Edwards, 2017). Studying the English language proficiency level of three groups of refugees in Australia during 2013–2014, Smart et al. (2017) reported that over 70% of the refugees had no or a poor level of English proficiency. They also found that the English language proficiency level of refugee women was significantly lower than men.

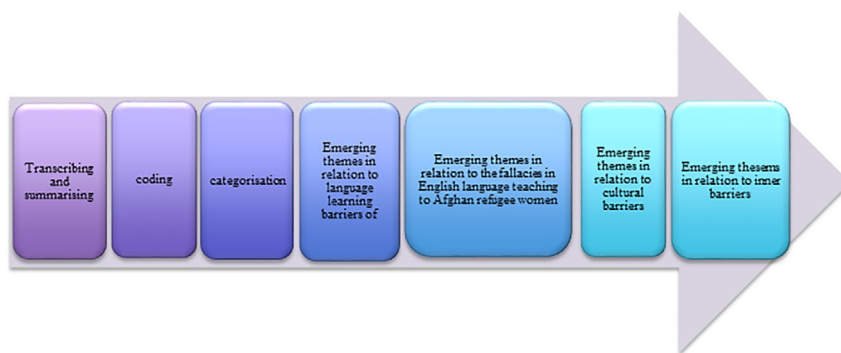
Watkins et al. (2010) reported that refugee children studying at both primary and secondary school level tended to have better educational outcomes when they were experiencing higher levels of successful acculturation (adapting to and adopting key elements of the new country's culture while maintaining cultural connections with the countries of origin). For many adult learners of English, linguistic competency and command in their first language of education has been shown to have a direct correlation with their success in learning English (Yates, 2010). It has also been shown that educators tend to be more effective working with and educating adult refugees when they have gained an understanding of the social and cultural environments and backgrounds of the adult learners, including the languages that they use at home (Finn, 2010). In particular, this helps teachers to better appreciate the second language influences that shape the learning experience.

The Australian Government funds a variety of programs to teach English to migrants in Australia. The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) delivers up to 510 h of English language program to refugees and migrants (Department of Education and Training, AMEP, 2019). Refugees wanting to undertake the AMEP must register in the first 6 months of their arrival in Australia and complete the course within 12 months. Significantly, this program provides child-care for under-school-age children. AMEP language classes are run in dozens of locations around Australia. The AMEP classes are delivered by accredited institutions such as TAFE colleges and migrant resource centers following standard general guidelines but varying in content and delivery according to the expertise and experience of those institutions.

Although AMEP endeavors to deliver both distance learning and face-to-face classroom teaching, research has shown the services provided were insufficient for most refugees, especially women refugees with children (Nega, 2008). How the courses are designed and delivered mostly depends on the institution running the courses. Many of the teachers are volunteers who design their own syllabus and plan their own classes. For this reason, the authors argue in this paper that there is a need for English language programs that pay thoughtful attention the sociocultural and educational background of learners. Despite efforts to provide support to refugees for language learning, “[t]here is general consensus that the number of classroom hours offered through the AMEP program, in the way that they are delivered, is insufficient for the majority of clients to acquire sufficient language skills to manage at an acceptable level within the workplace and in social situations” (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008: 22; Department of Immigration and Citizenship (Economic Analysis Unit), 2010).

### 4 | METHOD

The participants in the present study were women from Afghanistan who had recently arrived in Victoria as refugees. Participants were recruited from Dandenong in Melbourne's southeast (where most of Victoria's Afghan migrant population live) and Geelong, a satellite city one-hour's drive southwest of Melbourne, which is home to a new Afghan community largely comprised of refugees who arrived under the Women at Risk visa program. In keeping with standard practice, prior to commencing the interviews, research ethics approval was secured from the university's Human Research Ethics Committee.



**FIGURE 1** The data analysis process [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

A qualitative research approach (Yin, 2015) employing semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups with open-ended questions was used to investigate the challenges faced by Afghan refugee women living in Victoria. The use of focus group interviews allows one to collect similar data from many interviewees at any one time through discussions on a particular organized topic (Kitzinger, 1994). While there were no insider researchers on the research team, in the sense that it included no Afghan female researchers (although there were among the research assistance team), the researchers come from diverse backgrounds which informed their contributions to this study. Three of the six team members share a common religion with the participants (Islam, both Shi'a and Sunni), two are native Persian-speakers from Iran, and one is a Persian-speaker from a European background. All six have spent their careers working on issues relating to diversity in Australia and abroad, and all have a specific expertise in Muslim communities, particularly in Australia. The two female researchers on the team further enhanced the research team's understanding of the mechanics of gender difference in the case study.

The language skills of the research team allowed us to prepare and conduct the interviews in Persian (known as Farsi in Iran and Dari in Afghanistan, with most dialects of Dari in Afghanistan being close to standard Iranian Persian), as the majority of the participants were not conversant in English. The interviews were conducted by 10 Farsi/Dari-speaking research assistants (of both Afghan and Iranian backgrounds) alongside two of the Persian-speaking members of the research team.

The research team spent a considerable amount of planning, through trial and error, on the locations of the interviews. The pilot interviews which took place in July 2017 at a facility provided by our research partners, which was also the space used for the teaching of English in the AMEP program. This proved problematic as some of the women present expressed their dislike for the location, and tensions between some of the participants and some staff at the center were obvious to the research team. After this experience, the research team offered the participants several other options for locations for interviews, leaving the choice with the participant as to what was the most comfortable. As a result, the interviews in this research were performed at a number of locations, notably local libraries, shopping arcades, cafes and similar locations that were familiar and comfortable for the participants. While some of these locations could be noisy, the interviews were conducted much more smoothly than they had at the community center, largely because of the lack of negative association with the participants. Due to the nature of focus groups, the five focus groups had to take place in one formal location, and rooms at local libraries were hired for this purpose.

To analyze the interview data, a thematic qualitative content analysis method (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) was adopted (see Figure 1). First, the interviews were transcribed by the research assistants. Standard punctuation was the main method of transcription with several key transcribing symbols employed. The data were transcribed and coded by a Farsi-speaking investigator, and validated by another investigator familiar with Farsi, in order to construct a thematic framework for data analysis. Pseudonyms were assigned to the interview participants and each center in which the interviews were conducted, with a numerical code attached to each to minimize the potential problem of

“social desirability bias” (Garett, 2010: 44). Burnard (1991) suggests thematic content analysis for the analysis of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Coding of this study was based on the technique introduced by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). In this technique, the most recurrent answers provided by participants invoked by the interview questions are used to create themes.

Codifying the interview transcripts involved a three-step approach: “making the text manageable,” “hearing what was said,” and “developing theory” (Lewins & Silver, 2007: 262–267). In “making the text manageable,” the main aim was to look for the answers to research questions and theoretical concepts addressed in the literature. For the next step, or “hearing what was said,” the recurrent ideas were collected and organized to create new themes.

Finally, in “developing theory” the study sought to develop theoretical construct and to construct theoretical narrative (Fox, 1997: 475–478). To do so, NVivo10 software was employed for the storing, coding, and tagging processes. The transcribed data were imported to the NVivo10, which was used for the qualitative thematic analysis of this study. The data were reviewed a number of times and general categories were recognized. These general recognized categories were classified as parent nodes. The reoccurring patterns in each category were then sub-categorized as child nodes. Any data that did not relate to the recognized categories or sub-categories were coded as miscellaneous data. In the next phase, similar categories were grouped under more general headings.

## 5 | RESULTS

The data generated by the interviews were grouped into common categories or conceptual themes. Responses that were similar in meaning, or that had a common conceptual theme, were organized and grouped together. Each participant's responses were added to the tentative themes elicited by the previous responses, reinforcing those themes or allowing them to be altered (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the analysis of barriers to English language learning for Afghan refugee women in Australia, more than 10 main barriers were identified, classified under three main categories: pedagogical, family, and inner barriers.

Each of the three general categories identified, as shown in Figure 2, is discussed in greater detail in the following sections of the data analysis. A definition of each category, together with examples from interviewees, are presented in the next sections.

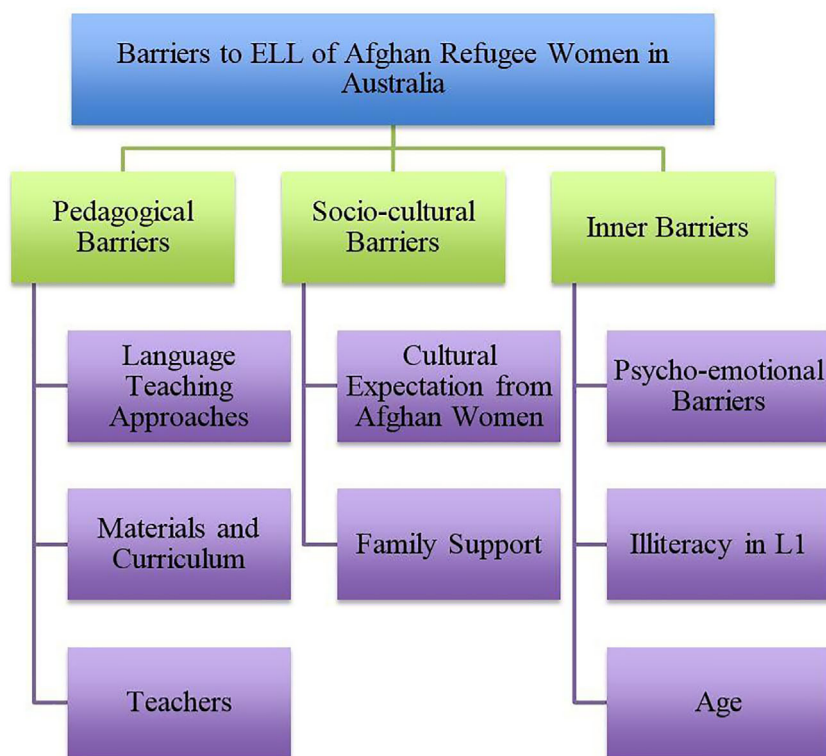
## 6 | PEDAGOGICAL BARRIERS

The classroom experience of Afghan refugee women, and their experience of the pedagogical approaches used, were among the key areas explored in the interviews. The analysis of the responses indicated that while most of the Afghan refugee women appeared to be motivated to develop their English language skills, they experienced barriers to learning, (bearing in mind that many had never learned to read and write in any language), and a classroom environment that was not optimally conducive to learning.

Another recurring theme in the interviews was that the instructional “texts were too difficult” for them to learn. Such an approach is inconsistent with the concept of “comprehensible input” (Krashen, 1981). Interviews with the coordinators of the programs in which the participants were studying, revealed that teachers used a wide variety of different teaching materials and sources.

Some participants who reported that they had discontinued their English language study, said that the “course was not useful for their daily life.” As one of the participants explained:

I need to go to the doctor, I need to do some shopping, and I need to pay the bills. The topics covered in our classes do not help me with these.



**FIGURE 2** The barriers facing Afghan refugee women in learning English in Australia [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

This position was shared by another participant who said that:

*[Teachers] should teach us speaking. They teach us grammar. We don't want to go to school or university. I just need to tell the doctors about my problem. I need to go shopping. I don't need these lessons.*

Matthews (2008: 32) believes that English language teaching programs for refugees in Australia have not provided effective support to refugees due to educators' unfamiliarity "with the historical and political circumstances of intra-national conflict and forced migration in [the Middle East] regions, as well as ethnic and cultural differences" between different groups of refugees. She argues that English language programs used for teaching English to refugees are mainly based on the courses written for teaching English to literate European and Asian migrants, and therefore tend to be ineffective for learners who are illiterate and for migrants from non-Western backgrounds.

Some participants explained that they discontinued their English courses as they felt that they were not learning anything or they could not see any progress. This perception was observed in an interview with one participant who mentioned that she felt deeply disappointed when she could not speak English fluently after attending English language classes for around 6 months.

*I don't learn anything. My brain doesn't work. I come to the class but can't speak English and still have to ask my children to answer my phone calls [which are in English].*

One potential reason for this feeling could be the class assessments that measure proficiency rather than progress. Rutter (2006), reiterating the differences between language teaching to different learners, argued that instead of

assessing the proficiency level of students at the end of the course, English language assessments should focus on using tools to measure their progress.

In terms of English language teachers, it is important to note that all participants reported that they had teachers who were trying to help them learn English. Participants noted approvingly that they had teachers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Some participants referred, in particular, to positive experiences with Afghan teachers, stating that they believed their Afghan teacher was better equipped to assist them because they were intimately familiar with their linguistic and cultural background, meaning that they were able to understand their challenges and help them better understand what was being taught.

*Investigator: How was the experience of learning English with an Afghan teacher?*

*Participant: He was very clear. He could explain the words and translate them for me if I could not understand them. He helped me to do the activities in class when I could not understand the instructions.*

Nevertheless, the participants reported that they could generally also understand their non-Afghan teachers (including Anglo-Australian and Asian-background teachers). Overall, although most participants preferred to learn English with Afghan teachers, they all agreed that the non-Afghan teachers that they engaged with were also “very helpful,” “taught English well,” and were “understandable.”

*Investigator: How was your non-Afghan teacher?*

*Participants: Very kind. She was patient and used body language to help me understand the concepts. She brought extra-curriculum resources for us. She was helpful.*

In terms of the gender of the language teachers, prior to the interviews it was hypothesized that as the Afghan woman participants came from culturally conservative Muslim backgrounds, most would prefer to have female teachers. The interviews with participants revealed, however, that they had no strong preference regarding the gender of their teachers. Most female participants who had male teachers said that they experienced no cultural or religious obstacles in studying in classes with male teachers.

Regarding the language teaching approach, one particular issue that emerged was the disruption caused by learners who talked in class in their first language. One of the participants mentioned:

*Some Afghan women come to class to find friends and speak in Afghani [Dari] together. They just want to spend some time together. They don't listen to the teacher and they always make noise. The teacher cannot stop them from speaking Afghani. It is difficult to concentrate and hear the teacher while others are speaking.*

In general, the quality of the learning experience in this regard appeared to depend on classroom management of the teachers to motivate students to learn.

The emergence of these themes in the interviews points to the need for curriculum developers to revisit their courses to see if learners' needs are addressed. In addition, teachers need also to better clarify the aim and goal of each lesson and activity and link it to real life situations to motivate their learners to learn. In other words, the biggest challenge for participants in learning English was the resources available to them. One participant said:

*I study English in class, and then I go home and forget everything the teacher taught me. I have so many papers from different classes but I cannot use them.*



It is clear that to be effective, English language teaching programs for migrants need to give careful consideration to the special needs of these learners.

## 7 | SOCIOCULTURAL BARRIERS

For most people, their family home is the first place where they, as learners, receive support and education. Consequently, key factors, such as the living environment and family's economic status, the educational background of the parents and of their children, and family expectations will greatly influence student learning. Most of the Afghan refugee women had childcare issues and they also had to care for sick or elderly relatives, and reported that as a result they did not have enough time to practice English, complete homework and attend class regularly. This finding is in line with the results of Nega's (2008) research, which indicates the insufficiency of services provided by English language programs for refugees, especially for mothers with children. Some examples from participants' responses are presented below:

*It is difficult for me to attend all classes as I have to take care of my parents. They are more than 70 years old. I can only come to class when my husband or my children accept to stay home and look after them.*

*I have a disabled daughter whom I had to take to school every day. As the school is far away, I can't go back home. So, I wait in front of her school for more than 6 hours, till she finishes class and take her home. I need to take care of her and I don't have time to practice my English.*

Another barrier to learning identified by some respondents was that their families were not sufficiently supportive. The analysis of the responses revealed that family members were busy juggling work commitments or had negative thoughts and experiences of others' perception of women's literacy. This emerged in an interview with one participant who stated that "My husband is not happy with me being here and study. He says you don't need it. A woman should stay at home, do housework and her husband will take care of her." Other participants mentioned that they needed further assistance at home to be able to complete their assigned work. One of the participants emphasized that "the teacher's papers give me headache! I cannot understand anything! I just go over them, look at the photos at home. My children don't help me." These sentiments align with Hou and Beiser's (2006) research findings that women tend to receive unequal opportunities for education, social and vocational participation both before and after their immigration. In Australia, Smart et al.'s (2017) study showed that refugee women, compared with men, delayed attending the AMEP English classes after their settlement, mainly due to family responsibilities, childcare, poor health and employment.

Most married participants reported that their husband either had part-time or full-time employment and that they had children attending school or university. The majority of these women came to Australia speaking "no" to "poor" English and have had very limited contact with native or second language English speakers. Almost all participants reported that they lived in suburbs, such as Dandenong, where a significant number of their neighbors were also Afghan and that they tended to frequent Afghan-run businesses. These participants said that they did not need English as long as they stayed in their Afghan environment. These Afghan women, mostly isolated from the broader non-Afghan society, are in danger of being left behind: their children and husbands are active members in Australian society and have more opportunities to improve their English. This passiveness can be not only detrimental for their English language learning and integration to the society in which they live, but, as Riggs et al. (2012) state, can be detrimental to their mental health. For instance, one of the participants mentioned that when she was in class with other women, she felt fine, but as soon as she returned home, she started dwelling on the death of her son.

## 8 | INNER BARRIERS

With regard to inner and personal barriers, the interviews provided insight into some of the psycho-emotional factors affecting Afghan refugee women's learning of English. The most challenging psycho-emotional issues identified were motivation, attitude, self-esteem, dedication, commitment, and age. Many Afghan refugee women had difficulty activating and accessing their background and linguistic knowledge stored in their mental lexicon. The majority of participants appeared to be affected by this psychological problems of this kind.

As mentioned earlier, all participants agreed that they had received free training courses to help them to improve their English language proficiency. The majority of the participants, however, reported that the classes did not significantly contribute to their language learning. Responses to follow-up questions showed that for many of the participants illiteracy in the first language (Farsi/Dari) was the main problem. For example, one participant explained that:

*Our teacher gave us handouts every session, and asked us to study and do the activities. I cannot read! I did not remember what she was explaining in class. I could not take any notes in class. If my daughter is not home and if she does not help me, I won't be able to do the activities. The teacher explains well in class but I forget.*

On the other hand, other participants who had received some formal education in Afghanistan and who were literate, generally reported that the English classes were effective and they could learn, pass the courses, and proceed to higher levels. For example, one participant who had a part-time job mentioned that she had improved her English in the English language classes that she attended in Melbourne. Speaking in fluent English, she explained that she used the teaching materials at home to improve her English. She believed that having a basic knowledge of English when she came to Australia and having independent learning skills helped her to use the teaching materials and improve her English.

Analysis of the interviews also revealed that another factor that might relate to learners' difficulties in learning English was the lack of engagement and encouragement of autonomous and independent learning. The students were mainly dependent on their teachers and their children to solve their language issues. Many older participants (aged 50+) reported having age-related issues with sitting in class and for learning. For instance, one of the interviewees recounted that: "I get headache after 45 minutes of sitting in class. I would like to sit on the floor and on the carpet. Chairs are not comfortable for me." Another participant noted her age as a factor that made learning very difficult for her: "what the teacher says does not go to my head, I feel like I am too old to learn these things. Kids learn fast, but I am too old for that."

Illiteracy in their first language, age and unfamiliarity with the educational system are common problems among refugees from other countries, too (e.g., Andersen & Kooij, 2007). For example, Watkins et al. (2012) found that Burmese refugee women had little chance to learn how to read and write before arriving in Australia. The Australian Department of Social Services (2013) is aware of this, with reports noting that in the gender-divided society of Afghanistan, many Afghan women have been deprived of opportunities for education and that consequently there were very high rates of illiteracy among Afghan women.

## 9 | SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Migrating, learning to speak a new language, and adapting to a new culture, can be immensely challenging experiences for refugees. A large number of refugees all around the world and in Australia are women with little or no literacy or formal educational background. For many of these refugees, who were forced to migrate due to economic or political reasons, learning to speak the language of the host country is necessary to be able to work and settle into the new society. The number of Afghan refugees in Australia continues to grow and it is important to understand that the challenges that they face in settling into life in Australia. Language acquisition represents a major challenge to refugees in

general, and women in particular, successfully integrating into Australian society. This study focused on investigating English language learning barriers for Afghan refugee women in Australia. Thematic and qualitative analysis of individual and focus-group interviews with 23 refugee women in the state of Victoria revealed that pedagogical, sociocultural and inner barriers were the main challenges that Afghan women faced in learning English.

Participants reported that the language teaching materials that they received were not particularly relevant to their immediate social needs, such as visiting general practitioners. Many of the teachers who work with refugees are volunteers who join the teaching programs to help when they can but may only work for these programs for short periods. One of the key findings of this study is there is a need for English language programs to recruit professional teaching staff to develop and deliver English language programs that are designed particularly for the needs of refugees and give particular consideration to their sociocultural and educational background.

In addition, for many participants, illiteracy in their first language made English language learning a challenge, as the teaching materials and curriculum was set with the assumption that language learners are able to read and write in their first language. If migrants and refugees are not literate, their use of the available resources for learning English will be limited (Haznedar & Peyton, 2018). It is clear from this study that those designing migrant English language teaching curriculum will benefit from a better understanding of the sociocultural background of refugees from different backgrounds. Language teachers and educators are also called to revisit their language teaching approaches. As discussed in the previous sections, language teaching approaches and curriculum are designed mainly for European language learners. These teaching approaches may not be as effective for teaching English to refugees who come from the Middle East and West Asia.

A review of the literature about Afghanistan cultural background shows that in most Afghan families and beliefs, a woman's first and most important role is motherhood and household responsibilities. Therefore, English language learning and integration to the wider community, as reported by many participants, were always a second or last priority. Better services for mothers, such as child care during the English language lessons, would be a great help in facilitating English language learning for Afghan women.

Some of the participants in this study expressed disappointment with learning English because they regularly encountered situations in their daily lives where they were unable to communicate successfully. English language programs should be encouraged to provide an overview of the process of language learning for their learners and make sure that these learners have access to educational counsellors when necessary. Exposure to the language of the host country can facilitate the process of language learning, and it is commonly assumed that refugees will pick up the language by immersion. In many cases, however, refugees who do not speak the language of the host country fluently, are recruited in jobs that do not require a high level of language proficiency and they end up working in jobs with no or minimum contact with speakers of the national language. English programs would benefit from having culture and language hubs that provide opportunities for language-learning refugees to socialize and communicate with professional English language speakers. These will help learners to overcome some of the affective language learning barriers and motivate them to push on in their efforts to learn English.

Data collected for this study was limited to the reflections of Afghan refugee women in the state of Victoria who had attended English language classes. Future studies could focus instead on Afghan refugee women who have never attended English language classes as a comparative example, or examine the experiences of Afghan refugee women in other states of Australia. Such comparisons would further this existing research by providing a more in-depth understanding of the language learning barriers faced by these migrants, and contribute to improving the quality of the language teaching programs currently provided, thereby enhancing the social integration of migrants in these circumstances.

In addition, another limitation relates to the disciplinary scope of this study. The research team was multidisciplinary, including two linguists, two political scientists, one anthropologist and one specialist in communication and education. However, the overall frame of the study was in the field of applied linguistics, and therefore encompassed all the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. On the one hand, the applied nature of the method suited all of the researchers, since the team was made up of scholars whose research is primarily policy-focused in their own

respective disciplines. This meant the problem solving and policy recommendations that emerged from the research were the result of the researchers own experience in carrying out similar studies. On the other hand, the team recognizes that this approach resulted in some of the limitations of the study, namely that while the Afghan female participants raised other issues regarding integration and adjustment to Australian English, as these fell outside the bounds of what can be achieved through government policy, and outside linguistics as a discipline, these were not included in these final results.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to dedicate this piece to lead author, Professor Farzad Sharifian, who sadly passed away on May 12, 2020. Farzad was the Founding Chair of Cultural Linguistics at Monash University. Farzad began his career in Iran, before moving to Australia in 1998 where he earned his doctorate in applied linguistics from Edith Cowan University. He joined Monash University in 2005 where he focused on intercultural and international communication, and led work on effective, culturally appropriate, health education in English in remote Aboriginal communities in which English was a foreign language. In his short but illustrious career, he had many milestones, most notably the 2017 publication of his book, *Cultural Linguistics*, which is regarded as the seminal text in the field. Despite his industrious work-ethic, he always had time to be a generous mentor to many young scholars, including Marzieh and James. Farzad was a much-loved colleague to many and will be dearly missed. This paper, which reflects his passion to help build trust and understanding through intercultural communication, is dedicated to his memory. This study was funded by Research Institute of Social Cohesion, Victorian Government.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors state that they have no conflict of interest.

## PEER REVIEW

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