Chapter 12
Research and Reflective Practice in the Pre–Literate ESL Classroom: New Challenges in Migrant Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on findings of a qualitative study conducted with diverse cultural and linguistic background adult students engaged in learning English through an adult migrant English language program offered in a refugee welcome zone in a rural region of Australia. Twenty students whose first language was not English were observed in the language learning environment and participated in semi-structured interviews. The research explored how English language learning can be best supported for humanitarian refugees with little or no literacy in their first language to become acculturated and socially integrated into Australian society. It was found that the typical ‘English only approach’ that is commonly used in the Adult Migrant English Language Program (AMEP) to teach literacy and develop proficiency in the English language is called into question when applied to learners with limited or no print literacy skills in their first language. It was concluded that these learners, who are commonly referred to in the literature as LESLLA (Low Educated Second Language Acquisition and Literacy for Adults), are faced with a number of social exclusionary practices during their integration process. Recommendations are made on how these issues might be addressed.

INTRODUCTION

Many refugees and humanitarian entrants to host countries are typically literate in their first language and may also be highly educated (Boese, van Kooy, & Bowman, 2018; United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2019; Hewagodage, 2015). However, some subgroups of this population arrive in their host countries rich in linguistic and cultural capital (Harvey & Mallman, 2019)

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but have no print literacy skills in their first language and may not have experienced formal education either (Farrelly, 2017). As a host country and recognized multicultural society (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Wright & Clibborn, 2017) in keeping with global trends and demands Australia has increased its refugee intake from cultures that have oral rather than written traditions, where refugees have had little or no literacy education, or whose years in refugee camps has deprived them of schooling/education (Hatoss, 2013). These groups include people from South Sudan, Somalia, Myanmar and Nepal (Scanlon Foundation, 2019, p. 26). Upon arrival in Australia they are supported to acquire the English language through being referred to the Adult Migrant English Language Program (AMEP) where tuition is available over a limited time (the number of hours depending on their immigrant status) (Hewagodage, 2015). The AMEP provides a basic 510 hours of free tuition for migrants and refugee humanitarian entrants (RHEs), which includes this increasing number of English language learners who have no literacy skills in their first language. Thus, the AMEP is faced with providing for this relatively new cohort where foundation English language and settlement skills are vital to enable them to participate socially and economically in Australian society (Lenette, Baker, & Hirsch, 2019).

The AMEP has gone through various developments since its original conceptualisation of curriculum and pedagogy (Christison & Murray, 2012; Karlsen, 2018; Murray & Christison, 2019) and over time there has been debate regarding the quality of the provision its business model, and curriculum, in particular (Australian Council of TESOL Associations 2019; Australian Government, 2018; Leitner, 2004). This debate continues with most recent issues seen as involving reduced funding, the creation of two streams of ‘Social’ and Pre-employment’ that has led to increased class sizes and the reduction of teacher qualifications for the Social Stream (Stewart, 2019, p. 101). This reflects the changing nature of the migrant population, which involves the intake of skilled migrants according to Australia’s needs in keeping with the general immigration policy but also its international responsibilities for humanitarian refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, [UNHCR], 2013). It is not surprising, therefore, that these current provisions appear inadequate in relation to the circumstances and needs of LESELLA migrants (Community Languages Australia, 2017; Council of Europe, 2017). Thus, there are significant consequences for these learners in that they do not have a voice and it can be argued they are the most disempowered because of their lack of literacy in their first language, their lack of education, their traumatic background and potential isolation in a new country (Benseman, 2014). Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to evaluate or discuss the quality of language learning provisions delivered by AMEP, it is crucial to make clear that there is a disruption for LESLLA learners with regards to providing the required level of language support for them. This is reinforced by the 2017 submission to the parliamentary inquiry on migrant settlement outcomes, where the Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) reported that the AMEP has moved away from its focus on integrating English language learning into migrant settlement, and has moved towards a much narrower focus on employment skills. A further criticism notes that AMEP’s Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are unsuitable for English language learners and stem from theories of teaching basic literacy to native speakers (ACTA Submission, 2018, p. 6). It is claimed that “English language provision for adult migrants is fragmented and disjointed. No clear “centre of gravity” exists for developing policy, programs, pathways, eligibility, delivery, professional development, advice and referrals, cost-effective collaboration between providers, assessment of learner outcomes, and accountability and transparency in the public domain” (ACTA Submission, 2017, p. 7). Of note from a pedagogical perspective, the submission draws attention to how teachers in the program should engage in reflective practice through professional development activities to be able to grapple with the challenges they face when teaching LESLLA learners. Moreover, the