

“Systematic Literature Review on English Language Acquisition and Competency Impact on the Mental Well-being of Refugees Settled in the UK”

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Abstract:

United Nations High Commission for Refugees has reported that at the end of 2013, the number of worldwide forcibly displaced people was more than 50 million that is the higher number of obligatory human migration after the World War II when it is called “global refugee crisis” (Campbell et al., 2018). In addition to the basic needs of food, clothing and safe shelter, they have many other complex requirements with variable impacts on their physical and mental health.

The current systematic review surveyed the literatures which studied the language as a predictor of mental wellbeing of refugee and asylum seekers who settled in UK. Among the different predictors of mental well-being, having good English language skills has found to be one of the most important post-migration social factors impacting mental well-being of refugees and asylum seekers. It includes recommendations for Hull Open doors project where mental health of the registered refugees were studied.

Keywords: Mental well-being, refugees, language, social.

Introduction:

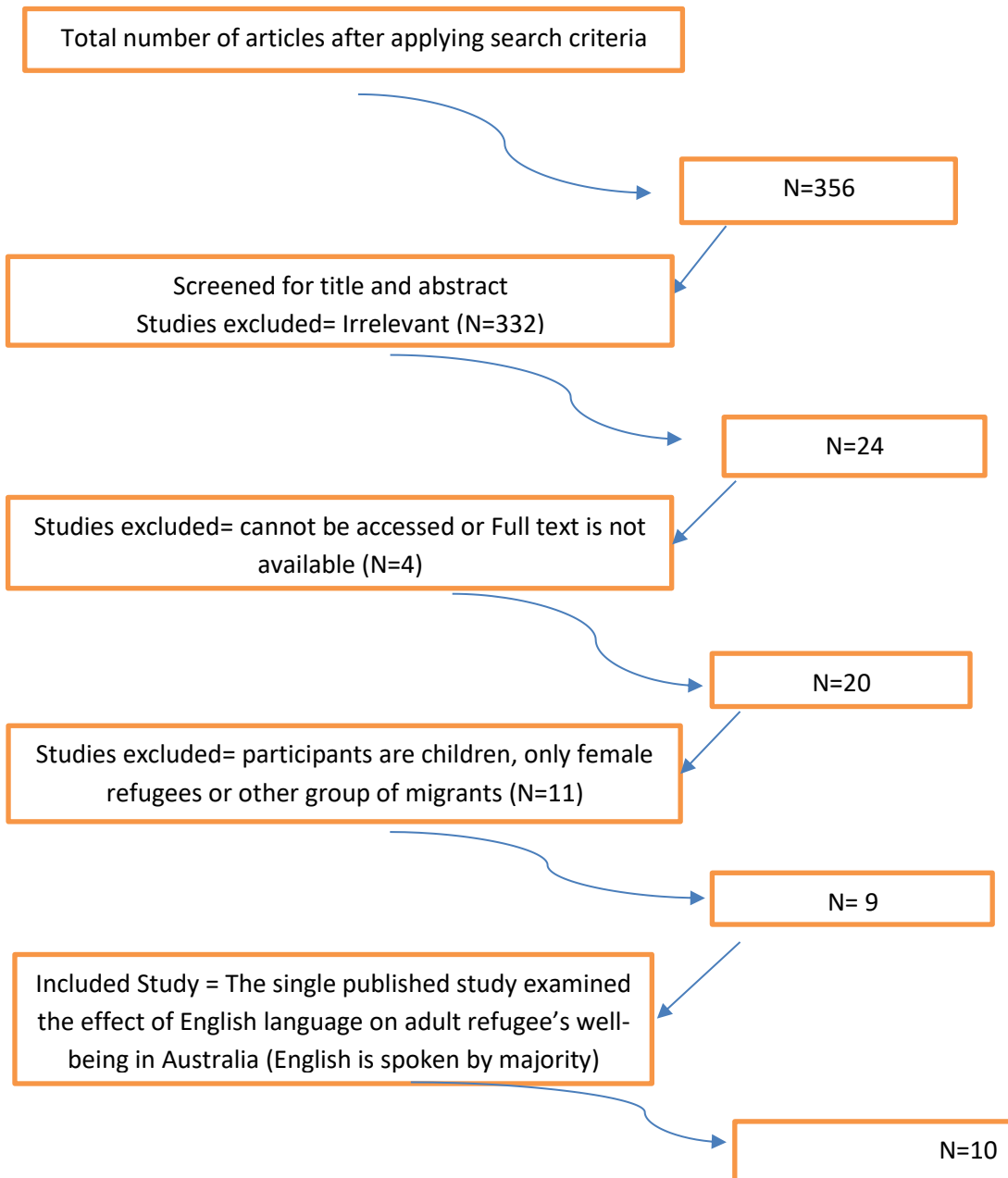
Refugee referred to a person who compulsorily flees his/her country because of a reasonable fear of persecution, human right violation, war or conflicts (UNHCR, 2019). In the UK, close to 123 thousand refugees and more than 45 thousand asylum seekers with pending applications were living all over the island at the end of 2015, when it's estimated that by 2020, this number could be doubled as the result of current unresolved conflicts (Mohamed & Thomas, 2017). Refugees are the most vulnerable group in the population to different types of mental health problems (Smith, 2018 and Bhui, 2006). Although the high prevalent Depressive disorders, Anxiety and Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in refugees are mainly related to their pre-migration stressors and traumatic experiences (Robjant, Robbins & Senior, 2009), however the challenges and barriers that they face during the process of settlement in the new environment may bring considerable amount of distress as well (Liamputtong & Kurban, 2018 and Buchanan et al., 2018). In addition to difficulties in dealing with the financial issues, building social relationships and engaging in the new, diverse culture with its specific rules and values is one of the most difficult challenges for them (Campbell et al., 2018)

The most frequently reported problem by refugees in the UK is isolation and absence of social support network with a high negative impact on their emotional well-being (Tip et al., 2018 and Sorgen, 2015). The main obstacle in establishing contact with the member of the new community is known to be the lack of the proficiency in the language spoken by the majority (Tip et al., 2018 and Pernice & Brook, 1996). Female refugees older than 35 with no previous formal English language education are the most struggling group in English communication in the UK (Alhussain, 2018 and Campbell et al., 2018)

In Hull Open Doors, a considerable number of refugees and asylum seekers gather every Thursday to enjoy having free meals while meeting other people. They noticeably, prefer to speak with those who share their language and often avoid talking with English people. Most of them have very poor or no English language skills at all. Those who are referring to British Red Cross at the next Hall, struggle in talking about themselves in English where they often rely on others or ask for help from interpreters who are not professional, not always available or cannot interpret all the spoken words. Although the weekly gatherings help them in building some social connections, however, the absence of English communication may render them more isolated and separated from the English community and prevent their integration into their new society. So, could English learning help in beating their isolation, engage them in their new environment and improve their mental well-being? and how?

Method:

The Academic Search Premier, PsycINFO, PsycArticle via EBSCO database, Web of science Scopus, Science Direct and Google Scholar have been searched with applying advanced search criteria and using appropriate search techniques of truncation, synonyms, and phrase searching. The search was limited to last twenty years publication, in English and peer-reviewed articles. The search terms were; “English” OR “English language” AND “Proficiency” OR “Competency” OR “Ability” OR “Skills” AND “Psychological” OR “Mental” AND “Well-being” OR “Health” And “Adults.” The article’s title and abstract checked and those who were not relevant or didn’t fit with the search criteria excluded when finally, ten studies remain:



Results:

Study	Study Design	Characteristics & number of Participants	Findings
(Campbell et al. 2018)	Longitudinal/cohort	New UK Refugees N=5678	Language skill is a significant social predictor of Refugee's emotional well-being.
(Tip et al., 2018)	Three waves longitudinal	Settled refugees (4-8 years) N=180	English language competency is positively correlated with subjective well-being of refugees.
(Salvo, de C & Amanda, 2017)	Qualitative (in-depth interview)	Refugees attending NHS services and charities N=16	The English language has an essential role in promoting the psychological well-being of refugee and their integration in the UK community.
(Sorgen, 2015)	Qualitative (semi-structured interview)	Refugees in C-Clubs N=36	Informal English conversation club facilitates the process of integration by improving language and communication skills.
(Alhussain, 2018)	Case Study	New Syrian Refugees N=6	Rote learning of the English language is an important tool for Empowerment and self-reliance of a newly arrived refugee.
(Martzoukou & Burnett, 2018)	Qualitative (interview and focus group)	Syrian refugees in Scotland N=64	English learning is correlated with Refugee's health information needs, well-being, and social connection.
(Court, 2017)	Qualitative (semi-structured interview and focus group)	Refugees attending ESOL classes N=14	The English language perceived as fundamental for interaction, building self-confidence and achieving personal goals.
(Hebbani & Preece, 2015)	Exploratory survey	African Refugees in Brisbane N=56	Proficiency in the English language is associated with higher odds of employment and lower psychological distress.
(Smith, 2016)	Mixed quantitative and qualitative	Refugees in 'creative ESOL' classes N=54	Creative English learning of newly arrived refugees breaks their isolation and provides a sense of belonging.
(Liamputtong & Kurban, 2018)	Qualitative (in-depth interviews & mapping)	Middle-eastern refugees in Australia N=10	The English language reported as an important factor in feeling belong to and forming connections with the members of society

Discussion:

Learning the language of the host community and being able to communicate efficiently, found to be one of the most important post-migration social determinants of psychological well-being of the settled refugees (Campbell et al., 2018, Liamputtong & Kurban, 2018, Pernice & Brook 1996 and Fleischman et al., 2015). The refugees living in English speaking countries are perceiving the English language acquisition as a primary need for dealing with everyday life information requirements (Martzoukou & Burnett, 2018). They need it for reading and responding to e-mails and letters, paying bills, opening a bank account, dealing with accommodation agency, their children's school or G.P, when the language barrier is known as the main obstacle in accessing health-related services (Sturino, 2018

and Ali & Watson, 2018). It's required for understanding the rules and rights in using health or other services as well for seeking appropriate care (Court, 2017). Additionally, language is required for finding a job either as one of its requirements or for writing a CV, filling the job application form or handling job interviews (Alhussain, 2018).

There is a strong positive relationship between the employment of the settled refugee and their mental well-being (Campbell et al., 2018 and Hebbani & Preece, 2015). Unemployment worsens the financial difficulties, and those who have lower resources for managing their living expenses are at higher risk of developing anxiety, depression or risk-taking behaviors such as drug abuse or alcoholism (Campbell et al., 2018 and Warfa et al., 2012). Rather than financial strains, joblessness itself, may result in lack of self-confidence, limit the social contact and increase the possibility of isolation and loneliness (Alhussain, 2018). Studies found that in addition to the educational level and previous work experience, the proficiency in the spoken language is a significant determinant of Refugees employment (Hebbani & Preece, 2015 and Correa-Velez, Barnett & Gifford, 2015). In the UK, people with a low level of English have limited opportunities to find a suitable job to be financially independent (Alhussain, 2018). As a result, they are either unemployed or employed in a low-skilled, unsatisfying, poorly paid jobs. Having good language skills, additionally, provides more educational opportunities and those with higher academic qualifications are more likely to have better job offers (Correa-Velez, Barnett & Gifford, 2015). So, language, facilitate employability that helps with living expenses, improve self-esteem and break the isolation by expanding and enriching relationships, in addition to offering more opportunities for practicing and improving the language (Sorgen, 2018 and Court, 2017).

The other important factor affecting the mental well-being of the refugees in the host country is their perceived belonging to that community (Buchanan et al., 2018 and Gözpinar, 2018). The

integration of refugees in their new environment is a complex process and is affected by many factors and require mutual efforts of refugees and community members (Sorgen, 2015). Common barriers of integration are refugee's low linguistic, socioeconomic and educational levels (Liamputtong & Kurban, 2018), forced unemployment and future insecurities (Tip et al., 2018), legal and political discriminations (Sorgen, 2015), racism and social stigmatization (Alhussain, 2018). The sense of belonging to the community when discrimination and inequalities are abolished facilitate refugee integration (Court, 2017). When they feel they are connected to and are part of the society, this new environment will give them the 'sense of place' that might bring all other concepts of identity (Brass,2018), acceptance, safety and security (Liamputtong & Kurban, 2018 and Giralt, 2015).

Language acquisition is the crucial first step in the process of adjustment and integration into a new culture (Campbell et al., 2018 and Martzoukou & Burnett 2018). From the sociocultural point of view, learning the language of a country, regarded as an entry point to its culture, history, values, and traditions (Liamputtong & Kurban, 2018) and from the psychological perspective, it gives a "sense of belonging" to that community (Sorgen, 2018 and Gözpinar, 2018). Studies showed that there is a positive correlation between improvement in language abilities and feeling of 'being accepted' in a community, as reasonably, the members of the host country will be more receptive of the migrants that could communicate more efficiently with them and in their language than those who cannot (Liamputtong & Kurban, 2018). The refugees in UK who has very poor English grasp, felt that they are not able to build strong and meaningful relationships (Alhussain, 2018) where at the same time, studies found a strong positive correlation between proficiency in English and number of British friends and perceived robust relationships (Tip et al., 2018).

The Language difficulties impede the proper interaction with people in the immediate environment so could lead to frustration and low self-worth (Liamputtong & Kurban, 2018). People with poor language skills are often isolated, have low self-confidence in social contacts or overreliance on the help of their friends and family members with better language abilities or even interpreter that are not readily available or may be costly (Court, 2017). Teaching the English language to the refugee settled in the UK help them to become more independent and improve their self-esteem (Alhussain, 2018). Those who start to learn and communicate in English have reported it a positive experience that gives them autonomy, sense of achievement with a growing hope and ambition to achieve more (Salvo, de C & Amanda, 2017 and Bozkurt & Arslan, 2018). They found it as a tool toward being a confident, independent person and a powerful member of the community.

Empowerment in human studies is defined as the process of “gaining power and authority” (Alhussain, 2018). The language is believed to be a source of empowerment as it gives its learner a right to speak and to be heard (Sorgen,2015). Refugees with poor language often evaluated as inadequate to be considered as ‘worthy speakers’ or are misunderstood or misinterpreted. This inequality in the right to speak inevitably leave them ‘inaudible’ (Giralt, 2015). It may potentially reinforce the ‘identity of incompetency’ when the people who are low skilled in a language assumed to be educationally deficient or intellectually disabled (Court, 2017 and Liamputtong & Kurban, 2018) or have limited access to the resources (Sorgen, 2015). As the result of the disappointment of being heard or feeling embarrassed of not being competent in English (Salvo & de C Williams, Amanda C., 2017), they often avoid the situations that require communication in English, so, limit their social contacts and become isolated (Court 2017& Alhussain, 2018).

Positive context can reduce anxiety and gives the language learner confidence to speak freely. Those who attend ESOL classes, that funded by the government for settled refugee in the UK, felt that they belong to this place as it gives them the sense of security and freedom where they could talk freely, unafraid of making mistakes (Court 2017). However, the main problem with these classes is that they are not considering the English background of trainers, their capabilities, demands and willing and what is taught is not suitable for everyday life language needs (Alhussain, 2018 and Salvo, de C and Amanda, 2017).

Strengths and weaknesses of examined literature:

With regard to design and number of participants, the study that carried out by UK border agency with a four-time point survey of 6000 newly arrived refugees seems to be the most powerful one (Campbell et al., 2018). The longitudinal three-wave study of 180 participants for two years (Tip et al., 2018) that give the direction of causality for variables comes at the 2nd level. However, both had high attrition rate (36%-38%) and time for taking baseline measures are biased, as they are collected when the refugees were waiting for the asylum decision when it associated with extreme anxiety.

Most of the studies, use qualitative method some with in-depth interviewing. Nonetheless, the selected samples are very diverse; Most of them are from the lower socioeconomic status, or exclusively those attending English classes. So, they could be biased and may not be the full representative of refugees living in the UK. Furthermore, Different explanation and definitions are given for mental well-being, and the questionnaires used for its assessment are variable; some are brief and not validated. In addition, the psychological well-being measures, as well as language proficiency, were self-reported and subjective.

Recommendations:

The following points that arise from this review could enhance English learning opportunities of Refugees attending Hull Open Doors:

- The importance of English language learning for new refugees should be acknowledged to people who work at Hull Open doors and to the refugees as well through brochures or posters written in their languages.
- The tables and chairs arrangement could be in the way that allows sitting of English speakers next to refugees encouraging them to speak English in a warm, supporting, respectful and accepting way when they enjoy talking without shame of making mistakes (Salvo, de C, and Amanda, 2017).
- The ESOL classes that ran there every Thursday should motivate a higher number of people to take part. The lessons must be tailored according to their daily communication requirements, concerning their previous language level and learning capacities (Martzoukou & Burnnet, 2018).

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