

Training Interpreters in Rare and Emerging Languages: The Problems of Adjustment to a Tertiary Education Setting

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ABSTRACT

Due to the changing humanitarian intake patterns in Australia, there has been an increasing need for interpreter training in a number of rare and emerging languages in order to facilitate communication concerning the provision of government and community services.

In order to reflect this need, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University (RMIT) in Australia has been offering, since 2002, a Diploma of Interpreting program in these languages. The Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC), a State Government statutory authority, has provided scholarships as an incentive to entrants in the program, which has been approved by the Australian National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI). Students in these rare and emerging language streams have for the most part arrived as refugees, have lived in Australia for only a relatively short period of time, and have varying educational backgrounds. Their languages are characteristically orally based in that language resources such as dictionaries, glossaries and literature on common topics such as medicine, politics, law are largely unavailable.

This paper seeks to identify the sociolinguistic, socio-political and socio-economic factors that impact on the adjustment of these students to an interpreter training course in an Australian dual-sector education (Vocational Education and Training

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and Tertiary education) setting. It also seeks to identify the factors affecting the teaching and learning aspects of the program. The sources of data for the study are two specifically designed questionnaires and data from the university's Course Experience Surveys, as well as interviews with the teaching staff and participant observation by the authors. The subjects of the study are students of the 2009 RMIT Diploma of Interpreting program in the Karen (an ethnic language of Myanmar) and Nuer (a language spoken mainly in Southern Sudan and parts of Ethiopia) language streams. The findings of this study have policy implications for not only the continuation of such education endeavours, but also the provision of and access to public funding of interpreter training programs in rare and emerging languages. With the identification of the underlying factors affecting the students' adjustment and learning outcome, this study will contribute to the development of more specific learning and teaching strategies for future similar courses, maximising academic and professional outcomes under confining human, material and financial input, which will, in turn, add to the social capital to society at large.

Keywords: Sociolinguistic, Refugee adjustment issues, learning outcomes, language skills, social networks

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, there has been an increase in the number of people seeking asylum and refugee status throughout the world mainly emanating from areas of regional conflict and political and social unrest such as parts of Africa and south eastern Asia, Iraq and Afghanistan. Typically, the movement of these people has been from the less developed parts of the world to the more developed areas in anticipation of safer and/or improved living conditions. Australia is one of the prime destinations for refugee resettlement, ranking second in the world according to the 2009 statistics of United Nations' High Commissioner of Refugees (p. 12). Australia accepted 11,000 refugees in 2008, second only to the United States of America (60,200).

In recent years, the Australian humanitarian intake pattern has shifted its focus from predominantly African countries, which accounted for over 70% in 2003-04, to three roughly evenly distributed (one third each) geographic regions in 2008-09, namely: (1) Africa; (2) the Middle East and South West Asia; and (3) the Asia/Pacific region (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Australia).

RMIT has since 1976 engaged in the training of interpreters and translators in a variety of languages. In line with the changing humanitarian and

refugee intake patterns and the consequent emerging demand for interpreters in the new community languages, the RMIT Diploma of Interpreting program has, since 2002, delivered a number of rare and emerging languages in collaboration with the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC). VMC is a Victorian state government statutory authority that provides independent advice on legislative, policy frameworks and the delivery of services to the state's highly culturally and linguistically diverse population. VMC contributes to the initiative by promoting the program and the various languages offered for each intake through their extensive community relations and networks. Importantly, it also offers scholarships to all enrolled students in the program in the rare and emerging language streams to help with expenditures on tuition, transportation and studying materials.

This research-based paper reports on the key findings of a case study involving the students enrolled in the 2009 RMIT Diploma of Interpreting program in two language streams: Karen (one of the ethnic languages of Myanmar) and Nuer (the main language spoken in southern Sudan and parts of Ethiopia). A literature review is conducted to look into community interpreting and the settlement and adjustment issues faced by refugee/humanitarian entrants to their adopted countries, with particular emphasis on the area of adult learning. It is then followed by an outline of the study's methodology, which leads to the elaboration of the results of the study. The nature of student profile and the background of their languages are summarised, and feedback from teaching and administrative staff is drawn upon to facilitate holistic discussion on the training of interpreters in rare and emerging languages. The authors have attempted to identify the factors that may impact on the effectiveness and viability of providing interpreter training in rare and emerging languages, and address the issues and challenges faced by students undergoing such training. Implications of the research and recommendations are then outlined at the end of this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing literature on interpreter training covers, to a great extent, issues pertaining to interpreting competencies, curriculum design, pedagogy, assessment methodologies and application of technology. There is a dearth of literature on how interpreting students' sociolinguistic, socio-political and socioeconomic backgrounds may impact on didactics and learning of interpreting. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to firstly look at literature outside the field of interpreting education to understand the

experiential journeys refugees go through in their adopted country, before it focuses on specific factors impacting the Karen and Nuer students enrolled in 2009 RMIT Diploma of Interpreting program to be trained as community interpreters.

With regard to challenges faced by uprooted refugees, a report on refugee resettlement in rural and regional Victoria (Australia) prepared by McDonald et al. (2008) points out that refugees are a heterogeneous group with a diversity of language, culture, political and religious affiliation and social class, but they share the common experience of being forced to flee their country of origin, significant disruption in their lives, traumatic experiences and human rights abuses, which result very often in persistent resettlement difficulties. These challenges and difficulties mostly relate to the experience of one or more of the following (Refugee Resettlement Advisory Council 2002, cited in McDonald et al 2008, p. 24):

- *Being forced to leave their country of origin;*
- *Profound disruption before resettlement in Australia, including, but not limited to, periods of discrimination;*
- *Conflict and human rights abuses in their countries of origin, often followed by a period of uncertain status in a country of asylum or refugee camp;*
- *Exposure to traumatic experiences, such as loss of or separation from family, torture or life-threatening events;*
- *Prolonged periods in countries where infrastructure and services are inadequate due to conflicts; and*
- *As a consequence of torture or other traumatic experiences, grief, anxiety, depression, guilt or symptoms of post-traumatic disorder, which may persist long after resettlement.*

One or a combination of these factors is the basis of settlement or adjustment issues for refugees, which have been the subject of various studies and reports (McMichael and Manderson 2004; Foley & Beer 2003).

McDonald et al. (2008) identified four phases in the process of resettlement for refugee adjustment in the host country. The first one is a short period after 'arrival', where refugees express a high level of satisfaction with their new environment. This is followed by a second phase, a period of 'reality', where satisfaction rapidly declines when the day-to-day circumstances of their environment become apparent. The third and fourth phases involve a period of 'integration' into the community where some are more successful than others (p.26).

Social networks are widely believed to break down social isolation of refugees in their resettlement process and encourage the continuation of their own cultures in the wider host society -- a view confirmed by McMichael & Manderson (2004) and Colic-Peisker & Tilbury (2003). In a similar vein, Allodi (1989) points out that social support from the refugees' own cultural community and receiving society may enhance adaptation; Brown & Harris (1978) and Gorst-Unsworth & Goldenbert (1998) also refer to social support as a protective factor in the emotional wellbeing of refugees in the host country (cited in Tribe and Morrissey 2003, p.201).

In the field of sociology, the concept of social networks and social support is referred to as 'social connection' by Ager and Strang (2008). They gauge the level of integration by refugees into the host country by developing a conceptual framework that consists of four potential indicators, one of which is 'social connection'. They further identified three core domains under the 'social connection' indicator, namely 'social bonds' (with family and other members of their community), 'social bridge' (with other communities, including host community) and 'social links' (with the structures of the host country) (Pittaway & Muli 2009, p.28). The original idea of the first two domains can be traced back to Putnam's discussion of social capital (1995), who attributes the coining of the terms, 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital, to Gittell and Vidal (1998, p.10). His idea of social capital refers to such features of social organisation as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (1995). In other words, it is the collective value of all 'social networks' and the inclinations that arise from these networks for members of them to do things for each other. The concept of social capital is particularly relevant in the discussion of training members from refugee communities in the host country to become interpreters, in that the interpreter role they play will facilitate the very interaction, and ultimately, integration, under which mutual benefit is achieved.

The other side of the process of integration is the notion of adjustment. Although adjustment has been widely discussed in the literature, there is no consensus on its precise nature, apart from the generally held view that it manifests multiple components (Montgomery 1996; Searle & Ward 2003; Michailidis 2004). Montgomery (1996) focuses on the causal factors affecting adjustment and adaptation of refugees to their new environment, whereas Michailidis (2004) isolates the key factors that constitute a barrier to cross-cultural communication experienced by international students. Burgoyne and Hull's research (2007) focuses on refugee adult literacy and numeracy learning related to classroom management issues. Ben-Moshe et al. (2008) report on general settlement issues for refugees at primary and secondary

school ages, and discuss access and participation factors for refugee students in tertiary institutions. Despite the above, there have been few studies on adjustment problems encountered by refugees in tertiary education settings and in the wider community.

To illustrate the above studies on refugee adjustment issues and their corresponding research areas, Figure 1 below attempts to visualise where the studies are situated in terms of refugee's age (children vs adult axis) and different sociological settings (community vs education axis). The focus of this paper positions itself at the intersection dimensions 2 and 4.

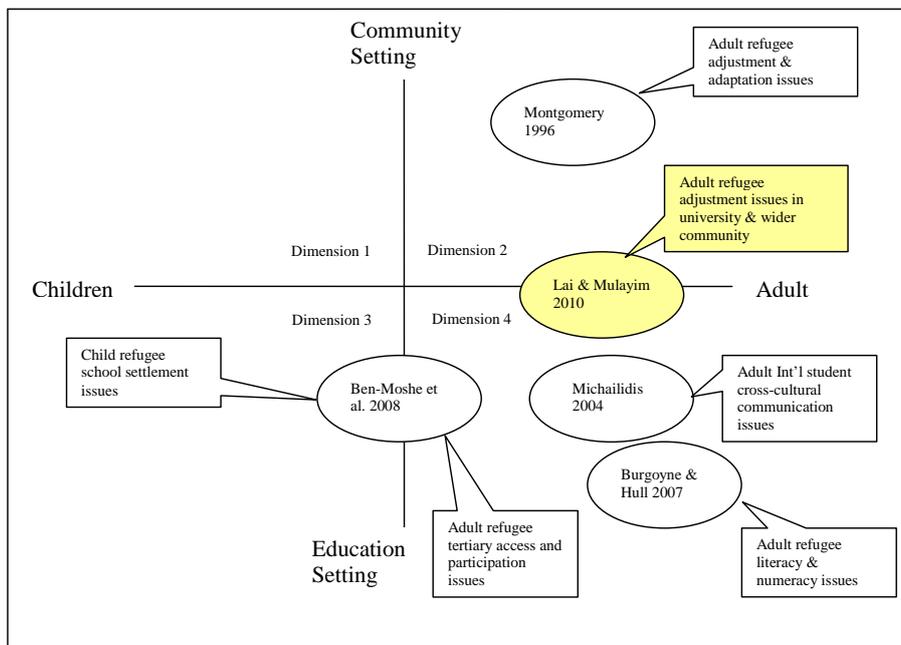


Figure 1. Distribution of Existing Literature on Refugee Adjustment Issues

With regard to community interpreting, the contexts they work in and the specific role community interpreters assume have been elaborated by Gentile et al. (1996) and Hale (2007). Community Interpreters effectively serve as a communication channel for ethnic communities, transferring information in such areas as health, education, social welfare, housing and legal matters. These domains have been the focus of RMIT's training in the Diploma of Interpreting and they coincide with the social context which gives rise to the issues regarded as most problematic for refugees settling in Australia (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008). From this perspective, trained community

interpreters play a crucial role in facilitating all phases of the resettlement process as well as providing for the communication mechanism with the wider community. They are often considered agents of social inclusion by government agencies dealing with settlement services. Because RMIT student interpreters are predominantly drawn from the very refugee communities this section of literature review focuses on, it may be concluded that most of them, at one stage or another, have had to deal with the same resettlement challenges as other members of their ethnic communities. They thus acquire the 'dual role' of agents and subjects of social inclusion. The later sections of this paper which analyse certain paradoxical survey results will attest to this duality of roles assumed by the student interpreters.

METHODOLOGY

This research-based paper is based on a case study which uses data from three sources:

- two questionnaires designed by the authors;
- RMIT's routine Course Experience Survey conducted at the end of each semester'
- unstructured interviews with the teaching staff.

This paper attempts to provide an insight into adjustment issues encountered by adult refugees in an Australian tertiary education setting, using the Karen and Nuer interpreting students enrolled in 2009 RMIT Diploma of Interpreting program. The context of this training course is aimed at preparing the students for future employment and an enhanced role in their ethnic communities. Ethics clearance was obtained from the university, and participation of the surveys and interviews were completely voluntary. The data collected and participant observation made by the authors enabled the authors to triangulate factors that affected the students' adjustment to life in Australia and studying interpreting at RMIT.

The first of the two questionnaires designed for this study attempted to elicit information from the research subjects by covering the following four areas:

- Section 1 contained questions related to students' own perception of their language proficiency in both English and Language Other Than English (LOTE).
- Section 2 asked questions related to teaching and learning experiences.

- Section 3 related to adjustment factors which were adapted from Michailidis (2004) and related to loneliness/homesickness, perceived discrimination, local attitudes and customs, and opportunities to establish networks in the university and in the general community as a factor in adjustment.
- Section 4 asked the students about perceived difficulties in dealing with the university as an institution.

This first questionnaire was handed out in hard copies to students in May 2009. There were 26 students in the Karen group and 13 in the Nuer, of whom 22 Karen (85%) and nine (69%) Nuer students returned the questionnaires. Overall response rate of the two language groups combined was 79%.

A follow-up questionnaire to expand on Section 3 of the original questionnaire was administered at the end of October 2009 in order to ascertain the factors affecting students' adjustment to living in Australia and studying at RMIT, as well as factors affecting their progress in achieving their study goals. A four-point Likert scale was used in this second questionnaire to gauge students' positive or negative response to each statement. 21 of the 26 Karen students (81%) and 10 of the 13 (78%) Nuer students returned the questionnaire -- a 79% response rate for the two language groups combined.

The survey findings and discussions are presented in the following sections of this paper.

SURVEY RESULTS

Background

The RMIT Diploma of Interpreting program is approved by Australia's National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) and leads to NAATI's Paraprofessional Interpreter accreditation for successful graduates. Since 2002, RMIT has collaborated with the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC), a State Government statutory authority, to provide scholarships to students selected in the rare and emerging language streams under the program. The languages delivered since 2002 under this joint initiative are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Rare and Emerging Languages Delivered by RMIT Since 2002

Year	Languages
2010	Dari, Tamil
2009	Karen, Nuer
2008	Burmese, Swahili
2007	Amharic, Nuer
2006	Dari, Sudanese Arabic*, Tigrinya
2005	Dari, Dinka, Oromo
2004	Amharic, Timorese Hakka
2003	Dari, Khmer
2002	Khmer

* Sudanese Arabic is not a NAATI accredited language stream. Students who achieved accreditation levels were accredited by NAATI in standard Arabic. A special additional test was given to students in Sudanese Arabic and successful students were given an RMIT certificate acknowledging their proficiency in Sudanese Arabic.

Details of the RMIT Diploma of Interpreting curriculum, conditions for NAATI Paraprofessional accreditation and the involvement of VMC in student recruitment and scholarship provision are covered at length by Lai & Mulayim (2010).

The subjects of this study were the students enrolled in RMIT Diploma of Interpreting in the 2009 academic year in the Karen and Nuer language streams. The program in these language streams was delivered in part-time mode, entailing 2 evenings (8 face-to-face contact hours) per week, 15 weeks per semester for two semesters (one year). The interpreting and contextual knowledge subjects were delivered in a bilingual setting, whereas ethics and English consolidation subjects were taught using English as the language of instruction. The interpreting subject, being the focus of the program, accounts for 50% of the contact hours. It was delivered by an appropriately qualified language other than English (LOTE) teacher, and an experienced English teacher, who had team-taught interpreting in other language settings.

Student Profile (from the first questionnaire)

The Nuer group was an all-male class (by reasons the authors attribute to sheer chance of selection outcome, given there were significantly fewer female applicants applying for the language stream), meaning 100% of the Nuer respondents were male, whereas the Karen group respondents comprised 41% male and 59% female.

Seven out of the nine Nuer respondents were aged between 30-39. In comparison, the Karen group had a wider range of ages, ranging from 36% aged between 20-29, 32% between 30-39, 14% between 40-49, while the remaining 18% were more than 50 years of age.

Six out of the nine Nuer respondents had tertiary education qualifications, whereas just under 30% of the Karen respondents had been educated at tertiary levels.

All except one of the Nuer respondents were from the Sudan, and the majority (7) of them had Nuer as their first language. Many of them were proficient in other languages, including Amharic, Swahili and Arabic, that functioned as their second, third or even fourth languages.

Over 80% of the Karen respondents were from Burma, while a small number of them originated from Thailand or other places. Karen was overwhelmingly the respondents' first language (21 out of 22), and Burmese the second language of more than half of the respondents. English was the second language of 40% of the respondents, and the third language of a further 40% of the respondents.

Language Proficiency (from the first questionnaire)

Almost 70% of the Nuer respondents have had their English proficiency formally assessed. In contrast only one third of the Karen students had undergone formal English assessment. However, when asked about their perception of their own English proficiency, almost 80% of the Nuer respondents thought it was either good or excellent. The Karen respondents also exhibit a high degree of confidence in their English proficiency, with 95% regarding it as either good or excellent. When asked about their own perception of their LOTE proficiency, almost 90% of Nuer respondents and nearly 95% of Karen respondents regarded their LOTE as either good or excellent.

Learning and Teaching (from the first questionnaire)

On average a high percentage (80%) of the Nuer and Karen respondents did not find it difficult to seek clarification when they were not sure about a specific instruction in class. A further 99% of them felt they were given ample opportunities to express their opinions freely in the classroom. Similar percentages were recorded for their perception about classroom instructions being clear and understandable.

When asked whether they felt their language skills were a barrier in interacting with their teachers and university staff, 75% of the respondents replied it was not a problem and 87% of the respondents thought their teachers were sensitive to their learning needs. This also resonated with their response to the question about whether they felt teachers' expectations of them were too high, to which almost 80% of them responded that this was not the case.

In terms of classroom dynamics, 84% of the respondents felt that correction of language errors was adequately dealt with in their interpreting class by both the English and LOTE teachers. Although Nuer students seemed relatively less comfortable with the correction process than their Karen counterparts, almost 90% of the two cohorts of students combined reported that they received adequate constructive feedback from both their English and LOTE teachers.

Functioning within the Institutional Context (from the first questionnaire)

Nearly 90% of the respondents reported having no difficulties dealing with RMIT administration in areas such as enrolment, payment, obtaining student card etc. And about 80% felt that the language RMIT administrative staff used was easy to understand. In other words, around 20% of the respondents experienced difficulty in grasping the language used by the university administrative staff.

About half of the respondents reported that they had accessed university support services to help with their studies. However when asked to name the services they had used, they listed library, computer equipment, online learning hub etc.—not ones usually regarded as 'support services' in Australian education settings. Furthermore, when asked about what particular service they wanted the university to provide to enhance their learning experience and outcome, a little over 30% of the respondents pointed to things such as software for their language installed on library PCs (facility), transport expenditure support (financial), tour of the university (student orientation service), bilingual dictionaries and glossaries (learning resources) and special lectures (career counselling service).

Adjustment to University Environment (from the first questionnaire)

For the purposes of this study the following adjustment factors, which were derived from Michailidis' 2004 study, were used in the survey: homesickness/loneliness; perceived discrimination; language skills; local

attitudes and customs; opportunities to develop social networks in the university and opportunities to develop social networks in the general community.

The results indicated that approximately half of the respondents regarded loneliness/homesickness (48%), perceived discrimination (48%), language skills (48%), and local attitudes and customs (45%) to be factors of some or great importance to their adjustment process. Of the respondents who regarded language skills as important to their adjustment, 45% of the Karen respondents and 55% of the Nuer respondents reported some or a lot of difficulties.

A further 48% of the respondents perceived that language skills, to some degree, hindered their attempt to adjust to the Australian education setting. Two out of three respondents (65%) reported difficulties in establishing social networks within the university, and over half of them seemed to experience the same difficulty off-campus (54%) in the general community.

Perceived Factors Affecting Adjustment (from the follow-up questionnaire)

A follow-up survey was administered five months after the first survey was completed. A four-point Likert scale was used for the following 11 factors in the questionnaire to gauge students' positive or negative responses in regard to their attempts to adjust to living in Australia and studying at RMIT.

- (1) home sickness;
- (2) perceived discrimination;
- (3) English skills;
- (4) fear of failure;
- (5) familiarity with Australian customs;
- (6) familiarity with RMIT procedures;
- (7) opportunity to establish social networks within RMIT;
- (8) opportunity to establish social networks outside of RMIT;
- (9) access to counselling services;
- (10) worry about financial problems;
- (11) opportunity to find employment.

91% of the respondents from the two language groups combined expressed factor (3) 'English skills' as either important or very important, ranking the highest among all factors. This was followed by 87% of the respondents regarding factor (11) 'opportunity to find employment' as either important or very important. The other factors that scored above 80% were (8) 'opportunity to establish social networks outside of RMIT' (86%); (5) 'familiarity with Australian customs' (84%); (10) 'worry about financial problems' (83%); (6) 'familiarity with RMIT procedures' (81%). The lowest scoring factor was (1) 'home sickness', which 49% of the respondents thought was important or very important in their attempt to adjust to their life and study in Australia. The remaining four factors, namely (2) 'perceived discrimination'; (4) 'fear of failure'; (7) 'opportunity to establish social networks within RMIT'; and (9) 'access to counselling services', all scored in the 70s%.

It is worth noting that different language groups attached different importance to the 11 factors in terms of their adjustment. One hundred percent of the Karen group respondents regarded both (3) 'English skills' and (8) 'opportunity to establish social networks outside of RMIT' as either important or very important, whereas the highest number of Nuer students (80%) chose (5) 'familiarity with Australian customs' and (10) 'worry about financial problems' as the major factor affecting their adjustment.

Perceived Factors Affecting Tertiary Study (from the follow-up questionnaire)

This part of the questionnaire was divided into four categories with a combined total of 21 factors, and a four-point Likert scale was used again to elicit student response in relation to factors they deemed important to their attempt to achieve their study goals at RMIT.

The categories and the factors proposed under each category are as follows:

Language proficiency:

- (1) English listening skills;
- (2) LOTE listening skills;
- (3) English vocabulary;
- (4) LOTE vocabulary;
- (5) English pronunciation;
- (6) English fluency.

Learning strategies:

- (7) developing strategies for vocabulary acquisition;
- (8) developing strategies for English fluency;
- (9) developing strategies for effective listening;
- (10) developing strategies for contextual knowledge acquisition;
- (11) knowing how to study effectively;
- (12) managing balance among work, family and study.

Learning resources:

- (13) LOTE resources;
- (14) English resources;
- (15) access to library;
- (16) access to computer and IT support.

Learning interpreting

- (17) Opportunity to practice;
- (18) applying note-taking skills;
- (19) building confidence;
- (20) availability of practice materials;
- (21) provision of feedback on performance.

Strikingly the two language groups converged on exactly the same factor they regarded as important or very important in achieving their study goals—factor (12) ‘managing balance among work, family and study’. This factor was chosen by the highest numbers of respondents in both language groups: 62% by the Karen group and as high as 90% by the Nuer group, and it was also the top factor chosen by most respondents in the two language groups combined (71%). The second factor chosen by the highest number of respondents in the two language groups combined was factor (8) ‘developing strategies for English fluency’ (68%). This was closely followed by 65% of the total respondents from the two language groups combined regarding factor (6) ‘English fluency’ under the language proficiency category as important or very important in achieving their study goals.

Looking at individual language groups, the highest number of Karen students regarded factors (6), (8) and (12) as important or very important in achieving their study goals, each scoring an equal 62%. On the other hand,, 90% of the Nuer respondents regarded factor (12) 'managing balance among work, family and study' as either important or very important in achieving their study goals. Curiously another 90% of them regarded factor (5) 'English pronunciation' to be also either important or very important. Factor (8) 'developing strategies for English fluency' was regarded by a lesser 70% of the Nuer students as important or very important, with factor (6) 'English fluency' regarded by 80% of them as important or very important. The same number of Nuer students (80%) also deemed having access to 'LOTE resources' (factor 13) and 'access to computer IT support' (factor 16) to be important or very important.

Open Ended Questions on Suggested Improvement (from the follow-up questionnaire)

At the end of the follow-up questionnaire, the respondents were asked to list three suggestions they thought may improve their learning experience and learning outcome. The following is a summary of the top five responses:

1. Need more practice materials and resources x 9 respondents
2. Access to pathways to future studies x 3 respondents
3. More emphasis on listening and familiarity of Australian accent x 3 respondents
4. More practice in interpreting x 3 respondents
5. Program length should be extended x 3 respondents

Teacher Feedback from Unstructured Interviews

With the interpreting subject accounting for 50% of the contact hours of the program, the LOTE and English teachers who were engaged in team-teaching in the Karen and Nuer groups were interviewed just before the authors administered the follow-up survey. The following is a summary of their feedback:

1. Teachers overwhelmingly commented that the students were highly motivated and worked as hard as they could.
2. What they perceived as cultural values and practices of some students relating to punctuality, making and keeping appointments did intrude on classroom management.

3. Attendance was intermittent, and arriving late, sometimes substantially late, due to travelling distance and work commitments was prevalent.
4. It was extremely beneficial to conduct the interpreting class in the team-teaching mode. It provided timely feedback to students in both languages in all aspects involving vocabulary, syntax, grammar and conceptual difficulties.
5. Bilingual teaching materials were insufficient and teachers often had to *ad lib* or fell back on monolingual English materials.
6. Students' bilingual capacity varied significantly, particularly in their English proficiency. This created pedagogical challenges in the classroom.

DISCUSSION OF SURVEY OUTCOMES

Paradoxical Responses to Language Skills

In the first survey, the majority of the respondents expressed high levels of confidence in their proficiency in both languages, regarding their English and LOTE skills as good to excellent. This confidence was further demonstrated by more than 70% of both language groups thinking that their English language proficiency was not a barrier to interacting with their teachers, while 80% of them felt it was easy communicating with university administrative staff.

However, when the students were asked in the first survey whether language was a factor in their adjustment to the wider community, 45% of the Karen respondents and 55% of the Nuer respondents reported some or a lot of difficulties. Similarly, 48% of the respondents from the two language groups combined perceived language skills to hinder their ability in adjusting to the Australian education setting. These rather paradoxical responses to language skills on adjustment and adaptation is also remarked on by Montgomery (1996, p.694). The authors' attribute this inconsistency to two reasons.

First, these languages are characterised by highly developed oral form of linguistic socialisation. As a result the students generally had well developed oral skills, which were reflected in their confidence when asked about their own perception of proficiency in both their own language and English. Also because most of the students had arrived in Australia as humanitarian entrants, anecdotal evidence indicated that they had been exposed to English in refugee camps or humanitarian processing facilities outside their places of origin before they resettled in Australia. Their unique

sociolinguistic and socio-political backgrounds offered them an edge in developing competency in English as a second (or third, or even fourth) language with relative ease. This again was reflected in their response to the level of comfort in dealing with teachers and university administrative staff, where most interaction was orally based communication.

Second, as a result of the respondents' strong oral tradition,, often language learning (in the context of interpreter training, ie. language consolidation, vocabulary acquisition, grammar and syntax re-enforcement etc.) did not seem, to be a problem in classroom settings. Rather the knowledge of the concepts underlying the language in use was often more problematic. Therefore when the respondents were asked, from a different angle in different questions, whether they found language to be a factor affecting their adjustment to the wider community and to the Australian education setting, their perception of language then expanded beyond a mere medium of oral communication to 'get them by' in daily life and interaction with university staff. Instead it encompassed a wider and deeper sphere of socialisation, integration and adaptation. This may account for the contradiction in their answers to different questions, i.e. they felt confident in their language skill; but at the same time they also felt language posed problems to their adjustment to living in Australia and studying at RMIT.

This paradox once again is indicative of the fact that these student interpreters were drawn from the very refugee communities that they were going to serve and they were facing the same resettlement and adjustment challenges as other members of their own ethnic communities. This once again highlights their 'dual role' of agents and subjects of social inclusion.

Another rather confusing response in the language proficiency aspect arises from the follow-up questionnaire administered 5 months after the first one, where as high as 90% of the respondents of the two language groups combined picked 'English skills' as either an important or very important factor affecting their successful adjustment, contrary to the high level of confidence in their bilingual capacity manifested in the first survey. This change of attitude will be discussed in the section entitled 'Social Networks in the Adjustment Process' below.

Learning and Teaching in the Adjustment Process

On the whole, most respondents to the first survey demonstrated high adaptability to their studies at RMIT. Few expressed that they encountered problems when functioning in the tertiary education setting. This was

consistent with the results of the Course Experience Survey administered by the university at the end of semester 1 2009. This may be attributed to previous exposure by about half of the respondents to post-secondary education in Australian or in other linguistic settings. The literature (Montgomery 1996; Biggs 2003) also indicates that better educated or vocationally trained refugees can be expected to adapt better, but not necessarily feel better about the experience.

Drawing on the authors' experience dealing with international students in other language streams (eg. Japanese, Korean and Mandarin) of RMIT translating and interpreting programs, where students find it challenging adapting to Australian university classroom, the authors were pleasantly surprised by the Karen and Nuer respondents' high adaptability in their learning experience. The main reason the international students, in our experience, find it difficult to adjust to their new study environment is the vastly different classroom dynamics and the predominantly learner-centred teaching methodologies in the Australian tertiary classroom. The countries of origin of these international students are referred to as 'collectivist society' with high 'power distance index' by Hofstede & Hofstede (2005, p. 83), where teacher-centred learning stresses 'adaptation to the skills and virtues necessary to be an acceptable group member' (p. 98). A typical complaint from teachers from more individualist culture, such as Australia, is that 'students from collectivist cultures do not speak up, not even when the teacher puts a question to the class' (p.96). This comment was concurred by teachers teaching in these international language streams in our T & I programs.

Although it cannot be identified from Hofstede & Hofstede's data the level of collectivism/individualism and power distance index for Burma and Sudan (as reference countries, although not all respondents were necessarily from these countries), the authors posited that these countries would be more collectivist than individualist, and with relatively high power distance index. As opposed to their counterpart student interpreters from Chinese, Japanese and Korean backgrounds at RMIT, the Karen and Nuer student interpreters defied the same learning adjustment issues and exhibited positive classroom participation behaviour appreciated by the instructing teachers. The authors attributed such exception to the following three reasons:

1. Exposure to post-secondary education in Australia or other linguistic settings by about half of the students;

2. Life experience of uprooting from their places of origin, subsisting in refugee facilities, to finally resettling in a new country, through which they learned to be assertive and communicative as a surviving mechanism;
3. Determination to make the best of the education opportunity so there were no holding back in the classroom.

Teachers' feedback and the authors' observations confirmed that the students were highly motivated in the classroom, which might be related to the common beliefs, values and socialisation practices of their own cultures. Nevertheless, some cultural values and practices of the students relating to punctuality, making and keeping appointments did intrude on classroom management. Attendance was at best intermittent, mainly due to obligations regarding work or other settlement issues. It ultimately affected their accreditation results. The number of students who attained NAATI Paraprofessional Accreditation at the end of 2009 was 13 (50%) out of 26 Karen students, and 5 (38%) out of 13 Nuer students, although these accreditation rates were on a par with other language streams of the RMIT T & I programs, and even better compared to NAATI's public exam outcomes of around 30% on average (Turner & Ozolins, p. 18) and other similar interpreter exams internationally (p. 47).

While the first survey demonstrated high adaptability by the research subjects to their interpreting studies at RMIT, in the follow-up survey it was revealed that the highest number of students (71%) regarded 'managing balance among work, family and study' to be critical to their adjustment to tertiary studies. This seemed to indicate their struggle between study and other commitments and correspond to the teachers' feedback on their time management and attendance. It is also worth noting that 'English fluency' and 'developing strategies for English fluency' were chosen by around two thirds (65% and 68% respectively) of the respondents to be critical in their adjustment to tertiary studies. This change of perception to their language ability seemed to echo the paradoxical responses to their linguistic skills mentioned in the previous section, pointing to a decline of confidence as time went by during their study.

Social Networks in the Adjustment Process

The authors regarded the most interesting findings of this study to be relating to social networks, and how they converge with Putnam's social capital theory. It was identified through the first survey that the respondents felt they lacked opportunities to build social networks as one of the major

factors affecting their adjustment both on campus (65%) and off campus (54%). The former percentage relating to the lack of opportunities on campus may be partly due to the timetabling of classes on two evenings of the week. And the reason behind it was to allow students to fulfil their day-time work commitment. Nonetheless the perceived lack of opportunities to develop social networks seemed consistent in the wider community as it was in the educational setting. It may also explain why nearly half of the respondents (from the first survey) felt lonely and homesick, which they identify as a major barrier to their adjustment. This issue has been identified in other studies (McDonald et al 2008; Michailidis, 2004), although the percentages seem to be lower. This issue also indicated an area of concern that needed to be addressed, and again highlights the fact that these student interpreters' 'dual role' of agents and subjects of social inclusion. The latter role echoes the importance of social networks in resettlement process identified by McMichael & Manderson (2004) and Colic-Peisker & Tilbury (2003).

Another aspect that was investigated in the first survey related to perceived discrimination. Almost half of the students (48%) felt there was some or a lot perceived discrimination. Unfortunately this is consistent with other studies (Taylor & Fraser, cited in McDonald et al, 2008).

The results of the second questionnaire administered in October 2009 towards the end of the one-year diploma program revealed an unexpected dimension. Contrary to the first survey, in which the lack of opportunities to establish social networks on- and off-campus were identified to be the major factors affecting the students' adjustment, followed by other factors such as feel of loneliness and perceived discrimination, in the follow-up questionnaire the most respondents (90%) picked 'English skills' as either an important or very important factor to their successful adjustment. This is contrary to the first survey, which manifested high level of linguistic confidence by the student interpreters in both their LOTE and English. That being the case, there are still 87% of the student interpreters who, in the follow-up survey, regarded 'opportunity to establish social networks outside of RMIT' as being either an important or very important factor to their adjustment. In addition, a few other factors were also chosen by similar numbers of respondents, including 'opportunity to find employment' (87%), 'familiarity with Australian customs' (84%), and 'worry about financial problems' (83%).

Although 'feel of loneliness' scored the lowest in the second survey (48%) as the factor affecting students' adjustment, the percentage was consistent with the first survey. This probably explained why 87% of the respondents in the

second survey felt the need to establish social networks outside of RMIT, and 77% felt the need to establish social networks within RMIT. The uncoerced responses from the research subjects in the two surveys revealed their yearning for social networks both on- and off-campus. This converges with Putnam's social capital theory, which relates to the collective value of all 'social networks' and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other.

The authors regard that the timing of the second survey played a critical role in the reshuffling of factors the respondents deemed important to their adjustment process. The students' one-year study journey, in a sense, resembled a microcosm of the four phases proposed by McDonald et al. (2008, p.26), in which the respondents expressed high levels of satisfaction with their new environment (manifested in their confidence in their bilingual linguistic ability, communicative interaction with teachers and university staff in the first survey five months into their studies). When the second questionnaire was administered at the end of their studies, it was when 'reality' had started to set in and the initial satisfaction had tapered off. A different order of priority, therefore, was reflected in the respondents' evaluation of the adjustment factors. However the total reversal of the importance they attached to language skills can be viewed in a positive light. The very fact that these students were trained as interpreters who had to work with their pair of languages on a daily basis provided a chance for their deeper reflection. Their change of attitude to language skills seemed to concur with the statement by the Chinese sage, Confucius, 'the more one learns, the more he sees his ignorance.' Rather than 'ignorance', the authors regard this introspection as 'awareness of insufficiency'.

IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

Implications on Training

(1) Team Teaching

The practice of team teaching in the interpreting subject, although a costly form of teaching, has been regarded by teachers to be valuable in terms of classroom management by adding different discourse perspectives in the language pairs. It has also been accepted by the teachers to be an effective methodology to understand the radically different communication styles derived from a variety of language and cultural backgrounds. As anthropologist Edward T. Hall distinguished communication styles based on cultures from high-context to low-context (cited in Hofstede & Hofstede

2005, p. 89), teachers must learn to unpack messages encoded in the high-context communication style used by students from collectivist cultures, just as students from these cultures must learn how to construct their expressions with information using explicit code, which is typical for individualist cultures such as Australia.

The authors believe that the dialogic pedagogy (Game & Metcalfe, 2009) which views team teaching as a supportive relationship between teachers, with opportunities for students to provide input and engage in the teaching process is particularly valuable for the teaching of interpreting skills. The benefits of interdisciplinary and multicultural education teams were identified by McDaniel and Colarulli to be 'very effective in fostering integrative thinking and appreciation of diversity' (cited in Esen 2000, p. 9). Team teaching provides an important medium for teacher/student classroom interaction in the context of interpreting training on vocabulary use, pronunciation and discourse style. The authors would like to advocate more professional development for teachers engaged in team teaching as a catalyst for improving didactic strategies in managing culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms as well as helping students to develop more advanced communicative and linguistic competencies.

(2) Student Selection

One point of the teacher feedback touched on the heterogeneity of the students' language proficiency, particularly their English, and the consequent pedagogical challenges. The program administers a bilingual intake test to screen applicants, which comprises a written component of English reading comprehension and essay composition, followed by a spoken component of either telephone or face-to-face bilingual interview.

Drawing on the most students' choice of 'English skills' to be an important factor in their attempt to achieve their study goals, on top of the teachers' remark on students' level of English, the authors are of the opinion that the intake test needs to be modified in its breadth and depth in order to increase its screening efficacy for suitable entrants to enter the interpreting training program.

(3) Bilingual Teaching Materials

Feedback from both the students and teachers drew attention to the shortage of bilingual teaching materials. Lai & Mulayim (2010) discussed the very difficulties the program faced. These rare and emerging languages are not

offered by the program on a continual basis. In some cases they are delivered once only. This deprives the program of the capacity to accumulate language-specific materials. Adding to the predicament, resources available for these rare and emerging languages in print or on the internet are extremely limited, resulting in the paltry collection of available materials in RMIT libraries. Many of the rare and emerging languages are often in the process of developing a vocabulary to match Western cultural contexts. In many instances the English team teacher had to explain what a word or concept meant in English and worked with the LOTE teacher to assist the students to work out how to express them in their LOTE.

The authors believe concerted efforts are needed to address this deficiency. We call for training materials to be shared among training institutions offering similar community interpreting courses both in Australia and overseas, thus spreading the load and cost of developing appropriate teaching materials.

Implications on Policy

(1) VMC Scholarship

The Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) has been the main drive in linking aspirong community members from rare and emerging language backgrounds to vocational interpreter training. The scholarships VMC has provided since 2002 to entrants to the RMIT Diploma of Interpreting program have been instrumental in enabling the students to receive the training without undue financial burden to them.

The authors have observed over the years that the attrition rates for these rare and emerging languages in the RMIT Diploma of Interpreting program have been low, comparing to other languages, and a very high degree of appreciation was expressed by these students to the provision of VMC scholarship and the opportunity to study. Most importantly, they all felt the pressing need for their community to access qualified interpreters and the implications for their communities on the current shortage of interpreters. As was revealed by the follow-up survey that "worry about financial problems" and "opportunity to find employment" were on the top of the students' agenda, the continuation of providing this scholarship funding can not be overemphasised.

(2) Social Networks

As was confirmed by the study, establishing social networks on- and off-campus were regarded by the students to be vitally important in their adjustment to Australian life and tertiary studies. The authors would like to advocate more support from the VMC in assisting the students to link up with various services and mainstream society, strengthening 'social bridge' and 'social links' as defined in the framework by Ager and Strang (2008). Meanwhile, the university also needs to work on strategies to help the students to better integrate in the university environment in order for them to tap into the social and academic resources it has to offer. An integration specialist for these interpreter students (as well as refugee students in other disciplines) similar to the Indigenous Education Liaison Officer should be considered. The authors believe this would greatly assist the students in managing balance among work, family and study, which was identified in the study as the number one factor effecting their adjustment to tertiary studies.

CONCLUSION

The refugee backgrounds of the research subjects in this study on interpreter training has led the authors to an unconventional path of looking at the adjustment issues perceived by the interpreter students, who were both the agents and subjects of social inclusion in their study journey at RMIT. The major factors identified by the students in the two surveys can be categorised into sociolinguistic (to do with English skills, fluency and pronunciation), socio-political (to do with familiarity with Australian customs and perceived discrimination) and socioeconomic (to do with work/life/study balance and worry about financial problems) natures. Each category and each factor deserves attention to discover the underlying causal effect and effort to address such concerns.

On the whole, certainly from the point of the students, this research shows that the students' background as humanitarian entrants does not seem to significantly affect their adjustment to an Australian tertiary education setting. It appears that the program helps the integration process of the individual student interpreters, but it also makes an important contribution to improving communication between the refugee community and the wider community, although it seems that more positive intervention is needed to facilitate the students' 'social connection' on all fronts of 'social bonds' (with family and other members of their community), 'social bridge' (with other communities, including host community) and 'social links' (with the

structures of the host country) (Ager and Strang 2008). It is only when these student interpreters are socially connected and fully functional in all spheres of social networks that Australia can speak of what Putnam refers to as 'social capital' that is vital for a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society such as ours.

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