

SPECIAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION

# The language, literacy, and social integration of refugee children and youth

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During 2015, the Syrian civil war triggered a deluge of mass migration and asylum claims around the world. In Europe, Germany opened its borders to over a million refugees and bucked the trend of other countries in the region that turned people away. At the same time during the fall of that year, in the middle of an election cycle, the Canadian public was captured by striking images of the lifeless body of Alan Kurdi on the shores of a Turkish beach. This vividly awoke the country to a refugee crisis that had been brewing for years and brought the crisis home to many. Kurdi's story was the story of so many other families and young people. Consequently, the Canadian government launched a program to resettle thousands of Syrian refugees.

Globally, people were struck by how many families were seeking refuge and the number of refugees that were children and youth. Unicef, at the time, reported that nearly half of all refugees were children. The crisis sparked individuals, communities, business leaders, politicians, service provider organizations, and academics to act quickly to welcome unprecedented numbers of refugees in a short time and to work toward addressing the needs of this unprecedentedly large cohort of young refugees.

Caught by the gravity of the circumstances, researchers around the world pivoted their work to understand how to assure that the large cohort of refugee families, children, and youth would be well supported in their integration into their new host countries. Networks were also formed, such as the Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition, which funded the research in this Special Issue. It is a network of over a hundred researchers, policy makers, educators, and service providers in Canada and has collaborated with partners in Germany to offer comparable analysis of core issues affecting refugee children and youth. One of the key clusters in the coalition focuses on the oral language and literacy learning of refugee children and youth.

This focus is of particular importance because second language (L2) and literacy development are the gateway to successful educational outcomes, which affects the life course and opportunities that children and youth are offered. It also affects how well they will perform in the labor market and a whole series of social, cultural, and economic outcomes. At the same time, maintenance of the heritage first language (L1) is essential for family well-being and cohesion. Accordingly, the Language,

Literacy, and Learning cluster of Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition has researched the bilingual and biliteracy development of refugee children and youth and the cognitive, family, and social factors that promote success and pose challenges for this development. Research with recently arrived refugee children and youth is relevant to the field of bilingual development more broadly because the life experiences of refugee children and youth can be different from those of other populations of bilinguals, such as second-generation heritage speakers or students in an L2 immersion school program. For example, children from refugee backgrounds might experience adversity premigration due to violence and conflict, interrupted schooling, and time in refugee camps. These experiences, combined with the resettlement and acculturation processes in the host country, could impact their language and literacy learning and their overall developmental growth and well-being.

This special issue of *Applied Psycholinguistics* shares the findings of this cluster and reports on both English (L2) and Arabic (L1) acquisition of Syrian refugee children and youth in Canada. It also compares the bilingual development of children and youth in Canada to their counterparts in Germany, and then looks at the long-term aspirational, educational, social, and economic outcomes of refugee children and youth. Wherever relevant, the educational and clinical implications of the findings are brought forward.

The first set of papers in the issue looked at different aspects of oral language and literacy learning in the L1 and L2 in this population. Johanne Paradis and colleagues examined how environmental factors contribute to L1 and L2 development in school-age Syrian refugee children in Canada. These include the use of the L1 and L2 at home, parents' levels of education, and engagement in language-rich learning activities. These environmental factors were considered alongside age and cognitive factors. The authors found that proximal environmental factors, such as L2 use at home among siblings and the richness of L2 activities, had a positive impact on the L2 development of the children and youth, but parental factors had an impact on both their L1 and L2 development. These issues were probed further by the second paper in the issue, led by Redab Al Janaideh and her team. Their work explored English and Arabic language learning among Syrian refugee children resettled in Canada. They assessed word reading, vocabulary, oral narrative skills, and reading comprehension in both languages. In doing so, they demonstrated that the simple view of reading model was applicable in both languages.

The relationship between English L2 and Arabic L1 abilities was investigated further by the paper by Alexandra Gottardo's team. Their work focused on word reading as a fundamental building block of literacy. It explored phonological and morphological awareness skills in the heritage L1 and the societal L2, and in turn, their influence on word reading. These researchers found that phonological and morphological skills were predictive of word reading within each language, and learning an L2 was linked to the skills children and youth had in their L1. Andrea MacLeod and colleagues presented a qualitative study of three preschool-age Syrian refugee children. Interviews with their parents and teachers were conducted to triangulate the factors underlying their language learning. The researchers observed that the heritage L1 was vulnerable to delays and weaknesses, and that learning the language of school was a drawn-out process affected by parents' difficulties in communicating with teachers. Taken together, these papers

stress the need to consider the influence of heritage L1 skills in L2 development, challenges in acquiring the L2, as well as the role that parents and home language environments play in bilingual development.

Such issues were also examined in a direct comparison between Syrian children, youth, and their parents in the Canadian and the German context through the paper led by Katrin Lindner. Their paper compared the language learning and acculturation experiences of Syrian refugee families in Toronto and Munich 2 years after settlement. Through interviews, they analyzed parent and child language practices in their heritage L1 and societal L2. These authors found that religion, ethnic status in the home country, and immigration status in their new host country affected the language learning and acculturation processes. A comparison of first-generation, Arabic L1 refugee children and second-generation, Arabic heritage L1 children in Germany was conducted by Cornelia Hamann and colleagues. Through analyzing Arabic and German sentence repetition and nonword repetition, these researchers found differences in the relative strength of L1 and L2 abilities between the first- and second-generation bilingual children; the former had weaker L2 abilities and the two groups showed both similar and dissimilar abilities in the L1 depending on what language assessment measure was used. Like the paper by Paradis and colleagues in the Canadian context, Hamann and colleagues found that a combination of cognitive and environmental factors shaped the L1 and L2 development of the children in the German context.

The last set of papers in the Special Issue examined the broader social and economic contexts of refugee children, youth, and their families in Canada. The paper led by Sally Ogoe examined the difficulties refugees face in finding adequate housing. The researchers explored Yazidi and Syrian refugees' struggles in finding affordable housing and their satisfaction with the housing offered in the settlement process. Results showed that along the various steps, agency in decisions over types of housing and facilities offered was important in empowering refugee families and this had an impact on satisfaction and later integration in Canada. In a number of ways this study extends the impact of home environment on language learning reported in Paradis et al.'s paper. Reza Nakhaie's paper also extended findings of earlier papers that examined language proficiency and sociocultural integration of newcomers. It investigated language proficiency while taking into account the importance of the assimilation, cultural fit, and social networks of newcomers. Consistent with Ogoe et al.'s findings, Nakhaie points to the importance of agency in decisions and the key role of language proficiency in this process. This paper reveals how language proficiency impacts long-term acculturation and integration.

The long-term outcomes of refugee children and youth was the focus of the paper by Yoko Yoshida and Jonathan Amoyaw. This research examined the life course transitions of refugee children and youth in Canada, including when they entered the labor market and when they formed families. Using the Canadian Longitudinal Immigration Database, an administrative data set of landing and tax records, the researchers found minimal difference in the timing of refugee children and youth's entry into the labor market compared to those of other immigrant streams, but refugee children started families earlier. The researchers further reported that language proficiency and age at the time of arrival had robust impacts on later adulthood

transitions. The findings suggest language proficiency in the early years of settlement can have profound long-term implications.

Overall, the Special Issue offers unique insights into the bilingual and biliteracy development of children and youth from refugee backgrounds. To our knowledge, it is among the only set of papers to consider oral language and reading abilities, and the factors that underlie them, in bilingual children from this background. It is also among the first set of papers to look specifically at the language learning and acculturation trajectories of Syrian refugee children and youth. Furthermore, the Special Issue offers comparisons between Canada and Germany and explores the home environment and long-term effects of language skills on refugee children and youth's life trajectories. Finally, this collection of papers provides evidence of the interrelationships between the L1 and the L2 in bilingual development, and in so doing, highlights the importance of supporting maintenance of the heritage L1 in the context of learning a societal L2.