

# ▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

## Sudanese refugee learners: Classroom management strategies to address their English language needs

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▶ **SUDANESE HUMANITARIAN SETTLERS** are culturally and linguistically diverse. Many have been denied access to formal education because of years of conflict and poverty in their home country. Also, on arrival in Australia, many have a very low level of proficiency in English. This study sought to identify teacher interventions that were producing results for Sudanese refugee learners and to highlight areas where their needs were not being adequately met.

### ▶ Scope of the study

The study involved participants from New South Wales and Western Australia, with some input from Victoria via the project's advisory group. These three states have the highest intake of Sudanese refugee families in Australia. Data were gathered from specialist English language, literacy and numeracy teachers currently teaching Sudanese refugee learners and from non-teaching experts in refugee rehabilitation and resettlement, including representatives from Sudanese community organisations.

Refugees from Sudan come from a highly oral language culture, with most having no experience of using written forms of language. Those who do have some knowledge of reading and writing have gained this through the specialised use of a written language (mostly confined to replication of religious texts in Arabic). On arrival in Australia, all are unfamiliar with ways of operating in a culture that places a high premium on the written word.

Furthermore, Sudanese refugees face complex resettlement challenges. Most are making the transition to urban, industrialised life in Australia from a world of pastoral living in Sudan. They have experienced armed conflict and sometimes lengthy stays in refugee camps in Sudan or other African countries. Educational challenges and aspirations

are inextricably bound up with an array of other issues, in some instances including areas as basic as the use of the telephone, finding a job and establishing a household.

### ▶ Findings

#### *The learners*

The study found that the teachers considered their Sudanese refugee students to be keen and able to learn spoken English. The learners' motivation was usually to find work, although many of the Sudanese mothers wanted to learn English so they could assist their children with schoolwork. The experience of trauma did not appear to have a significant impact on their classroom behaviour or their ability to learn. The learners appeared resilient and had established informal support systems such as the mentoring of younger men by older men. Support from the Sudanese community was a key factor in assisting learners to deal with the stresses of the past and present. This was also seen in the students' enthusiasm for using English classes to build on existing social and community ties.

#### *Successful interventions*

Classroom management strategies were found to be very successful when the needs of the Sudanese learners coincided with those of other learners with a similar profile. Teachers were sensitive to the learners' background as refugees. They understood the resettlement issues their students were negotiating and had developed good strategies for introducing learners to the processes of formal education. They usually used whole-of-class instruction, with some group or pair work, thus accommodating learner preference for teacher-directed instruction, while introducing them to the less familiar learner-to-learner groupings.

In terms of institutional structures, teachers said they received help in meeting the needs of Sudanese refugee learners by having access to bilingual support and the services of counsellors, and opportunities to share strategies with colleagues.

## Problem areas

The learning needs of Sudanese refugees were inadequately addressed when teachers lacked specific knowledge of the learners' background in highly oral cultures. Teachers were attempting to teach English writing and reading to people with only a fragile grasp of how to speak it. This approach, dismissed in the literature as unsound, was frustrating for teachers and learners alike. Literacy development was being addressed even before learners' oral skills were substantially developed. In most cases this was because of contractual obligations to funding bodies: that all language and literacy skills be taught concurrently. In addition teachers were often constrained in the classroom by having Sudanese learners placed alongside learners from other backgrounds and with different needs, or different levels of the same needs; teachers were also hampered by having to comply with the standard teacher-to-learner ratio of 1:15.

While Sudanese community representatives consulted in the study wanted to see the linking of English language and literacy tuition with a practical skill area, very few teachers said they worked with vocational content, considering that it was perhaps too early to introduce people with very limited English proficiency to vocational learning. Recent initiatives in New South Wales and Western Australia, however, suggest that levels of English language may not be a barrier to vocational learning. In these pilots, gardening and childcare were the main sources of content for English language instruction.

Inadequate attention to numeracy in all stages of language and literacy tuition being offered to Sudanese refugees was a further problem area. In view of the importance of numeracy in everyday life and work and of mathematics in many fields of vocational and higher educational study, teachers may be disadvantaging their Sudanese learners by not explicitly teaching numeracy.

## Strategies

The study identifies a number of strategies to address the specific needs of Sudanese refugee learners. They relate to either professional development or institutional support.

Teachers would benefit from:

- familiarising themselves with the existing literature on successful interventions for Sudanese refugees and other learner groups with a similar profile
- exploring the nature of learners' background in a highly oral culture and the implications for program design and teaching
- developing skills to meet learners' specific needs in the acquisition of oral language skills, written language skills and numeracy skills
- identifying existing teaching resources and material that should be developed.

Institutional support could come in the form of:

- smaller class sizes for learners with limited formal education and limited English language skills (reducing the teacher-learner ratio from 1:15 to 1:10), and additional tuition hours for learners with high levels of need
- greater flexibility in program content, outcomes and patterns of delivery to more adequately respond to the needs of Sudanese and other learners characterised by very limited spoken English, little experience of literacy in any language, and limited formal education
- prioritising the development of oral language skills for learners with limited oral skills in English
- prioritising the development of written English skills for learners with more advanced spoken English language skills
- placing a stronger emphasis on teaching numeracy
- exploring (in consultation with representatives of the Sudanese community) initiatives that link English language, literacy and numeracy development to practical skill development, local employment opportunities or urgent settlement concerns
- exploring options for training/employing bilingual teachers from Sudan to assist with pre-literacy skill development (for example, fine motor skills for using writing implements, letter formation, and learning to write from left to right).

*Sudanese refugee learners: Classroom management strategies to address their English language needs* by Ursula Burgoyne and Oksana Hull can be downloaded from the NCVER website at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.

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