



English as access for Syrian refugee students in Türkiye

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ABSTRACT

Language proficiency enables migrants to participate in the host society, resist marginalization, and pursue future goals and identities. This is particularly important for refugees negotiating the acquisition and use of additional linguistic capital amidst socioeconomic exclusion and legal precarity. Even in asylum settings where English is not the official language, it can facilitate access to educational and employment opportunities. Based on findings from an ethnographic dissertation study conducted in Türkiye in 2020, this article examines the role of English proficiency for Syrian refugees studying in Turkish universities, namely how participants invested in and employed English proficiency in order to access higher education and work toward future goals and identities. Layered narrative analysis of in-depth interviews with 11 Syrian young adults revealed distinct strategies for gaining and leveraging English knowledge for personal, social, and academic purposes. The article provides insights into the meanings and utility of English as an international language in asylum settings and pushes back against deficit discourses regarding migration, language learning, and higher education access.

Keywords

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Introduction

Bourdieu's theory of capital (1977, 2004) emphasizes the significance of cultural capital, or the "knowledge, attitudes, and educational credentials highly prized within a specific social context" (Kanno & Varghese, 2010, p. 313). Cultural capital serves as a means to acquire symbolic capital, including economic assets and social networks (Skrobanek & Jobst, 2010). This is especially pertinent for migrants lacking proficiency in the dominant language of the host society, which is a crucial form of cultural capital necessary for accessing other resources (Hope, 2011). Migrants' existing cultural capital, including native language(s) and knowledge systems, diminishes in value in the new society, often due to assimilationist ideologies, policies, and practices in keeping with the dominant cultural and linguistic norms (Skrobanek & Jobst, 2010). This powerfully impacts settlement experiences for refugees negotiating the acquisition and use of additional linguistic repertoires amidst socioeconomic exclusion and legal precarity.

In this context, the traditional education system plays a pivotal role in perpetuating unequal access to resources, disadvantaging students from marginalized backgrounds whose cultural capital is less valued, thus constraining the accumulation of symbolic capital (Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Skrobanek & Jobst, 2010). In fact, research about education for refugees often focuses on the barriers to participation and success, such as language, culture, and

psychosocial factors (Aydin & Kaya, 2017; Windle & Miller, 2012) rather than on positive adaptation strategies and successes (Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Stevenson & Baker, 2018). Such persistent deficit-focused narratives feed into low expectations for refugee students among their instructors (Duran, 2016; He et al., 2017; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017) and overshadows their successes and contributions.

Educators and researchers adopting an asset-oriented approach (Rodriguez, 2019), on the other hand, are aware of the barriers refugee students face but actively seek out and utilize their strengths. They also recognize the rich reservoir of cultural, linguistic, and embodied capital these students bring into the learning environment and perceive challenges as opportunities for growth and innovation (He et al., 2017; Rodriguez, 2019). In this perspective, language acquisition enables migrants to participate in the host society, resist marginalization, and pursue future goals (Norton, 2013; Norton & Toohey, 2011). This is not limited to the national or dominant language of the society; even in asylum settings where English is not the official language, it can facilitate access to educational and employment opportunities (Karam et al., 2017). In this paper, I take an asset-based perspective to highlight how a group of refugee young adults invested in and employed English proficiency in order to access higher education and work toward future goals and identities.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

Identity

Language plays a significant part in ongoing identity construction (Norton, 2013; Weedon, 1987), particularly in migration contexts (Canagarajah & Silberstein, 2012; Duran, 2016). In contrast to second language acquisition theories which emphasize either personal or social factors, Bonny Norton's (2013) identity framework explores the interconnectedness between the language learner and the social environment. Drawing on Weedon's (1987) poststructuralist feminist theory of *social identity* or *subjectivity*, Norton (2013) defines identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 44). This definition embraces changes in self-concept (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Weedon, 1987), and Norton asserts that "identity is multiple, contradictory, and a site of struggle" (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 16). Importantly, identity is constructed within societal power dynamics and individuals' roles and relationships within the social world; however, individuals have agency to position themselves rather than passively adopting assigned roles (Darvin & Norton, 2015).

Poststructuralist linguists like Bakhtin (1981) emphasize that language is always situated within social contexts, where speakers create meaning and navigate access to speech communities. Likewise, Bourdieu (1977) viewed language as a social and political practice wherein a speaker's symbolic capital, rather than the content of their speech, distinguishes them as a "legitimate" or "illegitimate" speaker. Norton Peirce (1995, as cited in Heller, 1987) explains:

It is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to –or is denied access to – powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak. (p. 13)

As a result, even "good" language learners exhibit differing levels of motivation, effort, and confidence at various points in the learning process (Norton, 2013). However, learners can adopt alternative identities, resist marginalization, and assert their right to speak in and through the new language (Kramsch, 2013).

Refugees possess significant cultural capital, such as previous education and familiarity with their home countries' educational systems as well as language skills and future ambitions. However, these often go unnoticed or are undervalued by the host community, leading to a disconnect with how refugees perceive themselves (Morrice, 2013). For instance, subtractive bilingualism policies encourage immigrant children to assimilate to the dominant language at without maintaining their home language (Flagler, 2019). Policymakers and academics often use the term "integration" to assess how well immigrants and refugees are economically and socially incorporated into the host country's community life (Ager & Strang, 2008). Unlike assimilation, integration does not suggest that newcomers must adapt at the cost of their own cultures or languages, though the term itself remains vaguely defined (Ager & Strang, 2008; Marlowe, 2018). Additionally, in asylum contexts, this concept does not fully capture the complex legal, social, and other challenges refugees face. Often, asylum seekers become "integrated" despite the lack of support from local authorities and community members (Hovil, 2014).

In many contemporary migration destinations, such as in Italy, migrants must prove a certain proficiency level on a language exam to maintain residency or apply for citizenship (Love, 2015). Since the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the national identity has explicitly centered a monolingual, monocultural ideology intended to unify disparate ethnic and religious groups after the fall of the Ottoman Empire (Bayar, 2011; Hauber-Özer & Özer, 2021). This mindset has been embedded in migration policies, prioritizing immigration of Turkic peoples from Europe, the former USSR, and Central Asia, and eventually in educational policy, banning the use of minority languages such as Kurdish in public schools (Hauber-Özer & Özer, 2021; Özkırımlı, 2014). The approach to Syrian migration, however, has been markedly different, as discussed in a later section.

Particularly for adult migrants, identity is complex, evolving over time as they integrate elements from their past and envision possibilities for the future (Duran, 2016; Norton, 2013). This process offers an opportunity for self-reinvention, allowing refugees to pursue new identities free from the constraints of their home society. These potential or envisioned future identities can strongly influence individuals' actions towards achieving their goals, such as obtaining a university degree (Stevenson, 2019). However, individuals need to believe they have the power to change their circumstances and work toward their goals despite facing systemic barriers (Stevenson, 2019). Many young adult refugees find themselves adopting a mindset focused solely on survival, relinquishing their aspirations due to the multitude of challenges they encounter. This is because personal experiences are shaped by the broader societal opportunities and limitations that either enable or hinder the realization of one's envisioned "possible self" (Stevenson, 2019, p. 143). Essentially, their circumstances hinder their ability to pursue higher education or skilled employment.

Investment

Norton (2013) also criticizes theories that oversimplify language learning, attributing slow progress to a deficiency in motivation while neglecting power dynamics in interactions between learners and target language speakers. While the concept of motivation has been influential in second language acquisition theory (e.g., Dörnyei, 2001; Krashen, 1981), it has often neglected a critical perspective on the power dynamics that shape a learner's language development. Additionally, motivation is commonly perceived as an inherent, unchanging trait that a learner either possesses or lacks (Norton Peirce, 1995). Informed by Bourdieu's theories of capital (1977, 2004), Norton introduced the concept of *investment*, which considers the relationships of second language learners with their social and structural contexts (Norton, 2013; Norton Peirce, 1995).

Learning the dominant language of the host society grants immigrants increased symbolic capital and access to material resources, thereby enhancing their cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Norton, 2013). Consequently, it is often assumed that second language learners are primarily driven by instrumental (e.g., employment or educational opportunities) or integrative (e.g., social integration) goals (Norton Peirce, 1995). However, Norton argues that contextual factors, especially power dynamics in society, interact with affective factors to create a multifaceted, fluid dynamic that either supports or hinders one's dedication to learning over time (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Norton Peirce, 1995). This model, in other words, considers the impact of the learner's personal goals and the sociocultural context in supporting or impeding investment in learning. I turn now to the geopolitical context within which I examined refugee students' processes of investment in language learning and higher education.

Methodology

Study Context

Türkiye hosts the largest number of refugees of any country in the world (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2024), including over 3.6 million Syrians under temporary protection status following the outbreak of civil war in 2011 (Directorate General of Migration Management [DGMM], 2023). The Turkish Council on Higher Education (CoHE) provided a pathway to higher education very early in the displacement period, starting with non-degree options at seven universities in the southeastern region bordering Syria, where most Syrians under temporary protection were located (Ergin, 2016; Sezgin & Yolcu, 2016). A year later, a limited number of scholarships supported by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities were announced, alongside plans for official transfer procedures for refugee students who had initiated their studies in their home countries, and provisions for those lacking official transcripts (Ergin, 2016). Additionally, various scholarships funded by the European Union (HOPES, 2019), the government of Germany (UNHCR, 2019), and non-governmental organizations such as the Karam Foundation (2019) and SPARK (2019) were made available to Syrians in subsequent years. These initiatives provided financial support for thousands of students to participate in preparatory language courses and university studies. As a result, about 37 000 Syrian individuals (constituting 7.5% of Syrian young adults residing in Türkiye) were registered in Turkish universities at the time of this study in 2020 (CoHE, 2020). This enrollment rate surpassed the global average for refugees in higher education at that time, indicating a positive trend towards integration (UNHCR, 2019).

Nonetheless, Syrian young adults who successfully entered Turkish universities encountered persistent challenges, including limited proficiency in the Turkish language, financial strain, and experiences of discrimination (Akbasli & Mavi, 2019; Hohberger, 2018; Kozikoğlu & Aslan, 2018). In fact, this was the first integrated educational experience for many. Syrian children and youth were educated separately in Arabic-medium temporary education centers or in separate shifts at local schools before being gradually integrated into Turkish schools starting in 2016 (Aydin et al., 2019; Tezel McCarthy, 2018). As a result, they had limited instruction in and exposure to the Turkish language during secondary schooling, and post-secondary Turkish language courses were often either inaccessible or insufficient to adequately prepare students for the academic and social demands of university (Akbasli & Mavi, 2019; Hohberger, 2018; Kozikoğlu & Aslan, 2018). In this challenging context, it is important to understand what factors contribute to the development of positive identities and investment in university and long-term goals.

This paper is drawn from a larger ethnographic study examining the experiences of a group of Syrian young adults living under temporary protection and enrolled in Turkish universities, their strategies for overcoming barriers, and the ways they envision and pursue their future goals and identities through education. Here, I focus on how participants invested in and drew on English proficiency in order to access higher education, form relationships, and work toward future goals and identities.

Research Design

As a former English as a second language educator from the United States living in Türkiye while completing my doctoral degree, my primary goal was to contribute to the development of more equitable educational pathways for refugee students. I aimed to use my position as an insider-outsider scholar (Hauber-Özer, 2019) and my personal and professional knowledge of second language acquisition and migration to produce valuable new insights. In order to document Syrian young adults' experiences, I utilized advocacy ethnography (Smyth & McInerney, 2013), a blend of critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996; Madison, 2005) and narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008), to capture how participants navigated various social, linguistic, and structural challenges in their efforts to invest in language learning and pursue long-term educational and professional goals. This critical and reflective qualitative research methodology sheds light on the intricate and complex processes of learning and identity formation among immigrants, situated within broader power dynamics and socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts (Norton & Toohey, 2011). By positioning the refugee as a subject rather than an object of study and focusing on their experiences and knowledge, I sought to challenge deficit-oriented perspectives and colonial practices in educational and migration research (Patel, 2016; Spivak, 1998; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). I adopted an explicitly asset-based approach, highlighting positive coping strategies and successes instead of solely focusing on the well-documented barriers that often hinder the academic pursuits of displaced youth.

Participants

The study involved 11 Syrian young adults residing in Türkiye under temporary protection who were current university students or recent graduates (demographic data listed in Table 1 in order of participation). I recruited them through my personal network and that of a Syrian key informant, Samar, whom I knew previously and who worked as my research assistant during the project. With Samar's recommendations, I selected participants purposefully to capture a broad spectrum of experiences. Participants were enrolled in their second, third, or fourth year across various majors in multiple universities across southern and eastern Türkiye, with one recent graduate and one enrolled in a Master of Business Administration program. They predominantly came from the Aleppo region, with a few from Idlib and one from Latakia, and their ages ranged from 20 to 27 (two did not provide their ages), and their arrival in Türkiye spanned from 2012 to 2015. Gender distribution was relatively balanced, with six identifying as male and five as female, and I had prior acquaintance with Samar and one other participant, Zehra, through university engagements before the study began.

Table 1. Participant Information

Pseudonym	Age	Hometown	Year of arrival	Province of study	Department	Year in school
Samar*	23	Aleppo	2013	Osmaniye	Political Science and Public Administration	4
John*	20	Aleppo	2014	Osmaniye	Electrical-Electronic Engineering	2
Azzam	25	Latakia	2012	Osmaniye	Electrical-Electronic Engineering	4
Nasir	27	Aleppo	2014	Gaziantep	Turkish language	3
Sophia*	22	Aleppo	2013	Trabzon	Journalism	3
Steve*	26	Aleppo	2015	Osmaniye	Economics	4
Zehra*	-	Idlib	2012	Hatay	Economics	4
Aynur	21	-	2013	Gümüşhane	Civil Engineering	2
Muallim	24	Aleppo	2013	Osmaniye	Energy Systems Engineering	Graduate
Maqsood*	-	Idlib	2014	İstanbul	MBA	n/a
Leyla	21	-	2013	Karaman	Mathematics	3

Data Collection

Utilizing a modified version of Carspecken's (1996) five-stage approach to critical ethnography (adjusted to fit virtual constraints imposed by COVID-19 measures) I gathered multilingual, multimodal data during the spring and summer of 2020. This involved three phases: a questionnaire, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and photovoice workshops (Wang & Burris, 1994) to explore and comprehend participants' experiences, learning trajectories, and identity evolution. The questionnaire was primarily used as a recruitment tool to identify participants with a variety of experiences and to tailor the interview questions. Open-ended items covered demographic characteristics and educational backgrounds (e.g., type of high school and/or Turkish language course attended). It also included three sets of Likert-type questions (adapted from Kozikoğlu & Aslan, 2018), in which participants rated their confidence and proficiency in Turkish, sources of support they had received in their studies, and social relations. The questionnaire concluded with an optional section to provide contact information and indicate interest in participating in the subsequent phases of the study.

Of the 42 participants who completed the questionnaire, 20 indicated interest in the interview phase, and I identified eight of them in collaboration with Samar to complete interviews along with Samar herself and two additional contacts who opted not to complete the questionnaire (Zehra and Maqsood). Seven interview participants agreed to participate in the third phase of data collection, photovoice workshops, as well. Participants were offered the option to engage in each research activity in Turkish, English, or Arabic, with the majority opting for Turkish or English (interviews conducted mainly in English are marked with an asterisk in Table 1). Samar served as an interpreter for the one interview conducted in Arabic and translated Arabic questionnaire responses and photovoice texts due to my limited proficiency in the language. As English was not addressed in the questionnaire, only relevant

background information from the questionnaire is included in this manuscript. Likewise, the photovoice workshops did not directly relate to English learning or use, so photovoice products have been omitted from this analysis, which is described below.

Data Analysis

I analyzed interview data collaboratively with Samar, employing layered ethnographic and narrative inquiry techniques (Carspecken, 1996; Riessman, 2008). Except for the Arabic interview, we completed analysis in the original language to preserve participants' voices and cultural nuances as much as possible. First, I conducted meaning field and reconstructive horizon analysis (Carspecken, 1996; see Call-Cummings et al., 2020 for an example) to increase intersubjective understanding and uncover subtle meanings. Then, I conducted thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), beginning with open coding to identify both emic meanings and etic concepts, resulting in 804 unique codes that I categorized into eight thematic groups. Samar utilized the code system I had developed to code the transcripts separately, and I reconciled the few disparities with deference to Samar's insider perspective.

Through this layered analysis, I identified a common narrative arc in participants' experiences as they traversed distinct stages in their educational and personal journeys. In the dissertation, I constructed an individual narrative portrait (Smyth & McInerney, 2013) from each participant's questionnaire, interview, and photovoice data (see Hauber-Özer, 2023 for an example). I translated these narratives into English when incorporating them into the dissertation findings, and my husband, a native speaker of Turkish, checked my translations for accuracy. Although English acquisition was not a focus of the study, I discovered intriguing patterns regarding its importance in participants' experiences. In this following section, I present thematic findings on the strategies participants employed to invest in English proficiency and the ways they used this linguistic capital to gain other forms of cultural capital.

Findings

Learning Strategies

Participants enacted a variety of strategies to acquire English through formal, non-formal, and independent means. Maqsood and Zehra both learned English during their formal education in Syria. Maqsood completed a bachelor's degree in English language at the University of Aleppo and taught English in Syria prior to the war. Zehra, whose degree in economics at Idlib University was interrupted by conflict, perceived general English proficiency to be higher in pre-war Syria than Türkiye. She explained:

My English was much better from [my Turkish classmates] because, you know, in Syria we learn English in school, in universities, in courses, and the situation is not like in Türkiye, you know. In Türkiye no one [speaks English], but in Syria it was different.

Samar and Sophia each pursued English proficiency through non-formal opportunities. In fact, I first met Samar the year before I began my research, when I was helping with a weekly English conversation club started by my husband, a lecturer at Samar's university in Osmaniye. She participated consistently and eagerly. Her younger sister Sophia, who was 14 when their family sought refuge in Hatay, took advantage of courses offered by a non-governmental organization (NGO):

Well, there is a foundation here for Syrians. And yeah, I got supported by them, and they are so nice people. I managed to get the course and then they pay for my exams, and I got certificate for English. So they did a really good job with that. Yeah, they are supporters, really supportive. It's so much beautiful, nice activities and really helpful.

Sophia even completed a TOEFL course through the foundation to improve her English at a more advanced level. Along with material support, the positive social environment at the NGO seemed to sustain her efforts in language learning.

In addition, participants engaged with a variety of media resources to learn English independently. Prior to enrolling in NGO courses, Sophia had invested in English learning on her own, as she explained, "At 14, I started to watch TV shows, old TV shows like *iCarly* and *Drake & Josh*. All like that. So, I started to watch them, two hours daily for three months and started to understand and speak." Sophia sought out available resources and created an intentional practice to improve her comprehension and production of English. Steve, who also opted to complete his interview in English, stated that his English used to be better before he started learning Turkish. He shared that he was currently working to improve his English and then intended to learn other languages but did not elaborate on his strategies. John, who described himself as an introvert with a close circle of friends who loves to learn and develop himself, saw the bright side of COVID-19 lockdowns as more time to spend on independent learning. When I commented on his fluent English during his interview, he explained modestly, "I don't think my English is really good, but I learned by myself, like watching movies and playing online video games with strangers from other countries more, and that's it. So, I don't have that academical English." Learning English informally through use of available media and online interactions proved an effective strategy for John as well.

Language Use

Participants described using their English skills to invest in building relationships, accessing academic knowledge, and obtaining employment. Zehra, Samar, and Sophia described the ways that English opened doors to interactions with both students and faculty. Zehra drew on her existing English proficiency to make friends with Romanian students who were at her university in Hatay through the Erasmus+ exchange program, which in turn helped her improve her English. Samar's Turkish classmates asked her for advice about and help learning English, which enabled her to build relationships with them. However, although she believed her classmates saw her as a successful person, as evidenced by their requests for help with English, Samar could not develop deep friendships with them due to what she perceived as a lack of interest. This tepid social environment prevented her from engaging more deeply with peers through the vehicle of English. In contrast, Sophia established an informal mentoring relationship with her English professor because of the connection between foreign language knowledge and intercultural competence. She explained, "He was so supportive... He travels a lot, and he saw how much people are different with culture and communication. And he could understand me so much, so I go straight to him and talk about everything." In other words, Sophia perceived her professor's multilingualism as contributing to a more open-minded outlook and supportive relationship.

Participants employed their linguistic capital in English to access new knowledge in a variety of ways. In Aynur's perspective, English helped her learn Turkish prior to university. She attended two Turkish courses in Hatay (where there is historically a large ethnically Arab

population) without seeing much progress before finding an effective instructional environment:

Because the teachers knew Arabic, and for this reason, no Turkish is spoken in class. I couldn't learn anything. Then a language scholarship came out. Do you know the Turkish Scholarships [Türk Bursları]? So, I won that and then took a private course. My teacher was from Ankara; he speaks both English and Turkish. That's how I learned.

Interestingly, Aynur saw her native language being used in Turkish class as a detriment to learning and preferred instruction mediated by English.

As a former English teacher working for an NGO in Türkiye, Maqsood bypassed Turkish acquisition by opting to pursue his master's in business administration in a low-residency English-medium program at a private (foundation) university in Istanbul. Because he was working full-time and supporting a young family, Maqsood had not had time to devote to learning Turkish, and his bachelor's degree in English exempted him from providing certification of language proficiency for admission. He clarified his decision as follows:

My program is in English. It's hard to do it in Turkish – no way. Because right now the topics I'm studying right now, I love it because I'm getting a big amount of knowledge, you see? Like, you know, we are studying marketing or about research methods either the first one or the second one, or international finance, you know? The medium in English is hard somehow for us, I know, and so what if you wanted to learn it in Turkish? So, and not only that, you need to do a lot of research. So, it's a hard process do it in Turkish. I will not say it's hard, but right now, like I'm not comfortable right now to turn my [program] version from English to Turkish.

Maqsood employed his existing symbolic capital, English proficiency, to earn additional symbolic capital, an MBA. In fact, this program was his second choice, prompted by three rejections from Gaziantep University, which he ascribed to discrimination against Syrians in favor of international students applying from outside of Türkiye.

While studying at Turkish-medium public universities, Zehra, Aynur, John, and Muallim all reported that their university professors offered scaffolding (Bruner, 1986) and instructional accommodations using English, such as defining unfamiliar words or explaining difficult concepts in English during a lecture. Additionally, Zehra, Aynur, and Muallim mentioned that their professors allowed Syrian and other international students to write assignments in English. Muallim described one such situation early in his studies:

I went to see a professor. It was a verbal class [not math or science]. I had a lot of problems in verbal classes. I went and said to the professor, "I'm a foreigner, and I'm having a hard time in this class." He asked, "Where are you from?" "I'm Syrian," I said. He said, "Ah, I didn't know about you. If I had known, I would have let you write in Arabic if I had known, but if you know English you can write in English if you don't know something. It won't be a problem." I even had a friend who was a foreigner too, African. He knows English; it's his native language anyway. He said, "Okay, you can write in English." All our professors were good about this.

Aynur's professor offered for her to complete projects in place of exams while she was still developing her Turkish proficiency:

In my first semester, my mid-term grade wasn't very high. One day, I told the professor that my Turkish wasn't very good, and I didn't understand the [exam] question. He said, "Okay, then do a project." I did two projects. Yes, after that I went and explained in English. Yeah, the first semester was a little difficult, but my project grade was high.

Through this combination of student investment and instructor scaffolding strategies, participants employed their English proficiency to acquire additional cultural capital.

Several participants drew on their linguistic capital to access economic capital. Sophia simultaneously drew on and increased her skills to support herself financially during university by working as a language tutor:

I gave a lesson for high school students, and I gave Turkish lessons and English lessons, yeah, just for myself there. And it was fun. I mean, in the same time you work on yourself, and you just learn, and in the same time, you teach. It was a challenge for me.

Even though it was challenging, Sophia found tutoring valuable to enhance her own learning. Maqsood used both English and Arabic professionally, because “the surrounding environment of me in my work, it’s either like foreigners in the world of NGOs or Syrians.” Maqsood believed that “the idea of linguistic capacity helped me a lot in my career with management in NGOs. Like, I am able to understand easier than others, and also, I am able to participate actively in different ways than others.” In other words, he recognized that his cultural capital as a multilingual person facilitated his career beyond the exchange of information to a broader communicative competence.

Moreover, English held symbolic value for future aspirations and mobility beyond the constraints of displacement. For instance, Sophia shared the reasons for her interest in English as a teenager: “Everything is working out in this language, and it was some computers, some musicians. Without English, you can't even succeed in your life.” Here, she appealed to the instrumental value of English in a globalized world, regardless of migration status. Samar planned to pursue a career in the diplomatic sector using her language skills and guided by her personal values, as she explained, “I’m in love with helping people and be an active person in the society. And I believe that this is our responsibility as a human, helping people and constructing the earth.” Acknowledging that safe repatriation to Syria was impossible for their families, Muallim and Maqsood both dreamed of completing graduate school abroad in the United Kingdom or North America, while Samar and Zehra envisioned emigrating to a third country, and others hoped to give back to both their home and host countries through careers in teaching, humanitarian work, and public service. These dreams both reflect and constitute their multilingual, transnational identities.

Discussion & Implications

These findings provide insights into the meanings and utility of English as an international language in asylum settings through the experiences of a group of Syrian university students in Türkiye. Their approaches to acquiring and using English demonstrate Norton’s (2013) concept of investment, which involves the interplay of various intricate and changing emotional and structural elements that either drive or hinder a migrant’s dedication to learning at different times. According to Norton (2013), the migrant’s identity plays an important role in this process, and all 11 participants portrayed themselves, either directly or indirectly, as persistent, diligent, and focused on their goals, which enabled them to overcome language barriers and succeed in their studies by dedicating significant time and effort. Participants actively acquired English through various means, from formal classes to self-study using media. They saw themselves as agents in their own learning, which supported the pursuit of their future identities and goals (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Stevenson, 2019). In these ways, they participated in their new society, resisted economic and social marginalization, and envisioned and inhabited new identities by investing in and employing English (Kramsch, 2013; Norton, 2013).

In a largely monolingual (Bayar, 2011; Hauber-Özer & Özer, 2021) and unequal social context, English proficiency imparted cultural capital. This capital paid off in numerous ways,

facilitating relationships with fellow students and faculty members, Turkish language acquisition, and content learning. These young adults also strategically used English to obtain employment, whether giving private lessons, contributing to the mission of a non-governmental organization, or preparing for a career in diplomatic services. All of these strategies demonstrate the exchange of cultural capital for symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 2004) of value in their new environment, including educational qualifications, economic resources, and social connections (Skrobanek & Jobst, 2010). Crucially, however, the willingness of host community members – classmates, professors, and employers – to engage with participants through English mediated the success of these strategies to some extent, reinforcing the role of the social context (Bakhtin, 1981; Norton, 2013). Their investment was sustained by warm and welcoming environments, as in Sophia’s NGO classes, and somewhat impeded by distant or hostile environments, like Samar’s classmates and the public university officials in Maqsood’s experience. In Norton’s (2013) terms, participants’ uses of English exhibit the role of social dynamics in language learning (Bakhtin, 1981).

Implications of these findings include insights for instructors teaching recently arrived refugees or other immigrant students who are in the process of acquiring the language of instruction. Given the ubiquity of English, refugee students are likely to have some proficiency in the language or another regional *lingua franca* such as French, Arabic, or Spanish. In the examples provided by these participants, university professors’ efforts to scaffold understanding of content (Bruner, 1986) and their flexibility in allowing the use of English empowered students to overcome the language barrier, develop confidence, and ultimately excel academically. Consciously or not, these educators adopted a critical pedagogical approach that acknowledged students’ linguistic capital and facilitated collaborative knowledge construction with the instructor through various types of translanguaging (García & Wei, 2015). Instructors who know one of migrant students’ languages can offer similar types of supports and accommodations. From an administrative perspective, it would be beneficial for instructors to receive professional development workshops focusing on these asset-oriented instructional strategies (Rodriguez, 2019) to foster a more welcoming and productive learning environment for displaced students.

Conclusion & Future Directions

As this paper is drawn from a small-scale qualitative study that used purposeful recruitment of participants rather than a representative sample, it is not intended to present generalizable findings. Instead, it offers nuanced insights from a group of individuals with lived experience of forced migration, language learning, and higher education access despite numerous intersecting challenges. Furthermore, the findings presented here were not the focus of the original study but surfaced during the analysis process. Regardless, they indicate simple steps that instructors can take to foster learning and positive identity development. They also challenge deficit discourses regarding migration, language learning, and higher education by positioning refugee students as goal-oriented, knowledgeable, and successful.

In a broader context, this study addresses the underrepresentation of refugee perspectives and indicates pertinent areas for future exploration amidst unprecedented forced migration globally (UNHCR, 2024). To add to our body of knowledge about this phenomenon, further research is needed which documents refugees’ strategies for investment in social, cultural, and linguistic capital as well as effective instructional approaches for supporting this process.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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