



# Perceptions of settlement well-being, language proficiency, and employment: An investigation of immigrant adult language learners in Australia<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Second language (L2) learning and settlement in a new country are inextricably intertwined. This relationship varies across individuals who go through differing experiences across times, contexts and circumstances. One of the indicators of this relationship is the progress/success or lack thereof in L2 learning and how it impacts on one's perception of settlement. This study explores the settlement experiences of 46 adult immigrant learners of English from three first language (L1) backgrounds: Mandarin, Arabic, and Vietnamese. All were undertaking English language study in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) at the time of investigation. Data were collected at two stages over a 1-year period and consisted of audio-recordings, transcripts, and field notes of semi-structured interviews. There was a significant positive relationship between proficiency gains and change in perception of well-being, indicating that the greater the extent of progress in proficiency, the more likely the perception of well-being increases. Findings also suggest that learners' employment status had no effect on their perceptions of either settlement satisfaction or progress in L2. Qualitative analysis of data revealed that immigrants' perception of their own language skills and settlement well-being impacted on their perception and process of L2 learning. While employment per se was not necessarily conducive to settlement well-being, the attainment of a job played a role in settlement and the L2 learning process in two ways: (1) by helping identify the requirements of L2 skills for the particular job, and (2) by facilitating their plans to attain a better job.

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## 1. Introduction

A major tenet of Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs is that lower level needs (e.g., hunger, thirst, safety) must be satisfied before higher level needs (e.g., closeness, sense of belonging and affiliation with other people). This hierarchical model can be applied to the context of recently arrived immigrants in Australia. Higher level needs such as closeness, sense of belonging and affiliation with other people can be interpreted as settlement success, while lower level needs such as hunger, thirst, and safety can be interpreted as having a job and an adequate income stream (a steady income will take care of basic necessities of life such as the purchase of food, the payment of rent, etc.). Taken together, it seems reasonable to suggest that immigrants' higher level needs of settlement success cannot be satisfied until their lower level needs are taken care of. That is, if an

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immigrant lacks a job and has limited access to funds then it is likely that she/he is not in a position to fulfil higher level needs and feel settled in her/his host community.

For example, in a study of 42 immigrant Somali women in Australia, McMichael and Manderson (2004) found that a lack of employment opportunities meant immigrants were completely dependent on a small living allowance provided by the government (fortnightly unemployment benefit payments). Such a living allowance covered only the most rudimentary living expenses and prohibited expenditure on more socially oriented activities. Consequently, many Somali women were isolated in their homes and were completely devoid of any support networks or social engagement. Not surprisingly, there was a high rate of depression among Somali immigrants. In other words, as the Somali women were unable to attend to their low level needs (attain a suitable income) they were unable to fulfil their higher level needs (e.g., affiliations with other people, sense of belonging in the community).

One of the greatest challenges immigrants face in respect to satisfying the lower level needs of attaining a job concerns their ability (or lack thereof) to speak the target language (TL), that is, the language of their host country. Without TL skills, immigrants face significant barriers to economic and social success. In countries where English is spoken, requirements for a high level of English language proficiency, or what is perceived as 'functional', acts as the gatekeeper to employment (Bloch, 2002; Valtonen, 2004; Wooden, 1994), and further education such as Technical and Further Education (TAFE) in the case of Australia and other tertiary education (Baker & Wooden, 1991; VandenHeuvel & Wooden, 1996). Attainment of English language proficiency is also important in fulfilling higher level needs such as desire for achievement or independence in these countries where English is the language of academic achievement, professional work and general social interaction (Smolicz & Secombe, 2003).

Hence, English language proficiency arguably provides the major route to immigrants' happiness in Australia. In order to either procure a job or gain entrance into further education to facilitate employment prospects, an immigrant needs to have or to develop a high level of English language proficiency upon arrival in Australia. Attainment of a job and a steady income then enables immigrants to fulfil their higher level needs and increase opportunities to engage in Australian society and experience settlement well-being and happiness. In a nutshell, an immigrant's English language proficiency, his/her feeling of well-being, and employment are inextricably intertwined with each other.

Even though prior studies have investigated immigrants' settlement satisfaction in regard to their employment and/or language proficiency (e.g., Beiser & Hou, 2001; Chiswick, Lee, & Miller, 2002; Colic-Peisker, 2009; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007; Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2008), few empirical studies have explored these issues within the specific context of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) in Australia (for details of the AMEP, see Ehrich, Kim, & Ficorilli, 2010; Murray & McPherson, 2006). For example, prior AMEP research has mostly focused on aspects of teaching (e.g., Burns, 1996, 2003; Burns & De Silva Joyce, 2006; Burns & Hood, 1995; Murray & McPherson, 2006), curriculum (e.g., Brindley, 2000; Brindley & Slatyer, 2002), or settlement issues of immigrants (e.g., Colic-Peisker, 2009; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007). While most research on immigrants has been conducted from a qualitative perspective (see Mathews-Aydinli, 2008), few AMEP studies have investigated the relationships between immigrant well-being and happiness in relation to settlement, English language proficiency and employment attainment (or lack thereof), from either quantitative or qualitative approaches. In order to fill this gap in the research, we explored the relationships between perceptions of settlement well-being, progress in English language proficiency and perceptions thereof, and employment attainment of adult immigrant language learners by adopting a mixed-method approach (Bazeley, 2009, see also Chi, 1997) drawing from a larger AMEP project. Each key variable will be discussed in turn.

### 1.1. Perceptions of settlement well-being

Immigrants' happiness and well-being in Australia constitutes a complex issue which may be contingent on a host of inter-related variables such as health, job satisfaction, financial success, social support, adaptation, Australian networks and acculturation (Colic-Peisker, 2009). Some previous studies suggested a positive relationship between job and life satisfaction (e.g., Judge & Watanabe, 1993), and others found factors other than employment status also affected the feeling of well-being among immigrants and refugees (Fozdar & Torezani, 2008). Furthermore, settlement satisfaction may differ from one group of immigrants to another. For example, Colic-Peisker (2009) found that in terms of overall life satisfaction, social networks were a major predictor of African immigrants' happiness in Australian society, whereas for Bosnians, job satisfaction was more important. Moreover, psychological research suggests that states of happiness vary across cultures (Inglehart, 1991) and between individuals (Myers, 2000). In light of this, and given the great cultural diversity of immigrants in the AMEP (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007), we feel it best to investigate settlement well-being and happiness from the immigrant's point of view and take an emic view of immigrants' settlement happiness. While prior studies have investigated immigrants' settlement satisfaction from such perspectives (i.e., Colic-Peisker, 2009; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007), this has not been explored sufficiently in relation to immigrants' English language proficiency in the context of the AMEP.

### 1.2. English language proficiency

The policy of the AMEP has been to focus on the development of English language competencies related to living and settling in Australia. The focus here is not on English proficiency per se and is more in line with the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). The curriculum used is the Certificate in Written and Spoken English (CSWE), which involves task-based

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