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Citation

MAJOR, George, TERRASCHKE, Agnes, MAJOR, Emily, & SETIJADI, Charlotte.(2014). Working it out: Migrants' perspectives of social inclusion in the workplace. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 37(3), 249-261.

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Working it out: Migrants' perspectives of social inclusion in the workplace

WORKING IT OUT: MIGRANTS' PERSPECTIVES OF SOCIAL INCLUSION IN THE WORKPLACE

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This paper explores the concept of social inclusion from the perspective of recent migrants, from language backgrounds other than English, at work in Australia. We adopt an understanding of social inclusion that acknowledges the importance of economic independence, while also considering migrants' feelings of connectedness at work and their sense of belonging. Based on qualitative interviews with migrants collected two years apart, we explore the ways language and language practices can lead to feelings of inclusion or exclusion at work. The data suggests that migrants who felt included at work often had colleagues and/or bosses who actively supported and encouraged them in learning new skills, and made an effort to connect with them through small talk. In contrast, participants who felt excluded were unable to fully participate in work activities and/or workplace interaction because of limitations they or others placed upon them based on their English proficiency. We suggest that social inclusion, as it relates to employment, can also encompass different things for different people. For some, a sense of belonging is not promoted solely by having work or the ability to connect with colleagues, but also by obtaining employment of a type and level commensurate with their pre-migration status.

KEY WORDS: migrants, employment, language learning, workplace communication

INTRODUCTION

Employment is commonly considered to be the key factor in the successful settlement of migrants as it represents a gateway not only to economic independence but also to the development of social connections and ongoing language learning within the wider community (Bloch, 2000; Yates, 2011). However, migrants' difficulties with finding appropriate employment have been well attested (Chiswick, Lee, & Miller, 2003; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Duff, Wong, & Early, 2000; Syed & Murray, 2009), and those who do succeed in finding work outside their own ethnic community are often faced with the challenge of negotiating a new set of linguistic conventions and socio-pragmatic norms specific to their workplace, all the while continuing to develop skills in the new language

(Holmes & Riddiford, 2011; Li, 2000). In this paper we seek to explore how language and language practices at work affect migrants' feelings of social inclusion or exclusion by examining interviews with recent migrants who have been successful in finding work in Australia. In addition to discussing participants' experiences of using English at work, we consider how day-to-day workplace communication and prospects for language development and vocational advancement can affect participants' sense of settlement over time.

BACKGROUND

According to Piller and Takahashi (2011), the often fuzzy concept of 'social inclusion' has grown into a political buzzword in recent decades, and at its core it tends to encompass the goal of improving the economic wellbeing of socially marginalised groups, particularly in terms of entry into the workforce. Scholars and policy makers often view employment as central to the successful settlement of migrants (Colic-Peisker, 2005, 2009; Valtonen, 2004). This perspective is also evident in the settlement framework of Australia (Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIAC], 2011), which lists employment as one of the key settlement indicators along with social participation, personal wellbeing, independence and life satisfaction. Indeed, settlement success is often measured by employment, particularly by host country governments who view settlement through a 'lens of economic rationality' (Richardson et al., 2004).

The notion of social inclusion can also be used more broadly to include access to social services and general social participation (Piller & Takahashi, 2011) as well as a subjective sense of connectedness and belonging (Butorac, this volume; Crisp, 2010; Musgrave & Bradshaw, this volume; Yates, 2011). Using this latter approach, Yates (2011), whose dataset was drawn from the same large study as the dataset used in the current paper, examined migrants' social networks and their ability to use English to socialise and connect with others. Yates draws a distinction between settlement success measured solely in terms of economic standards and that which encompasses other, less tangible, aspects of social inclusion, suggesting that while participants in the case studies could well be considered to have achieved economic success in Australia, their ability to engage and establish links with the English-speaking community was arguably much less successful.

In addition to providing economic independence for migrants, employment can also mean an opportunity to engage with members of the host community and learn the target language (Bloch, 2000; Derwing, Munro, & Thomson, 2007; Yates, 2011). However, migrants can struggle to find work – either at all, or at a level commensurate with their skills and experience. This is often the case because they do not understand the pragmatic conventions of job interviews (Campbell & Roberts, 2007; Louw, Derwing, & Abbott, 2010), do not have local experience (AMES, 2011), or because they are perceived to have what Syed and Murray (2009) refer to as an 'English language deficit', a deficiency (relative to native

speakers) in English proficiency and social skills needed for the workplace. As a result, many migrants are underemployed, relative to their pre-migration skills, education and experience (Chiswick et al., 2003; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Duff et al., 2000; Holmes et al., 2009; Syed & Murray, 2009), and low skilled jobs are likely to provide little opportunity for language learning and socialisation (Roberts, 2010; Yates, 2011).

Once in the workplace, migrants who come from language backgrounds other than the dominant language face what Li (2000) calls a double socialisation: they are required to both learn a new language and culture and adapt to the particular communication patterns of that workplace at the same time. The workplace can require a complex set of communication skills, among them the ability to make requests (Wigglesworth & Yates, 2007), give directives (Vine, 2004), manage disagreements (Angouri, 2012) and use humour to negotiate meetings (Rogerson-Revell, 2007).

The development and maintenance of relationships with colleagues can be a crucial part of the workplace experience at any level, and both small talk and humour play a key role in this (Holmes, 2000, 2007; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Syed & Murray, 2009). The rules of these interactional practices are often implicit and can be in stark contrast to migrants' experience of using English in formal classroom settings (Duff et al., 2000). In multi-ethnic workplaces, the development of relationships through engagement in social interaction at work has the potential to help migrants establish connections beyond their L1 (first language) community, and develop a sense of belonging in a new country. It relies, however, on socially inclusive practices in the workplace, such as the willingness of colleagues to encourage and engage migrants in interaction (Yates, 2011).

In this paper we explore migrants' experiences with regard to using language at work, and the role these, as well as overall employment status, have on their settlement experience. Where possible, we highlight changes that our participants noticed through time. We adopt an understanding of social inclusion that focuses on migrants' feelings of connectedness at work and their sense of belonging in Australia, while also considering the core definition of access to economic wellbeing where relevant.

DATA AND RESEARCH METHODS

The data used for this paper was collected as part of the AMEP Longitudinal Study (hereafter AMEP LS), a national longitudinal qualitative research project initially funded by the Australian Government's Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) and since 2013 by the Department of Industry. The AMEP LS investigates patterns of language use and language learning among recent migrants to Australia, based primarily on regular, semi-structured interviews collected in two phases. Phase 1 (2008–2009) initially consisted of 152 participants (Yates, 2010); Phase 2 (2011–2014) involved 60 participants from this group as

well as a new group of 85 participants. All participants were studying English in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), Australia's national on-arrival language and settlement program for eligible migrants assessed as having English skills below the basic functional level (see Butorac, this volume).

Interviews collected for the AMEP LS were designed to gain general insights into participants' lives, in particular with regard to their use of English inside and outside the classroom and their settlement in Australia, including their experiences of using English in the workplace (see Yates, 2010 for more information on the AMEP LS methodology and initial findings from Phase 1). In the current paper, we focus on those 60 participants who were involved in both phases of data collection. In particular, we examine the experiences of those who were in paid employment in English-speaking workplaces at the end of Phase 1 and/or at the beginning of Phase 2 (a total of 28 participants at Phase 1 and 32 participants at Phase 2; 40 individuals in total). We examine data across two points in time, collected approximately two years apart: the last interview of Phase 1 (conducted in mid-2009) and the first interview of Phase 2 (conducted in late 2011).

As with the larger study, the participants in our subset are mostly well-educated, with 25 out of 40 participants having had 13 or more years of education prior to migration, and most studying at AMEP at an intermediate level. Thirty are female and 10 are male, and they represent a range of language backgrounds, with the most common language groups being Mandarin (8 speakers), Arabic (3 speakers), and Spanish and Thai (4 speakers each). During the periods covered by the Phase 1 and 2 interviews, participants worked in a wide range of areas, including as labourers (e.g., factory worker, cleaner), community and personal service workers (e.g., child care worker, security guard), sales workers (e.g., shop assistant, make-up sales professional), and in professional or managerial level jobs (e.g., designer, interpreter).

Taking an experiential view of the data that considers participants' comments as accurate reflections of their realities (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we analysed the proofed interview transcripts for recurring themes related to participants' experiences of inclusion and exclusion at work. It is important to note that the interviews collected for the AMEP LS did not specifically feature questions on social inclusion; rather we have used a thematic analysis of participants' employment experiences (e.g., workplace interactions, problems encountered, feelings about colleagues, changes across time, links between employment and settlement) with particular regard to inclusion and exclusion. This process involved the compilation of summaries of each individual's employment experiences in the two interviews as a means to reduce the data in order to be able to detect prevalent patterns within and across the participant group (Cools, 2006; Thomas, 2006). The process thus involved a combination of inductive and deductive approaches, allowing both for themes to emerge from the data itself and to capture pre-identified categories relevant to our research focus

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following section provides a description of these patterns and a discussion of our findings, illustrated with quotes in participants' own words.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THE INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION OF MIGRANTS AT WORK

A thematic analysis of the interview data highlighted the important role language and linguistic diversity play in the social inclusion and exclusion of our participants at work. We first discuss what made participants feel excluded, followed by what gave them a sense of inclusiveness. Finally, we explore how these practices, in addition to broader considerations such as employment status and type of job, influence migrants' sense of connectedness at work and belonging in Australia. Note, all names used are pseudonyms.

EXCLUSION AT WORK

Seven participants told us that they felt unable to fully participate in the workplace because of their English proficiency and thus limitations placed upon them by themselves or others. Lila, for example, a migrant from Colombia in her early twenties, told us that she did not take external phone calls in her job as an assistant at an insurance company because she lacked confidence. She had experienced a number of occasions where she could not make herself understood to customers, and this made her feel nervous about continuing to take phone calls. While Lila did not indicate whether she had actually received any negative feedback from clients, others' feelings of having an 'English language deficit' (Syed & Murray, 2009) were based directly on customers' reactions to their non-native English. Jeannie, a Chinese woman who worked in a party supplies shop, for example, had experienced several occasions where she could not understand customers and they became unhappy, asking for an employee who 'speaks English'.

Three out of these seven participants were excluded outright from engaging in certain tasks by their bosses, based on their language competency. One of these was Susan, a migrant from Thailand in her early thirties who worked at a nail salon, who was not allowed to answer the telephone in case she had problems understanding customers on the other end of the line. Ping, also from Thailand and in her thirties, had been working in a chicken butcher's shop preparing food out the back since the beginning of data collection. Her role gave her little opportunity to converse with others. Despite her desire to interact with customers and to learn to use the till, she had not been trained for this, and on the few occasions where she was asked to come and assist out the front her colleagues would tell customers that Ping could not use the till. Ping reported feeling upset about this situation: 'Sometime you know, because I want to learn you know. Even I I don't know anything, not good you know' (Phase 2 interview).

Ping thought her boss might be worried about her helping out the front because of her colleagues' remarks. Such institutionalised exclusionary practices are expressions of a 'monolingual mindset' (Clyne, 2005) and keep migrants from learning and expanding their skills both linguistically and professionally. On an individual level, this behaviour sets the migrant worker apart from the rest of the team, emphasising their 'deficiencies' and likely having a detrimental effect on their feelings of belonging. It also clearly hinders improvement of English skills: Ping could not improve her skills in interacting with customers, because she was not given the opportunity to practise.

An additional five participants felt socially excluded at work because they could not participate in social interactions in the same way as their colleagues. As mentioned earlier, small talk and humour have been shown to be key elements in the development of relationships and a sense of belonging in the workplace (Coupland, 2003; Holmes, 2000). These participants attributed the problem to a number of (sometimes overlapping) reasons, including – again – limitations in respect of their own English proficiency, their own 'shyness', and the exclusionary behaviour of colleagues. Lisa from Thailand, for example, who worked as a dog groomer, attributed a lack of relationship-building talk not only to her English skills but also to her colleague's apparent unease at talking to a non-native speaker. Like Ping, Lisa also mainly worked in the back of the shop with little interaction, and after two years working for the same company, she was certain that her English had not improved at all during her time there.

The case of Wen, a Chinese participant who was a gynaecologist in her home country, also highlights the importance of being able to engage in social talk at work. In Phase 1, Wen had found work as a teacher's aide at a childcare centre. She would have preferred to have regained employment as a medical professional but had not yet been able to achieve the necessary IELTS level to qualify in Australia. She told us she nonetheless enjoyed working in childcare because it allowed her to practise her English and it gave her confidence. Between the two interview phases, however, she worked at a different childcare centre where she felt entirely alienated. She was working with younger Australian women who made no effort to include her, and she could not keep up with the pace of their conversation. This made her feel lonely, and she was worried that because of her difficulties, people would view her negatively:

'I just sit here (laughs), you know? I, (laughs) I, I thought, ah maybe people think I'm stupid (laughs). You know, you, you, you sit there; when they laugh you don't know what they laugh about, you know? Yeah oh that's a shame' (Phase 2 interview).

By the time of our interview at Phase 2, Wen had returned to the first childcare centre, even though they could only offer her part time work, simply because she felt much more comfortable in this workplace environment (which she described as multicultural).

Diane, a Japanese woman in her thirties, found herself in a similar position to Wen's unhappy stint in the second childcare centre. By the end of Phase 1, Diane had signed up with an employment agency that found her a clerical part-time position with a small non-profit organisation. She recounted the reason why she ate her lunch at her desk rather than in the shared lunchroom:

So first day when I came with the lunch room, there is ah some people who are from another company. [...] So it was a bit hard, and also – I thought they are having a hard time too. Like when I went to sit there, they didn't really talk much. [...] And – but other time when I pass the lunchroom they are chatting very loudly, so I think I made them uncomfortable. (Phase 1 interview)

Diane felt that her shy disposition also made it difficult for her to relate to her two colleagues with whom she shared a small office space. Even after about one year she still found it difficult to follow their conversation, saying that listening to them was 'like watching tennis', making it impossible for her to contribute.

As these examples show, social exclusion at work can take many forms, ranging from not being given a chance to develop new skills to social ostracism. In the cases we have discussed, it seems clear that the onus for social inclusion was placed on the migrant workers. However, as the next section illustrates, a collaborative approach – and the patience and support of colleagues – is key to fostering social inclusion in the workplace (Yates, 2011).

INCLUSION AT WORK

A greater number of participants (17) indicated that they were happy at work and felt – to some degree – part of the workplace culture. Unlike those who experienced exclusion, very few of these 17 participants explicitly said that they felt included. Nevertheless, we were able to gauge their positioning at work based on their reports of the social aspects that they were able to take part in (e.g., engaging in small talk with customers, being invited out for coffee after work with colleagues), and their feelings about them (e.g., enjoying the job, enjoying chatting with friends at work).

In a few cases, the way participants talked about their workplace changed over time as they slowly became more comfortable and included. One participant who needed some time to feel accepted was Karen, a Chinese migrant who worked as a landscape designer. At first, Karen did not feel included at work as she did not know what to talk to her colleagues about, and they often went out for lunch without her. By Phase 2, however, Karen had become much more comfortable talking to her colleagues and even commented that her interactions with her Australian colleagues were similar to those she used to have in China.

Overwhelmingly, examples of inclusion related to interpersonal aspects of workplace interaction rather than transactional or task-focused talk, which highlights the importance for

migrants of gaining an understanding of typical pragmatic conventions in the workplace (Holmes & Riddiford, 2011; Malthus, Holmes, & Major, 2005). Interpersonal communication skills are also often an expected and necessary part of the job itself, especially in customer service roles. The development of skills in this area was usually brought about by the support and encouragement of colleagues and/or bosses, and led to greater confidence and an increased sense of inclusion. Kamran, for example, a refugee from Iran where he operated a computer hardware store, decided to enrol in a hairdressing course at TAFE (vocational education provider) after arriving in Australia. The course included a practical component, which gave him the opportunity to work in a hairdressing salon. He explains that in the beginning he found small talk with clients to be quite challenging, both in terms of understanding their expectations, and in dealing with unfamiliar topics:

Sometime you know they talk about very- very difficult subject you know for example I don't have I know have idea about that [...] for example they talk about Jennifer Lopez. [...] I don't like know what's the number of his- her shoes. What's her detail of her life. It's not my business. I don't like make myself busy with them but the ladies when they are coming to salon they like to talk about that. (Phase 1 interview)

Kamran persevered, however, and with time and the encouragement of his boss he succeeded in building good relationships with clients. Towards the end of his time there he had adapted to the communicative requirements of the salon, happily talking with colleagues and clients both in person and on the phone.

Because I remember first time I had to talk to people by phone and I said to my boss, 'it's really hard for me because I can't see the people. I can't have body language, eye contact and I have problem with some accent'. She said to me, 'you can do that, do it'. And then first phone, after it ring she just asked me to pick it up. I was really like nervous but excited and it was really good. [...] I, it, it just became as a fun. I was always ah, the person was ah, happy and volunteer to pick up the phone and talk to the customer, yeah. (Phase 2 interview)

The support of Kamran's boss seems crucial in this context. Kamran and Lisa (the dog groomer mentioned earlier) attended the same AMEP class, but while he was encouraged to interact and engage with clients, Lisa was instead confined to tasks that did not involve customer contact.

Having opportunities to communicate with others can also have a positive effect on participants' language proficiency. Seven participants explicitly commented that employment had helped them improve their English, either through regular interaction as part of the job, or through active help from colleagues. Both Tat (factory worker) and Alina (shop assistant) mentioned having colleagues who helped by explaining words or by correcting their pronunciation or grammar, while Alex (bus driver) used his time at work to learn colloquial

language from his colleagues and practise speaking. Sarah, a former flight attendant from Iran who worked in an airline lounge during both phases, explained that interactions with customers helped her learn everyday English in a way that the classroom did not:

I had to talk with the other people at the workplace, so, um, so I g- I get ordinary, er, er, conversation at the workplace. But it helps me because when I put the academic and ordinary er the conversation together, it give me a good skill to improve my English skill. (Phase 2 interview)

Participants' proficiency levels were not necessarily always a barrier to interaction with colleagues, as the case of Tat illustrates. Tat, from Thailand, worked at a chicken factory throughout the course of data collection and got on well with many of her colleagues. She emphasised that the thing she liked best about work was the social aspect:

I like abouts when I got the good friend and we can talk, we can laugh. I'm proud of myself. I'm not a good English but the way I can make a joke to make them all laughing and then the way they're laughing like before start or break time, I feel happy more than them. (Phase 2 interview)

However, there is not always such a straightforward link between happiness at work and social inclusion in all senses of the concept. Even though Tat had many friends and felt included at work, she remained institutionally excluded from advancing within the ranks of the company due to her language skills. As she explained in her Phase 1 interview, she could not take on the role of work operator because her low English literacy level made it difficult for her to spell names correctly. Her reading and writing skills were also one of the reasons she had not trained in aged care in Australia, even though she was very interested in this field. Ultimately, her English literacy confined her to an unskilled job, albeit one she enjoyed.

EMPLOYMENT AND SETTLEMENT

As Tat's case suggests, the concept of social inclusion can be complex, and can encompass a variety of intersecting levels. In this final section we discuss some of the complex factors that led some participants in our study to feel a strong sense of belonging in Australia, while others spoke of a lack of connectedness relating directly to their employment situation.

For some participants, simply the status of having a job in Australia gave them feelings of validation as productive members of society. For Cherry, a migrant from China who formerly taught traditional Chinese music, obtaining employment at a childcare centre gave her a new sense of purpose:

At the beginning I don't like Australia (laughs) 'cause it's quiet and I can't speak English and yeah I don't have friends I don't have families at the beginning I don't like

here. I always want to go back go back (laughs) but once I start my job I feel I'm I was needed by someone yeah. (Phase 2 interview)

This sentiment was echoed by Abrar, a participant in her forties from Iraq, who struggled with being unable to return to her former career as a medical doctor as a result of failing to pass the required language test. In Phase 1 she spoke of being desperate for someone to 'see her' and recognise her capabilities. Although by Phase 2 she had not succeeded in regaining her status as a medical professional, she had been successful in finding managerial level employment with a state-wide health program, which helped her feel like a valued member of the community.

For Alina, a former bookkeeper from Romania, it was not only the status of being in employment that helped her gain a sense of purpose and belonging, but also the combination of being valued as a member of the team and making friends. After arriving in Australia, Alina first worked in a Polish delicatessen shop where she experienced some exclusion and felt discriminated against because of her inability to speak Polish. Then, three years after arriving in Australia, she found a job at a fabric store which she thoroughly enjoyed: she got on well with her colleagues, and she enjoyed being able to practise and improve her English through interactions with customers and other staff. She told us that she now felt much happier and 'at home' in Australia because of her better working situation (Phase 2 interview).

The inability to gain employment at a level commensurate with pre-migration status can be a barrier to establishing a sense of validation and belonging for some migrants. Wen exemplifies this: on paper she could be seen as a 'success story' given that she was happily employed at a childcare centre by Phase 2. Her enjoyment of the work and interactions with colleagues, however, did not alleviate the fact that she longed to improve her English to the point that she could regain her status as a respected health professional. This importance of regaining pre-migration employment status was particularly evident in the case of Anna. Anna is not part of our core dataset as she did not work in the identified time period since she was struggling to find a way to re-qualify as an ophthalmologist in Australia. In her first Phase 2 interview, she was enrolled in a TAFE course in optometry, a loss in professional standing she found quite hard to accept, which made her consider a return to China:

So sometimes I I (pause) really want to go back China to, ah, to do the job I did before because that job give me some kind of – ah (pause) how could I say – give me some kind of ah [. . .] satisfaction; satisfaction and it makes me feel that I am useful to the society and to the other people. (Phase 2 interview)

These examples illustrate that the concept of social inclusion, as it relates to employment, can encompass different things for different people. For some, a sense of connectedness and belonging is not promoted solely by employment status, but also by obtaining employment of

a type and level commensurate with their expertise and expectations, and through the experience of socially inclusive practices within the workplace.

CONCLUSION

The data presented in this paper highlight the central role language plays in the social inclusion and exclusion of migrants at work in Australia. The patterns of social exclusion described by our participants included instances of self-imposed exclusion due to lack of confidence in using English as well as cases of active marginalisation by customers or colleagues. In the latter instances, it was clear that the onus of making an effort to connect was left solely with the migrants and not shared by others in the workplace. It was suggested that a focus on migrants' language 'deficiencies' presents a barrier to the development of feelings of belonging in the workplace. Our findings support Yates' (2011) argument that local English-speaking communities could do more to foster interactions and connect with migrants, particularly in the workplace setting, which in turn would support the creation of a more diverse and socially inclusive community.

Our data also featured many positive stories, as participants described instances of inclusionary work practices such as colleagues who engaged in small talk with them, or encouraged them to undertake new language-based tasks, and supported them while they learned these new skills. Our examination of interviews two years apart allowed us to observe that the ability to relate to colleagues and the feeling of being part of a team were sometimes things that developed over time and as such echo the notion of workplace socialisation described by Li (2000) and Duff et al. (2000). Socially inclusive workplaces not only supported migrants in their language learning, but also helped them feel validated as productive members of society.

Finally, our analysis has highlighted the complexity of social inclusion as a concept that has relevance on a number of intersecting levels. Our study thus supports the notion that social inclusion cannot meaningfully be measured solely in terms of economic standards (see e.g., Ho, 2009). Diane, for example, was in paid employment but was socially ostracised in her workplace. Tat, on the other hand, was very happy in her day-to-day work at the factory, but issues with language proficiency excluded her from professional and economic advancement. Our examples show that in addition to employment status, social inclusion – as it relates to employment in Australia – also encompasses feelings of connectedness and belonging in the workplace, opportunities for development and advancement, and the ability to gain employment at an appropriate level. Our investigation emphasises the central role of workplace interpersonal relationships in migrants' lives and the wide reaching effect social inclusion at work can have on their settlement experience.

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