“From banking to fencing:” Language learning, employment and social inclusion

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Research questions

- Which learner groups engaged in employment?
- What role does the workplace have in participants’ language learning?
- What language do participants report they engaged with and need in/for the workplace?
- What do they say is the importance of employment in their settlement?
A note on the method and data

- Ethnography: observation field notes + interview transcripts
- 4th quarter interviews

Research questions

- Which learner groups engaged in employment?
Those who worked

- 76/152 employed at some point during project
  - 63 worked in their country of origin
  - 13 were students/housewife
  - 33/76 engaged in work that did not match previous employment

Those who did not work

- 76/152 not employed
- Looked for work but unsuccessful
- Not looked for work at all
  - until they felt that their English was good enough for employment
  - because of domestic responsibilities (child birth, child rearing)
  - they were doing workplace experience
Overall trends for various learner groups

- High percentage across both genders (55% vs 47%)
- Length of stay in Australia was not a factor (0=32 42%; 1=23 30%; 2=12 16%; 3+= 9 12%)
- More of higher CSWE level engaged in work (20/57 35%; 14/22 63%; 42/73 58%)
- Age group was not a predictor
- Visa status
  - 9/21 skilled
  - 55/102 family
  - 12/27 humanitarian
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Customer-service type work

- Fast food/take-away shops
- Cleaning services
- Retail shop assistance
- Beauty/nail salons
- Café/ restaurant waitressing
- Factory work (food or dry goods production)
- Bar tending
Employment matching previous work

- **CSWE I**
  - Samba (c08p014); Guinea; musician + give talks on Africa

- **CSWE III**
  - Ino (co2p015); Sudanese interpreter; Freelance interpreter (3rd Q after TAFE)
  - Charles (c05p007); Colombian; industrial engineer/manager; design company (manager); 3rd-4th thru Seek
  - Tobi (c09p007); Japanese; worked in travel agency; L1 travel agency
  - Yuna (c10p012); Korean; graphic designer; web design (internet)
  - Kaye (c09p011); Japanese; Language school (L1 teacher)

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Roles workplaces play in language use

- Provides opportunities for talk
  - Participants report enjoying their work
  - The majority of those who worked were concerned about the interpersonal rather than the work talk.
- Limits opportunities for talk
  - No talk is allowed
- Nature of work does not lend itself to talk
  - L1 work environment
  - Participants talk of finding another work with more “Aussie”

Employment and English use/learning

- Workplaces sometimes provide a venue for language learning, sometimes they don’t.
- It’s not just work talk but also (and especially) “chatting” talk that they identify as either lacking and for them what makes work fulfilling.
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Trends in their beliefs and choices

- workplace requiring minimal interaction provides low stakes (not too scary) venue for practicing English
- low proficiency means they feel they can’t aspire for higher skilled work until English is better
- routine and limited interaction at work means they can opt out of social talks, if unsure of themselves.
Low stakes English

Tina works in a nail salon. Although she aspires to work in a “better” job that will allow her more exposure to English, she sees her current work as a safe place to practice her limited language.

c03p008, F, Vietnamese, CSWE I

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Not ready for moving on/up

(1) Wen is a qualified gynaecologist but feels she does not have sufficient English to carry out her work. So, in the meantime, she works as a teacher aide and finds conversation with children as helpful practice.

C06p017, F, Chinese, CSWE III

(2) Kristina: I want to work in tourism. Though my language is not good so--I need to wait. Whe-- I think when I improve my language I can go to work.

C01p008, F, Lithuanian, CSWE II

(3) Irene (accountant) "Okay, because my English is very limited now so, I have to settle with this job. But if I-- as time goes by, my English can be improved, I am thinking of buying my own business."

C08p011, F, Chinese, CSWE I

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Opting out

George works in a takeaway shop and has no problems with the routine work talk such as taking orders, money and giving change. However, as soon as a customer engages in social talk with him, he shuts down such opportunities and tells the customer “he doesn’t speak much English”.

C07p013, M, Iraqi, CSWE 1

Trends in their beliefs and choices: Some Insights

- Workplace requiring minimal interaction provides low stakes (not too scary) venue for practicing English
  - but this also means they never learn more than what they know
- low proficiency means they feel they can't aspire for higher skilled work until English is better
  - quite a few of them never changed work over the year
- routine and limited interaction at work means they can opt out of social talk, if unsure of themselves.
  - for those whom this is a possible situation, it leaves them feeling dissatisfied with themselves for having ‘opted out’
"There's no point in arguing with him, sir — he doesn't speak English."

Trends in their beliefs and choices:

**Some Insights**

- Workplace requiring minimal interaction provides low stakes (not too scary) venue for practicing English
  - but this also means they never learn more than what they know
- Low proficiency means they feel they can’t aspire for higher skilled work until English is better
  - quite a few of them never changed work over the year
  - some found work without dramatic change in their language
- Routine and limited interaction at work means they can opt out of social talk, if unsure of themselves.
  - for those whom this is a possible situation, it leaves them feeling dissatisfied with themselves for having ‘opted out’
**Tina (C03p008i3) Factory job**

<C03AR>: <,> yes yes. And do you use much English at work?
Do you speak English at work?

<C03P008>: I talk there <,>

<C03AR>: Oh okay so you have to speak English? You have to speak English okay. And do you have any problems with your English at work?

<C03P008>: Yeah. (short L1 exchange)

<INT>: I do.

<C03AR>: You do what type of problems?

<INT>: Can’t understand what they’re talking about.

<C03AR>: And how do you come <,> I mean how do you overcome those problems?

<INT>: I just try to listen and catch the body language to learn what they really want to <,> to tell me.

<C03AR>: To say yes.

<C03P008>: Yeah.

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**Learner-created spaces for social talk**

*How can we address these needs in our program?*
Seeking out English-speaking colleagues at break time

1) Alex works in the factory and deliberately seeks and talks to the English speaking Australians at lunch breaks to practice his English.

C09p006, M, Saudi, CSWE III

Looking for work that has predominantly English-speaking staff i.e. as opposed to L1 workplaces

(2) Lily has been working in the local bakery shop for the last year. Her colleagues speak Mandarin with her and her interactions with customers are very limited to “which bread” and “here’s your change”. She aspires to work in another shop such as one of the leading supermarkets with English-speaking colleagues.

C01p003, F, Mandarin, CSWE II
Opting out of work that does not provide a venue for using English

(3) Anna works in a quality control office for eyeglasses. She dropped to a part-time status after realizing that work just does not provide sufficient venue for English use.

c09p004, F, China, CSWE III

Volunteering

(4a) Appi volunteered at a multicultural festival where he needed to use English.
C06p005, F, Indian, CSWE III

(4b) Chloe volunteers at the local hospital library apart from working in a major shopping store to create a conversation space for herself. She visits patients' rooms and talks to them about reading materials they are interested in.
C06p008, F, Korean, CSWE III
Learner-created spaces for interpersonal talk: Some Insights

- (1) Seeking out English-speaking colleagues at break time although a good strategy, they are non-existent in L1 workplaces
- (2) Looking for work that has predominantly English-speaking staff i.e. as opposed to L1 workplaces not always accessible
- (3) Opting out of work that does not provide a venue for using English not everyone can afford such a choice
- (4) Volunteering not everyone has the time

Different interactions by various learner groups

- Some participants in higher CSWE level (II & III) create alternative opportunities for talk when workplaces fail to do so.
- Perceptions and experiences of language at work are more or less the same for men and women.
- It is also similar across age groups with the notable exception of those 16-24 who seem to be the ones more engaged in L1 work.
Different interactions by various learner groups

- Although experiences in seeking out workplaces with limited interaction is shared across participants who have been in the country 0 or 3 years, they differ in the following:
  - 0 years stay in their workplace
  - 1-2 years look for alternative spaces (e.g. volunteer, other jobs)
- No discernable difference in the experiences of those with more or less previous education.

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Employment and settlement

- The ability to engage in social talk affords them the feeling of *being one with the blokes.*
  
  For those who are unable to, they feel alienated.

- Workplaces are not just about providing jobs but about providing spaces where one can *belong.*
  
  If their language allows them to engage in a banter with colleagues and customers.

Consider their stories...

- **Johnny**, M, Taiwan, bank manager
- **Lily**, F, China, cashier/customer service manager
- **Hogan**, M, China, structural engineer
- **Kristina**, F, Lithuania, tourism
- **Vinny**, F, India, teacher
Implications

- The role of the AMEP in addressing students’ need for more social/interpersonal/’chatting’ talk.
- Allowing space for skilled migrants to find their level of confidence in their interaction with others to be able to pursue their chosen profession.
- The role of the AMEP in helping those skilled migrants in the AMEP find a place for their skills.

Where to from here…

- Further analysis on the data
  - Distinguish those working while in the AMEP and those who worked post AMEP
  - Match aspirations at the start of the year and the work they engaged with and how these workplace aspirations changed over time and the factors that influenced such changes
  - Analysis of actual workplace conversations
  - Follow up participants post AMEP especially those who did workplace experience
How can the AMEP optimize its programs and resources to help migrants achieve a degree of confidence in their *social talk* enough to navigate their own settlement?