



Australian Government  
Australian Institute of  
Family Studies



Building a  
New Life  
in Australia

The Longitudinal Study  
of Humanitarian Migrants

# English language skills of humanitarian migrants in Australia

Policy brief

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*Australian Institute of Family Studies*

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The findings and views reported in this brief are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Australian Government, DSS or any of DSS's contractors and partners.

## Overview

This policy brief examines the self-reported English language skills of nearly 2,400 humanitarian migrants in the Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA) study over 10 years (from 2013-14 to 2023). The first part of the brief examines trends in 4 dimensions of English language skills: understanding spoken English, speaking, reading and writing proficiency. The second part investigates the understanding of spoken English in greater detail through analysing factors associated with acquiring language skills during the early years of resettlement and over time.

The determinants of language acquisition are presented here based on efficiency in acquiring the English language, exposure to the English language, and incentives for learning English. Efficiency in this context refers to the ability of the learner to understand spoken English, with minimal effort required by both the sender and the receiver. Exposure refers to the extent to which individuals come in to contact with and use the language of the country they are moving to, both in their home country and after they have relocated. Incentives refer to an individual's learning motivation, driven by perceived economic and non-economic benefits.

Data from the BNLA study are used to provide proxy measures for the 3 components of language acquisition. The analysis of data considers the association of each component with self-reported proficiency in understanding spoken English as well as their interaction to see which, if any, have stronger associations. The analysis also provides results by sex. The brief concludes with insights for policy and practice.

### Key findings

- Self-reported English language proficiency increased over time for humanitarian migrants, especially oral language skills (i.e. understanding and speaking English). By year 10, reported proficiency in English was highest for understanding spoken English (58%), and the largest gains were in understanding and speaking English, each increasing by over 30 percentage points from pre-arrival levels.
- Both men and women reported improvements in all dimensions of English language proficiency over the 10 years of settlement. While the rate of progress over time was similar for men and women, men consistently reported higher proficiency than women, reflecting stronger pre-arrival language skills – typically 5–7 percentage points above women at pre-arrival levels.
- Having formal education prior to arrival was significantly associated with higher self-reported proficiency in understanding spoken English after a decade of residence, with this association notably stronger for women. A similar pattern was observed for pre-arrival understanding of spoken English.
- Early assessment of language skills is important for building on existing knowledge and directing support where it is most needed during initial settlement. Accessing services soon after arrival is linked to stronger long-term English proficiency and reduced reliance on interpreters. Scaling up language programs for humanitarian migrants in the first few months enables them to build on pre-arrival skills and improves settlement outcomes.
- Language courses taken shortly after arrival improved understanding of spoken English for both men and women. While men showed limited long-term gains from formal English learning, women experienced sustained benefits over time, highlighting the importance of continued language support for women's settlement success. Men's early prioritisation of workforce entry often limits their engagement with formal learning, underscoring the need for flexible, work-integrated language programs that accommodate competing responsibilities.
- The early arrival period is a critical time for fostering social networks with people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Programs that support such networking during this phase are especially important, as they can help counter the challenges faced by newly arrived migrants – particularly women, whose English proficiency is often lower than that of men.
- Completing other studies or job training in Australia was associated with increased rates of proficiency in understanding spoken English up to 5 years after arrival for women and up to 10 years for men. The gender difference observed in year 10 may be related to other factors, including the persistent effects of poor mental health for women.

- The strong connection between poor mental health and lower proficiency in understanding spoken English highlights the urgent need to review the availability and suitability of related support services for humanitarian migrants, particularly women. Although strengthening mental health services remains a priority, support from family, friends and community groups is also important to sustaining language development and settlement outcomes.
- By the tenth year of settlement, child care responsibilities can significantly limit opportunities to develop understanding of spoken English proficiency, particularly for primary caregivers – both men and women. Limited access to learning environments due to caregiving demands highlights the need to strengthen child care support within formal language programs. Flexible, remote and home-based learning options should also be considered to better accommodate caregiving contexts.

## Box 1: Refugees and humanitarian migrants

### Refugees

A **refugee** is a person who has fled their country due to a fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. This definition is based on the 1951 Refugee Convention and is recognised under Australian law. Under Australia's Humanitarian Program, the Refugee category (visa subclasses 200, 201, 203 and 204) is designated for individuals experiencing persecution in their home country who are typically outside that country and in need of resettlement.

### Humanitarian migrants

A **humanitarian migrant** includes refugees but also encompasses individuals who may not meet the strict legal definition of a refugee yet are granted visas under Australia's Humanitarian Program due to substantial humanitarian need. This includes people affected by war, conflict or extreme living conditions.

The program operates through 2 main pathways: offshore resettlement and onshore protection. Offshore visa holders are people in Australia granted permanent or temporary visas based on applications submitted from outside the country. Onshore visa holders are those in Australia who applied for their visa while inside the country. The BNLA study includes onshore visa holders who applied for asylum while under temporary protection on another visa. Priority is given to vulnerable groups such as women, children, ethnic minorities and LGBTQI+ individuals, with referrals often made by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or through family sponsorship.

Source: Department of Home Affairs (2025b)

## Background

In 2023, the Department of Home Affairs introduced the Refugee and Humanitarian Entrant Settlement and Integration Outcomes Framework (the Framework) (Department of Home Affairs, 2023). This Framework serves as a guide for measuring progress and supporting the successful settlement of humanitarian migrants in Australia. It categorises outcome domains as personal factors, social factors and facilitators, underpinned by the principles of self-agency and self-efficacy. This brief focuses on English language proficiency, one of the key facilitators of resettlement.

For migrants, proficiency in the English language is relevant to many aspects of their lives. In Australia and other OECD countries, strong English language skills are critical for migrants and refugees to actively engage in employment, education and career advancement opportunities (Blake et al., 2018; Emilsson & Mozetič, 2021; van Kooy et al., 2024, 2025). A lack of English proficiency can cause social isolation (Blake et al., 2019), depression, stress and anxiety (Correa-Velez et al., 2015; Maneze et al., 2016) for migrants and refugees. Additionally, limited English skills hinder migrants' ability to form social networks (Ziersch et al., 2023), access social and health support services (Cheng et al., 2021) and obtain essential information and assistance for settlement (Blake et al., 2019). Other research shows that improvement in English language proficiency greatly helps resettled refugees adapt to their new culture and rebuild their sense of identity (Hebbani & McNamara, 2010).

Despite the significance of humanitarian migrants' English language skills in Australia, few systematic analyses have examined the factors contributing to these skills. Notable exceptions are Evans (1986), Chiswick and Miller (1995, 1996), Chiswick et al. (2004) and van Kooy et al. (2024). Most of these studies focused on 'immigrant' or 'refugee' populations, making it hard to apply their findings to humanitarian migrants (see Box 1). One exception is the study by van Kooy et al. (2024) from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). However, this study did not investigate how English language skills change over time or the factors related to those changes.

Since learning a new language is a gradual process, there is a need for long-term research that tracks language development among humanitarian migrants. This brief extends the work by van Kooy and colleagues by exploring the factors associated with English language learning over time. Importantly, longitudinal research provides critical visibility into the experiences of humanitarian migrants who are not participating in formal language programs. By examining self-reported English proficiency over time, it sheds light on the progress and challenges of an otherwise invisible group – to facilitate language-support policies and programs that are inclusive and equity-focused.

## Objectives

The aim of this policy brief is to provide a snapshot of humanitarian migrants' self-assessed proficiency in English language skills during their early settlement period in Australia and over time, and to explore a range of factors known to improve proficiency throughout the settlement journey. Self-reported measures are not a measure of actual language performance but rather a reflection of how a learner feels about their language proficiency at the time of being asked (Yates et al., 2015).

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the trends in English language proficiency among humanitarian migrants during their first 10 years of settlement?
2. What factors contribute to changes in humanitarian migrants' proficiency in understanding spoken English over time?

The current study draws on data from the BNLA survey, which collected data on the settlement trajectories and outcomes of 2,399 humanitarian migrants in Australia at 6 time points between 2013–14 and 2023. The data and approach section (Box 2) provides further details on the sample and study measures related to English language skills used in this study and the statistical methods used to analyse the data.

## Factors associated with language proficiency

### Efficiency, exposure and incentives

Chiswick and Millier (1995, 2001) argued that the determinants of destination-language acquisition are efficiency in second language acquisition, exposure to the language and incentives for achieving language proficiency. This brief used this framework to discuss the factors associated with proficiency in understanding spoken English after settling in Australia (see Figure 1 and Appendix A for details).

**Figure 1:** Components associated with the acquisition of destination-language skills



- **Efficiency** refers to the ability of the learner to understand spoken English with minimal effort required by both the sender and the receiver (Gibson et al., 2019). Migrants who are younger and have stronger cognitive skills and those with more education tend to learn the destination language more efficiently (Kosyakova et al., 2022). However, migrants are often exposed to trauma on their journey to a new destination (Hatton, 2020), which can affect their future learning prospects.
- **Exposure** refers to the extent to which individuals come into contact with and use the language of the country they are moving to, both in their home country and after they have relocated. Exposure to the host country's language can happen before or after migration through formal programs (e.g. schools or language centres) or informal learning, media and internet exposure or prior travel. Immediate and sustained exposure to structured learning environments, such as language classes or further education, is particularly advantageous for language acquisition among individuals with low initial proficiency (Kristen & Seuring, 2021). Exposure to the host country's language might also depend on family dynamics (Isphording, 2015). When children in the family are fluent in English, they may take on the role of interpreter for their parents or other relatives. While this can be helpful in the short term, it may place undue responsibility on children (Pandya, 2023) and limit opportunities for adults to engage directly with language learning environments.
- **Incentives** refer to an individual's learning motivation, driven by perceived economic and non-economic benefits. Economic incentives include access to better-quality jobs, improved employment opportunities and higher wages. Migrants with higher levels of formal education have higher income potential and therefore anticipate higher returns from investing in language acquisition (Bernhard & Bernhard, 2022). Similarly, migrants with prior employment experience are more likely to perceive language learning as beneficial for their career prospects (Hou & Beiser, 2006).

Non-economic incentives include social and emotional benefits of language mastery, such as forming cross-ethnic contacts or fostering a sense of belonging in the host country. Proficiency in the destination language is essential for building social connections and integrating with the broader community (Kristen et al., 2016). Irrespective of migration motives, migrants who intend to settle permanently are more likely to be inspired to learn the destination language, as the long-term benefits of such efforts are more substantial (Geurts & Lubbers, 2017).

## Box 2: Data and approach

### Study sample

The study sample includes BNLA participants aged 15 years and over who responded to questions about their understanding of spoken English as well as their speaking, reading and writing proficiency in Waves 1 (2013-14), 3 (2015-16), 5 (2017-18) and 6 (2023), referred to as 3-6 months, 3 years, 5 years and 10 years after arrival, respectively.<sup>a</sup> There were 2,367 respondents aged 15 years and over in Wave 1. In Waves 3, 5 and 6, 1,869, 1,877, and 1,199 of these participants, respectively, indicated their English proficiency and were included in the study. Trends spanning 3-6 months to 3 years were categorised as short-term, while trends from 5 to 10 years were regarded as long-term.

### Measures of English language proficiency

Respondents were asked how well they:

- Understand spoken English
- Speak English
- Read English
- Write English

The response options for each language skill measure were 'not at all', 'not well', 'well' and 'very well'. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) cautions that the 'not well' and 'not at all' categories will underestimate the extent of true English language proficiency because some individuals may underreport their abilities due to a lack of confidence or cultural norms, or may struggle in formal or unfamiliar situations but may understand English better in familiar settings (ABS, 2021).

As expected, preliminary tests showed significant differences between migrants who reported understanding spoken English 'not at all' and other responses at certain time points, after controlling

for socio-economic factors associated with English proficiency. However, this study does not intend to emphasise these results due to the limited number of observations, particularly in the 'not at all' category in later waves, which may affect the reliability of the estimates. See Figure C1.1 in Appendix C.

Hence, in this analysis, responses were coded as 1 for respondents who reported English language proficiency as 'well/very well' and 0 for all other responses for ease of interpretation. As shown below, collapsing the 4-category scale into a binary category not only aligns with methodologies used in other studies employing a similar longitudinal framework (see e.g. Van Tubergen, 2010) but also enables the provision of robust results. Respondents who answered, 'do not know', 'prefer not to say', or 'does not apply' to a particular measure were excluded from the analysis (less than 2%).

## Analysis

Part 1 provides numbers ( $n$ ) and percentages (%) as descriptive statistics to illustrate the distribution of the 4 measures of English language proficiency over the first 10 years of settlement by sex. It also examines proficiency in understanding spoken English by pre-arrival (e.g. pre-arrival education) and post-arrival (e.g. mental health, studying English and labour force participation) characteristics at 3–6 months after arrival and over time to provide context and facilitate the analyses in Part 2.

Following the literature discussed in the earlier section, pre- and post-arrival characteristics were used as proxies for each of the 3 components of language proficiency (see also Appendix A). All proportions presented are weighted to account for non-response by certain demographic characteristics over multiple waves of the study.<sup>b</sup>

Part 2 investigates the factors associated with proficiency in understanding spoken English over time.<sup>c</sup> The analysis used logistic regression models, adjusting for covariates associated with efficiency, exposure and incentives. In addition to pre- and post-arrival characteristics that served as proxies for each of the 3 components of language acquisition, age at arrival, sex, language spoken at home, marital status and location were included as control variables (these are typically used as such, see also van Kooy et al., 2024). Descriptions of the variables used in the analysis are provided in Table 1 (For the codes of variables, see Appendix B).

The probability of proficiency in understanding spoken English, as derived from logistic models, was presented in terms of percentages (i.e. percentage change in proficiency due to a change in a factor) for ease of interpretation. For example, if migrants had work experience before arriving, and their probability of understanding spoken English is described as 150%, it means they are 1.5 times more likely to be proficient than migrants without that experience. It indicates how much more likely they are to be proficient compared to others.

Endogeneity (when the dependent variables and the predictor variables are determined by each other or by an unmeasured factor) can be a concern with post-migration characteristics. For example, migrants' mental health status could make it more difficult to acquire a new language (as assumed here) but better knowledge of the English language could potentially increase the likelihood of accessing services that improve health outcomes. It is unclear how English language proficiency and other factors (e.g. labour force participation) that are likely to influence each other when migrants settle affect the study's results. This brief does not intend to directly address the potential endogeneity of independent variables. Therefore, one should interpret the results as evidence of association rather than causation.

The analysis was conducted in 3 steps:

- First, separate logistic regression models were estimated for each of the 3 components of language proficiency (efficiency, exposure and incentives).
- Second, a comprehensive model was estimated that included the 3 components of language proficiency. This assists in understanding the relative weight of each in the Australian context.
- Third, a comprehensive model was estimated by sex.

All analyses were done separately by waves to highlight the differentiated impacts over time. The significance of the results was assessed at 3 levels: 1% ( $p < 0.01$ : highly significant), 5% ( $p < 0.05$ : significant), and 10% ( $p < 0.10$ : marginally significant). This means that the results are statistically significant if the  $p$  value is less than 0.01, 0.05, or 0.10, respectively.

All references to changes in proportions in Part 1 are statistically significant at least at  $p < 0.10$ . Statistically significant results in Part 2 are presented using graphs and figures, with other key points noted in text. Complete regression results are provided in Appendix C.

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Waves 2 and 4, collected in 2014–15 and 2016–17, were excluded due to incomplete responses to many items. <sup>b</sup> For more information on how weights were calculated, see the BNLA Data user guide (Stevenson & Rioseco, 2024). <sup>c</sup> Models for the other 3 measures of English language proficiency (speaking, reading and writing) showed similar patterns to those reported for proficiency in understanding spoken English.

**Table 1: Measures used in the analysis**

| Language components     | Predictors in BNLA                            | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Efficiency              | Pre-arrival education                         | Whether the respondent completed up to 12 years of education or more, attained university or technical degrees, compared to those who had no formal education at all, before arriving in Australia                  |
|                         | Poor mental health                            | Determined by a series of diagnostic questions, such as meeting intrusion, avoidance and hypervigilance criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or has experienced severe mental illness                |
| Exposure                | Pre-arrival understanding of spoken English   | Whether the respondent could understand spoken English 'well' or 'very well', compared to 'not well' or 'not at all' (self-assessed), before arriving in Australia                                                  |
|                         | English study                                 | Whether the respondent had studied some English in Australia (formal), learned English outside of an institutional setting (informal), compared to those who needed to learn English but did not do so <sup>a</sup> |
| Economic incentives     | Children under 18                             | Whether the respondent had a child under 18 years of age                                                                                                                                                            |
|                         | Completed study and job training in Australia | Whether the respondent had completed any study (other than English studies) or job training in Australia prior to each wave                                                                                         |
|                         | Pre-arrival work experience                   | Whether the respondent had paid work before arriving in Australia                                                                                                                                                   |
|                         | Labour force status                           | Whether the respondent reported being in paid work in the last 7 days (employed), whether they looked for work in the last 4 weeks (unemployed) or neither (not in the labour force) <sup>b</sup>                   |
| Non-economic incentives | Migration pathway                             | Whether the respondent came to Australia under offshore or onshore pathways                                                                                                                                         |
|                         | Composition of the friendship group           | Whether the respondent reported mainly having friends from their own ethnic or religious group, from mixed/other backgrounds, or no friends                                                                         |
| <b>Demographics</b>     |                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|                         | Sex                                           | Whether the respondent is male or female <sup>c</sup>                                                                                                                                                               |
|                         | Age at arrival                                | Age of the respondent at the time of interview in Wave 1 <sup>d</sup>                                                                                                                                               |
|                         | Married or has a partner                      | Whether the respondent was married or had a partner prior to each survey                                                                                                                                            |
|                         | Language group                                | Respondent's main language spoken at home <sup>e</sup>                                                                                                                                                              |
|                         | Location                                      | Whether the respondent lived in areas with low, medium or high levels of disadvantage <sup>f</sup>                                                                                                                  |

**Notes:** For the code of variables used in this table, see Table B1.1 in Appendix B.

<sup>a</sup> Respondents who answered 'no, my English is already good' were not asked about studying English in Australia again until Wave 6. Note that informal language learning often happens through family, friends, conversation or social media and can prepare, complement, extend or even substitute classroom-based learning (Bahrani & Sim, 2012).

<sup>b</sup> Labour force status was used only for descriptive analysis due to the endogeneity issue discussed in Box 2.

<sup>c</sup> This captures only biological sex at birth rather than gender identity.

<sup>d</sup> Age was also coded into 5 categories for descriptive analysis: under 35, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64 and 65 and above.

<sup>e</sup> Respondents whose main language at home is English were excluded (less than 3%) to focus on those for whom the decision to learn the English language is more acute.

<sup>f</sup> Measured by the Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD) (ABS, 2023).

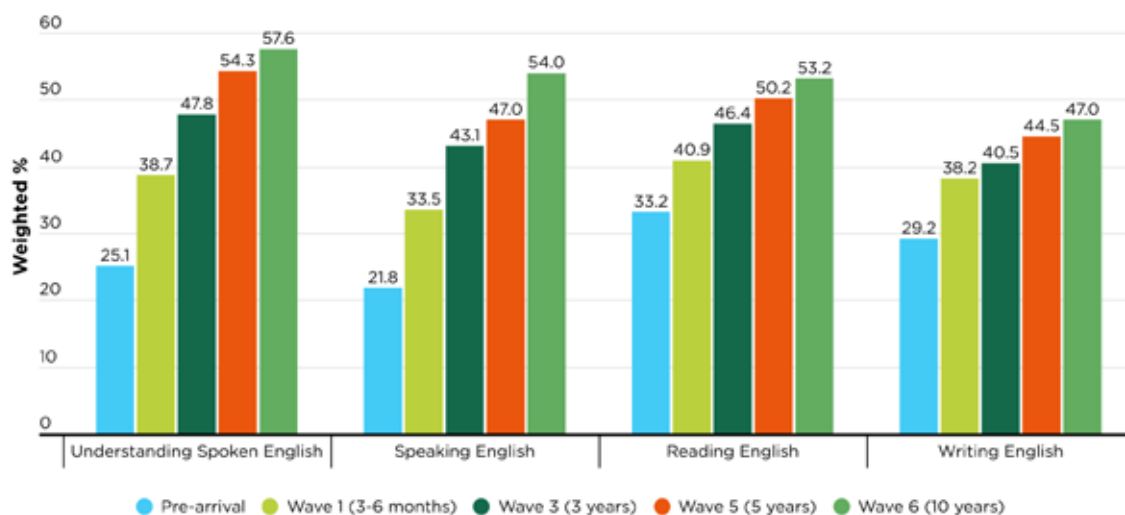
## Part 1: Trends in English language proficiency over the first 10 years of settlement

### General trends in English language proficiency across all 4 language domains

The proportion of humanitarian migrants reporting proficiency in the English language increased over time across all 4 language domains, and more so for speaking and understanding spoken English (Figure 2). Less than 3 out of 10 humanitarian migrants reported being proficient in each of the 4 language domains prior to arrival. However, proportions had increased by at least 8 percentage points for all domains within 3–6 months after arrival.

While proficiency in all dimensions was even stronger 10 years after arrival, oral skills (speaking and understanding spoken English) showed the largest increase (at least 30 percentage points each from pre-arrival levels). As humanitarian migrants become more immersed in their new environment and engage in daily conversations, their oral skills often develop more rapidly than their literacy skills (reading and writing).<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 2:** Proficiency in English language skills over time



**Notes:** For the number of participants responding to each measure of the English language in multiple waves, see Table C1.1 in Appendix C.

**Source:** BNLA Waves 1, 3, 5 and 6

Proficiency increased for both men and women over time but remained higher for men, given their higher starting point prior to arrival (Figure 3).<sup>2</sup> Men reported at least a 10-percentage point improvement in proficiency across the 4 dimensions within 3–6 months of arrival, compared to their pre-arrival levels, with this improvement continuing over the next 3, 5 and 10 years after arrival.

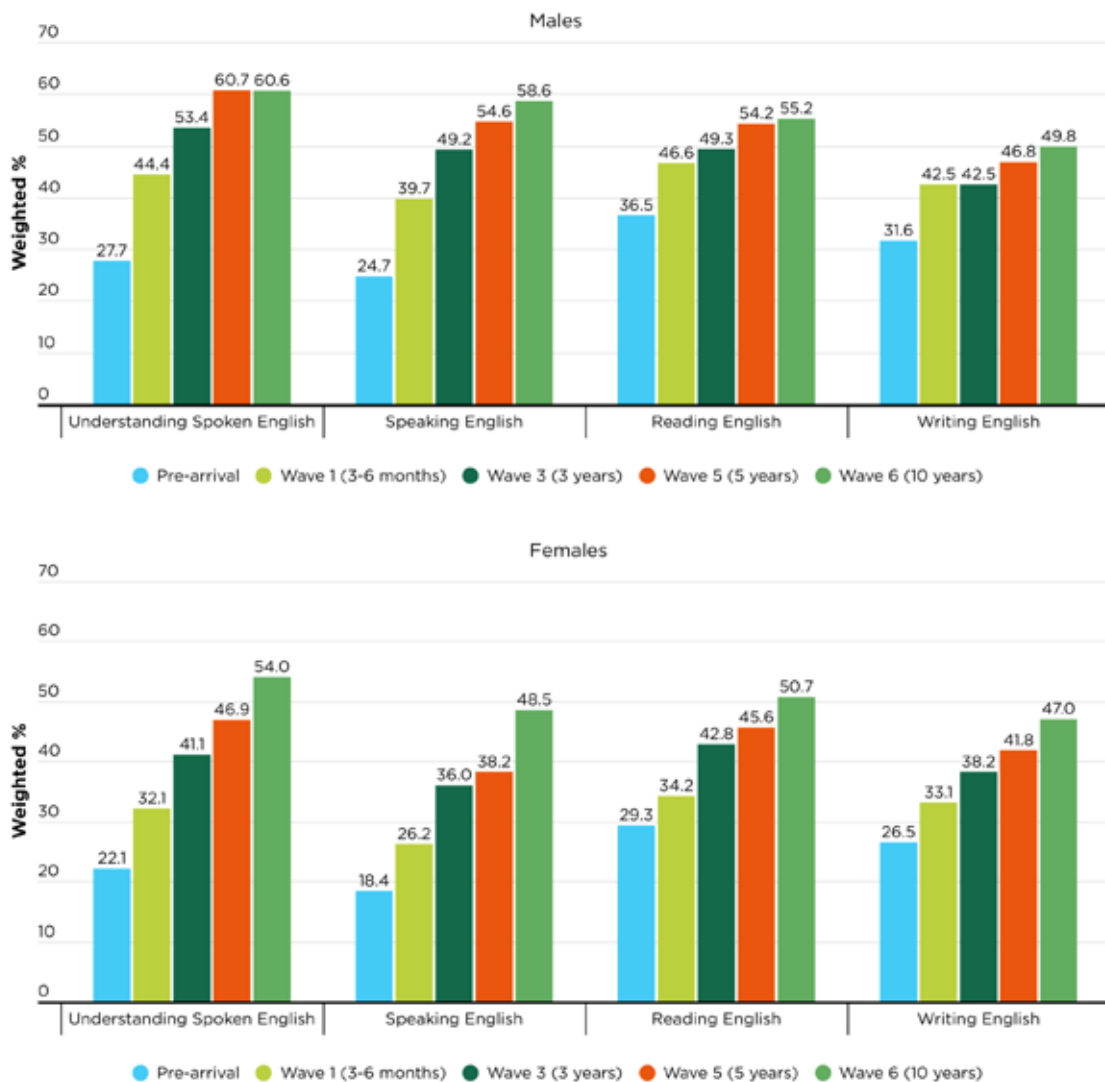
Women were up to 8 percentage points below men across the 4 dimensions pre-arrival, and while this gap widened in the short term (3–6 months), it subsequently narrowed again by the 10-year mark and almost approached parity for writing (50% for men and 47% for women). As more women entered the workforce and gained access to educational opportunities, their literacy skills improved considerably compared to those of men.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Morrice et al. (2021) showed that practical communication needs can lead to speaking ability developing more rapidly than reading skills among resettled refugees in the UK.

<sup>2</sup> Multiple factors might be at play, such as unequal opportunity to education and employment before migration, cultural influences, as well as cognitive ability (though the latter was not observable) (See Bernhard & Bernhard, 2022). Nonetheless, the differences between these groups were not statistically significant at the standard significance levels of 0.05, 0.01, and 0.001, except for the speaking English proficiency.

<sup>3</sup> Within 3–6 months of arrival, 63% of employed women and 60% of employed men reported reading proficiency; and 61% and 55% reported writing proficiency, respectively. These proportions increased over time but the gender gap remained statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Figure 3: Proficiency in English language skills over time, by sex



Notes: For the number of participants (males and females) responding to each measure of the English language in multiple waves, see Table C1.1 in Appendix C.

Source: BNLA Waves 1, 3, 5 and 6

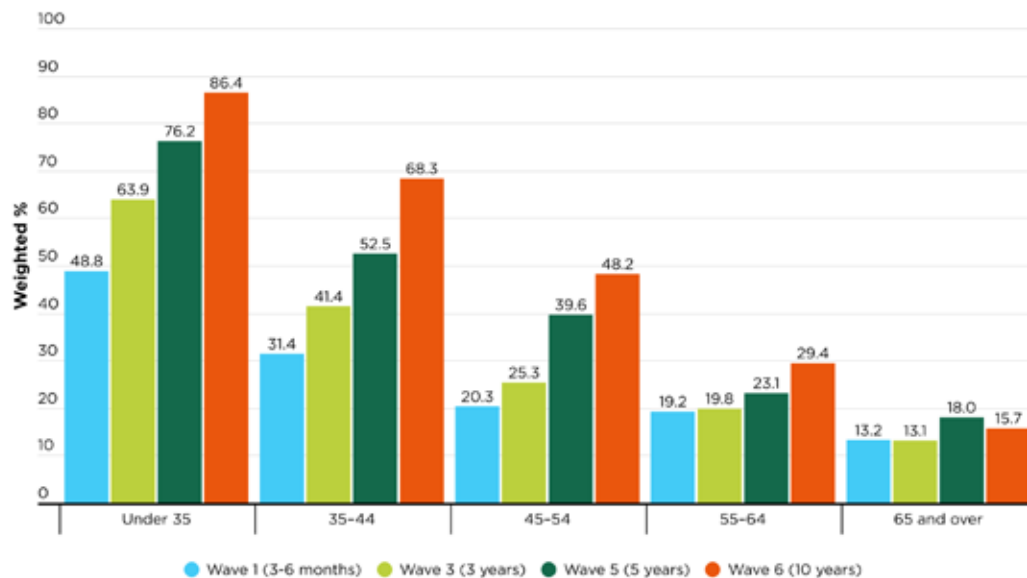
## Proficiency in understanding spoken English over time, by pre- and post-arrival characteristics

Results are presented here on pre- and post-arrival characteristics to provide context for the next part of the brief, which looks at the associations of these factors with the likelihood of achieving proficiency in understanding spoken English.

Younger age groups of humanitarian migrants had higher proportions who reported being proficient in understanding spoken English, both in the short term and longer term (Figure 4). Almost half of humanitarian migrants aged under 35 years (49%) were proficient 3–6 months after arrival, with this proportion increasing to 86% 10 years after arrival. In contrast, less than 1 in 5 humanitarian migrants aged 65 years and over were

proficient in understanding spoken English over the 10 years of settlement in Australia.<sup>4</sup> This is further evidenced in van Kooy and colleagues (2024) by the high rates of interpreting assistance needed by BNLA participants aged 65 years and over.

**Figure 4:** Proficiency in understanding spoken English over time, by age group



**Notes:** For the number of participants responding to understanding spoken English in multiple waves, see Table C1.1 in Appendix C.

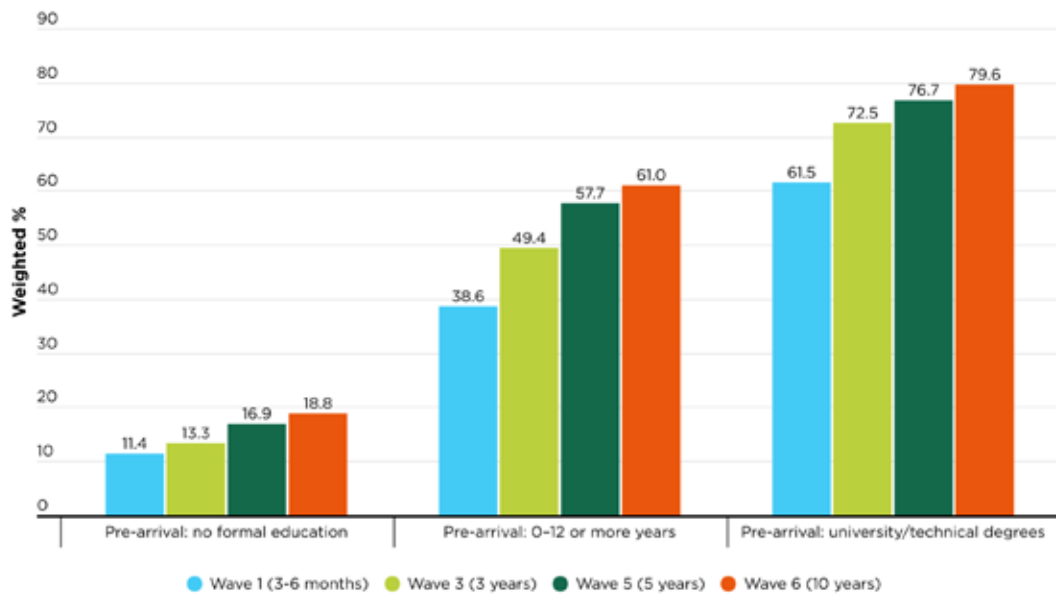
**Source:** BNLA Waves 1, 3, 5 and 6

Similarly, the proportion of humanitarian migrants with pre-arrival formal education who reported proficiency in understanding spoken English was higher than the proportion of those without any formal education prior to arrival (Figure 5). Those with university/technical degrees consistently reported the highest proficiency over time, while humanitarian migrants without formal education prior to arrival reported the smallest improvement.

Interestingly, the proportion of humanitarian migrants with formal education (up to 12 or more years but without a university or technical degree) reporting proficiency showed the largest increase over the 10-year period (increasing 22 percentage points over the 10 years, compared to 18 percentage points for those with university/technical degrees). This finding suggests that factors beyond formal education may have a significant influence on language acquisition. However, the underlying reasons remain unclear, highlighting a gap in the evidence base and the need for further research to better understand the drivers of language progression in this group.

<sup>4</sup> Note that the proportion of participants aged 65 and above reporting proficiency in understanding spoken English skills remained fixed at 13% in both Waves 1 and 3. This is because the number of observations for this oldest group was similar in both waves, whereas the sample size for this group increased slightly in Wave 5 before decreasing in Wave 6.

**Figure 5: Proficiency in understanding spoken English over time, by pre-arrival education**



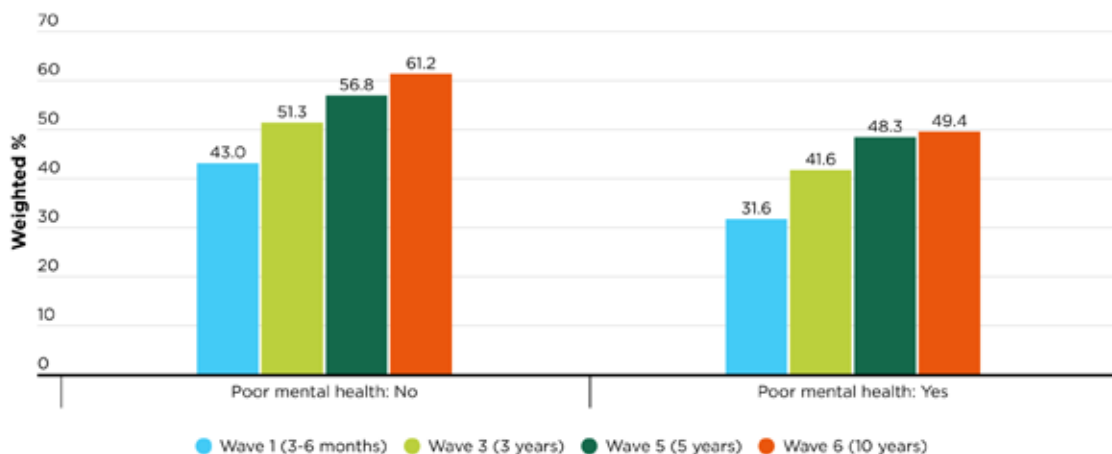
**Notes:** For the number of participants responding to understanding spoken English in multiple waves, see Table C1.1 in Appendix C.

**Source:** BNLA Waves 1, 3, 5 and 6

Proficiency in understanding spoken English increased over time for those with and without poor mental health, albeit off a lower base for those with poor mental health (Figure 6). Almost one-third (32%) of humanitarian migrants with poor mental health reported proficiency in understanding spoken English 3–6 months after arrival, compared to 43% for those without poor mental health. For both groups, the proportions increased by around 18 percentage points over the 10 years of settlement.

Despite starting from a lower baseline, migrants with poor mental health may still benefit from the same supports, such as access to language education programs, support networks and services that support language acquisition over time (Cooper et al., 2019). Moreover, language acquisition is likely to improve mental health over time (van Kooy et al., 2024), with individuals potentially transitioning from lower to higher wellbeing as their proficiency increases. Overall, although a lower starting point could reflect an initial barrier (e.g. social isolation, trauma and limited access to services prior to arrival), the parallel rate of improvement suggests that once resettled, humanitarian migrants with poor mental health can make comparable progress.

**Figure 6: Proficiency in understanding spoken English over time, by mental health status**



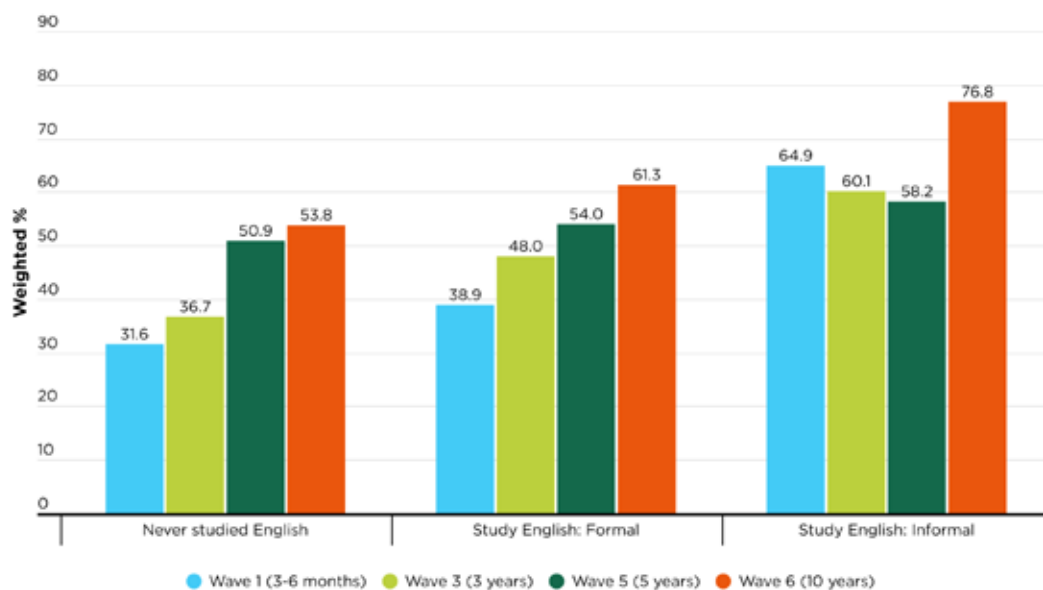
**Notes:** For the number of participants responding to understanding spoken English in multiple waves, see Table C1.1 in Appendix C.

**Source:** BNLA Waves 1, 3, 5 and 6

In Australia, humanitarian migrants can be exposed to English formally or informally after their arrival. Figure 7 shows that almost two-thirds (65%) of humanitarian migrants who learnt English informally after arrival reported being proficient in understanding spoken English 3–6 months after arrival, compared to less than two-fifths of humanitarian migrants who were studying formally or not learning at all (39% and 32% respectively). This may be due to more opportunities for informal learning in the very early days after arrival; research shows that informal learning can complement formal training and migrants, particularly those with limited prior education, feel less intimidated and improve English proficiency (OECD, 2022).

After 5 years of settlement, humanitarian migrants who were learning through formal studies and those not learning English at all, both reported improved proficiency (54% and 51% respectively). However, from year 5 to year 10, the proportion reporting proficiency increased the most for those learning informally (from 58% to 77%).<sup>5</sup> This accords with research from a Malaysian study that found that language learning can be enhanced informally through work, social interactions or mass media technologies (Bahrani & Sim, 2012).

**Figure 7:** Proficiency in understanding spoken English over time, by English study



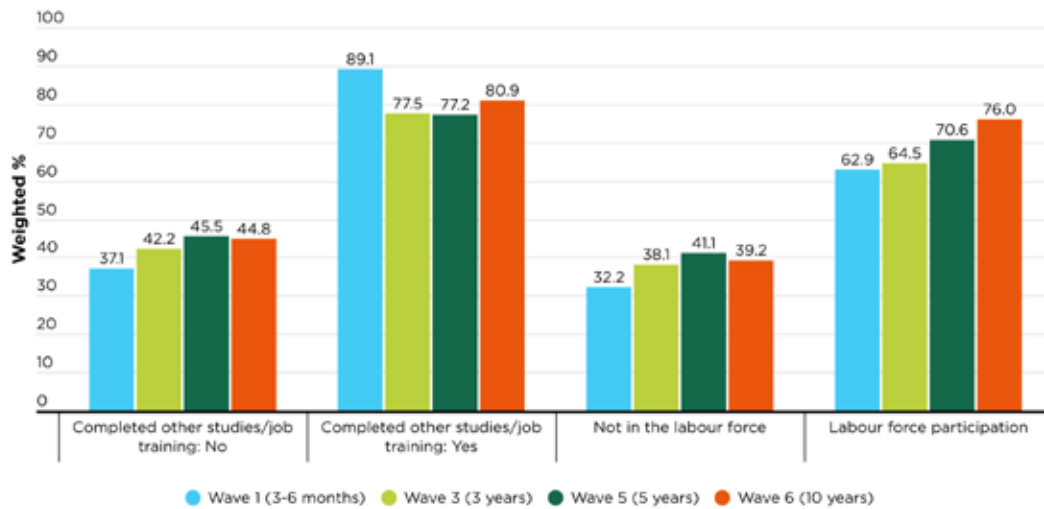
**Notes:** For the number of participants responding to understanding spoken English in multiple waves, see Table C1.1 in Appendix C.

**Source:** BNLA Waves 1, 3, 5 and 6

Humanitarian migrants who completed other studies or job training in Australia, or were employed or actively looking for work, were proficient in understanding spoken English at higher rates than their counterparts (see also van Kooy et al., 2024). Figure 8 shows that around 4 in 5 (81%) humanitarian migrants who had completed studies or job training in Australia were proficient in understanding spoken English after 10 years in Australia, almost twice the proportion as for those who had not completed other studies or job training in Australia at that time (45%). Similarly, the proportion of humanitarian migrants in the labour force proficient in understanding spoken English was almost twice (76%) that of humanitarian migrants not in the labour force (39%) after 10 years.

<sup>5</sup> Note that the observed increase may partly reflect changes in sample composition and size between survey waves and should be interpreted with caution.

**Figure 8:** Proficiency in understanding spoken English over time, by completion of other studies in Australia and labour force participation



**Notes:** For the number of participants responding to understanding spoken English in multiple waves, see Table C1.1 in Appendix C.

**Source:** BNLA Waves 1, 3, 5 and 6

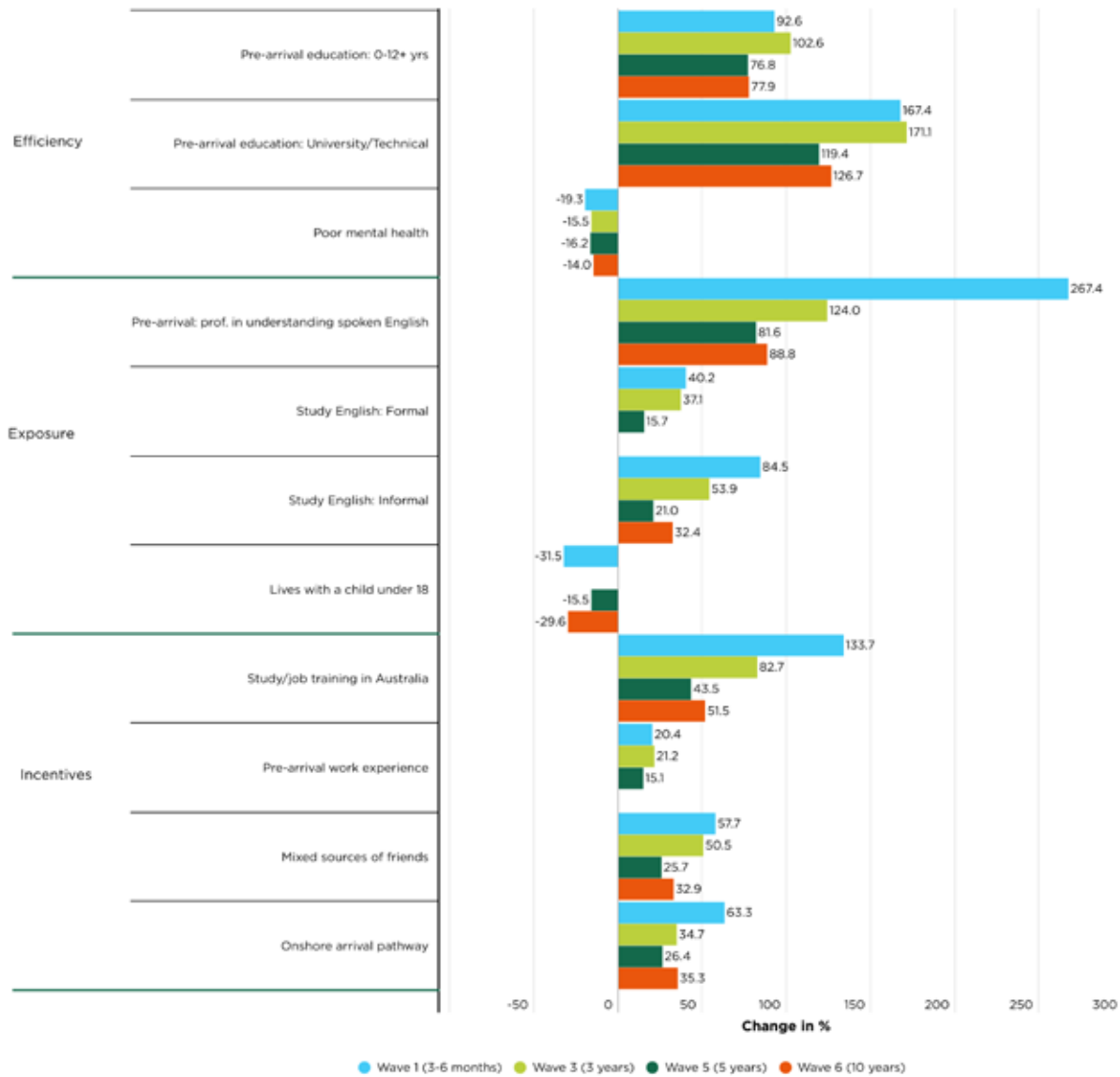
## Part 2: Factors contributing to changes in proficiency in understanding spoken English

Over the past decade, self-reported proficiency in understanding spoken English has seen a significant improvement for humanitarian migrants (see Figure 2). Identifying the factors associated with this progress has important implications for settlement policy.

This part explores the factors associated with changes in proficiency in understanding spoken English over time among humanitarian migrants in Australia.<sup>6</sup> Details on the methods used can be found in Box 2. Figure 9 shows the key results that were statistically significant for the factors reported as proxies for the 3 determinants of language proficiency: efficiency, exposure and incentives.

<sup>6</sup> This brief focused on proficiency in understanding spoken English for reasons of brevity and follows the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) Impact Evaluation findings, which suggest that understanding spoken English is a good proxy for general English proficiency in the absence of a standardised English test (Telethon Kids Institute and University of Western Australia, 2022).

**Figure 9:** Percentage change in the probability of reporting proficiency in understanding spoken English over time, by efficiency, exposure and incentives



**Notes:** Bars to the left of 0.0 on the horizontal axis indicate a negative association with proficiency in understanding spoken English and bars to the right show a positive association. For the complete regression results, see Tables C1.2–C1.3 in Appendix C.

**Reference groups:** pre-arrival: no formal education, no mental illness, pre-arrival: proficiency in understanding spoken English: not at all/not well, never studied English, no children under 18, non-completion of study/training in Aus, no pre-arrival work experience, no friends/mostly from ethnic/religious community, and offshore arrival pathway.

**Controls:** age at arrival, dummy variables for being male, language spoken at home, marital status, and location.

**Source:** BNLA Waves 1, 3, 5 and 6

## Looking at what drives change over time: efficiency, exposure and incentives

### Efficiency

Pre-arrival education levels and mental health were associated with changes in self-reported proficiency in understanding spoken English. Humanitarian migrants with educational attainment before arrival were more likely to be proficient in understanding spoken English over the 10 years post arrival but this association weakened over time. By 3–6 months after arrival, humanitarian migrants with a pre-arrival university/technical degree were 1.7 times (167%) more likely to report being proficient in understanding spoken English compared to those with no formal education before arrival. However, a decade later, this had reduced to 1.3 times (127%) more likely.<sup>7</sup> Results were similar for humanitarian migrants with up to 12 or more years of formal education (but without a university or technical degree), though not as strong.

It follows that pre-arrival education improves proficiency in understanding spoken English in the short term but as humanitarian migrants integrate into their new society, the need for further improvement diminishes (Mitrou & Nguyen, 2023). It is also possible that other unobserved factors associated with improvements in English proficiency over time may have accounted for the variation initially linked to pre-arrival education.

In contrast, poor mental health was a significant barrier to becoming proficient in understanding spoken English over the 10 years following arrival. Similar to pre-arrival education, this association weakened over time. Humanitarian migrants with poor mental health were 19% less likely to report proficiency in understanding spoken English 3–6 months after arrival, compared to those without poor mental health. This weakened to 14% less likely at 10 years after arrival.

### Exposure

Humanitarian migrants who reported being proficient in understanding spoken English before arrival were more likely to report being proficient in understanding spoken English over the 10 years post-arrival, although this association weakened over time. By 3–6 months after arrival, humanitarian migrants who reported being proficient in understanding spoken English before arrival were 2.7 times (267%) more likely to report being proficient in understanding spoken English, compared to those who reported not being proficient before arrival (see also Department of Social Services [DSS], 2017). This link weakened considerably over time, with the likelihood decreasing to 89% 10 years after arrival.

Like pre-arrival education, pre-arrival understanding of spoken English is more effective in the short term for improving English language comprehension than in the long term. Early English proficiency provides benefits immediately in terms of comprehension and communication but progress may plateau over time without continued formal and informal learning (Landgrave, 2019). It is also possible that self-perceptions of language skills may change over time (van Kooy et al., 2024).

English language learning after arrival was also associated with a higher likelihood of reporting proficiency in spoken English among humanitarian migrants. The positive association between formal and informal training and understanding spoken English weakened with the duration of residence in Australia, with the positive link to formal training becoming statistically insignificant 10 years after arrival.

The weakened result of formal English language training might be linked to increased social integration and employment opportunities over time (Lang, 2022). When sources of friends from non-ethnic backgrounds (e.g. in social and work settings) were considered, the link between formal language learning and proficiency in understanding spoken English was no longer evident 10 years after arrival (see Table C1.3 in Appendix C).

Having children under 18 years of age reduced the likelihood of reporting proficiency in understanding spoken English among humanitarian migrants. At 3–6 months after arrival, humanitarian migrants with children under 18 years were 32% less likely to be proficient in understanding spoken English compared to those without children under 18 years. While this result weakened 5 years after arrival, it returned to levels observed during the early settlement period by the 10-year mark. This finding holds for both men and women (see further below).

<sup>7</sup> In comparison to Figure 5, the findings revealed a downward trend in proficiency in understanding spoken English 10 years after arrival. This may stem from several factors, including controlling for confounding variables that are negatively associated with proficiency in understanding spoken English in the model. Figure 5, which exhibited an upward trend after 10 years, did not account for other factors.

Child care responsibilities and the time commitments of managing children's needs may restrict opportunities to enhance spoken English skills.<sup>8</sup> As discussed above, children may also provide interpreting or translation support to their parents, thereby limiting their parents' direct exposure to understanding spoken English and potentially slowing down their language development (see Isphording, 2015).

## Incentives

Completing other studies or job training in Australia was associated with higher self-reported proficiency in understanding spoken English among humanitarian migrants over the 10-year period; however, this association weakened over time. At 3–6 months after arrival, humanitarian migrants who had completed studies/job training since arriving in Australia were 1.3 times (133%) more likely to be proficient in understanding spoken English compared to those who had not completed these. By 10 years after arrival, this result had weakened to 52% more likely. Over time, as humanitarian migrants become more proficient in understanding spoken English and secure stable employment, the urgency to further improve their language skills diminishes (Blake et al., 2019).

Humanitarian migrants with pre-arrival work experience improved their understanding of spoken English skills by 20% more than those without prior work experience within 3–6 months after arrival. However, 10 years after arrival, pre-arrival work experience was no longer associated with spoken English proficiency (i.e. not statistically significant).

Among non-economic incentives, onshore arrival pathways (compared to offshore pathways) and having mixed sources of friends from non-ethnic backgrounds (compared to no friends/mostly from ethnic/religious communities) both contributed to higher proficiency in understanding spoken English over the 10-year period. However, these positive associations also weakened over time. Onshore migrants are more likely to be exposed to the host country's language than their offshore counterparts, as they are immediately immersed in the host country's language environment and have been there longer.<sup>9</sup>

## Comparing the relative strength of each language component together

To compare the relative strength of each of the 3 language components in understanding spoken English proficiency, this study analysed all 3 together, in addition to analysing them individually across waves (as above). A summary of the changes in the strength of the 3 components is provided below. There was generally a weaker association between factors related to each of the 3 language components and proficiency in understanding spoken English when examined collectively (the complete model), indicating that while they each remain important, their relative weight is less distinguishable when considered together. The summary of results for both the complete and individual models is shown in Table C1.4 of Appendix C.

The importance of pre-arrival education on proficiency in understanding spoken English remained but decreased more over time in the complete model (relative to the individual model). On the other hand, while the adverse relationship between poor mental health and understanding spoken English did not change much in the short term and became statistically insignificant 5 years after settlement, it grew stronger at the 10-year mark.

The combined effect of measures of efficiency interacting with those of exposure and incentives revealed that mental health challenges appeared to operate independently of exposure and incentives in the short term. However, the intensity of poor mental health became stronger in year 10, suggesting that factors related to exposure and incentives to improve understanding of spoken English may have amplified the observed effect of mental health conditions on proficiency over the longer term. Therefore, humanitarian migrants who had long struggled with mental health challenges, despite having a formal education prior to migration, experienced less improvement in proficiency in understanding spoken English over the longer term.

The negative association of having children in the household under 18 years of age for proficiency in understanding spoken English was initially weak but became even stronger at the 10-year mark when compared to the individual model. However, the association with formal and informal English language learning lost

<sup>8</sup> While AMEP providers can arrange subsidised child care for participants, child care options may not be convenient or accessible to parents, and it is not guaranteed that child care places will be available on the days when participants are in class (Department of Home Affairs, 2020; Refugee Communities Advocacy Network [RCAN], 2021).

<sup>9</sup> While both groups can be compared in terms of outcomes such as language proficiency, caution is advised in interpreting these comparisons due to differences in length of residence in Australia, environmental contexts (e.g. different settlement conditions) and access to resources, which may affect their comparability.

significance in the complete model after 3 years of settlement, and the positive association with pre-arrival English proficiency decreased over the 10-year period.

This shows that when measures of exposure interact with those of efficiency and incentives, the combined effect is that humanitarian migrants with children under 18 years of age, despite having proficiency in understanding spoken English prior to arrival, experienced less improvement in understanding spoken English over the longer term.

The importance of completing other studies or training in Australia and having friends from diverse backgrounds in understanding spoken English remained but decreased more over time in the complete model (relative to the individual model). Further, pre-arrival work experience and onshore arrival pathways (both incentive measures) lost significance at most time points and over the longer term, respectively, in the complete model.

Therefore, the combined effect of incentive measures interacting with efficiency and exposure measures revealed that humanitarian migrants who arrived via the onshore channel, despite completing formal education or job training in Australia or benefiting from having friends from different backgrounds, were less likely to experience improvement in understanding spoken English, especially in the long term.

The interaction of measures related to efficiency, exposure and incentives and their association with proficiency in understanding spoken English is complex. There is no one factor or factors that appear to hold greater weight than others. The next section explores the potential associations with demographic characteristics, followed by an analysis of how sex interacts with measures of efficiency, exposure and incentives.

## The interaction of demographic characteristics

Demographic factors interact in complex ways to shape proficiency in understanding spoken English among humanitarian migrants (in both individual models and complete models of the 3 language components). See Tables C1.2–C1.3 in Appendix C.

Migrating at an older age and being married were both associated to some extent with a lower proficiency in understanding spoken English. For age, the finding was consistent across all models over the 10-year settlement, indicating that proficiency in understanding spoken English declined with older ages, irrespective of other factors. This pattern holds for both males and females (see Figure C1.2 in Appendix C).

Being married was associated with a reduced likelihood of understanding spoken English for humanitarian migrants across all models at 5 years after arrival (with only a weak association in the efficiency model after a decade). This association lost significance in the exposure and complete models at other time points.

One possible explanation is that the measures of exposure, such as having young children at home, are likely to trigger gender-specific expectations that reduce the influence of marriage on proficiency in understanding spoken English (Bleakley & Chin, 2010). This is further supported by sex-disaggregated analysis in the complete model, which shows that married women were less likely to improve their proficiency in understanding spoken English, particularly over the longer term (see Table C1.6 in Appendix C).

Male humanitarian migrants were more likely than females to be proficient in understanding spoken English, with this advantage lasting up to 10 years after arrival in some models. The males' advantage in proficiency in understanding spoken English remained strong in efficiency and exposure models but disappeared in the incentive and complete models, except at 5 years after arrival. The analysis by sex may help explain the underlying factors contributing to this trend (see below).

Humanitarian migrants residing in less disadvantaged areas were more likely to be proficient in understanding spoken English than those who lived in more disadvantaged areas (see also van Kooy et al., 2024). However, this was not consistent in the efficiency model 10 years after arrival and in complete models at certain time points. The former finding suggests it may be challenging to isolate the influence of living in less disadvantaged areas on proficiency in understanding spoken English while controlling for efficiency measures. Further research is needed to explore this trend in more detail.

## Differences in findings for men and women

Figure 10 shows that the factors associated with proficiency in understanding spoken English varied not only over time but also by sex. This figure presents statistically significant results in the complete model (i.e. considering all 3 components of language proficiency together) across waves and disaggregated by sex (for details, see Tables C1.5–C1.6 in Appendix C).

Women experiencing poor mental health were generally less proficient in understanding spoken English at most stages after arrival, with the intensity of this pattern becoming most pronounced 10 years post-arrival. In contrast, men's English proficiency did not appear to be associated with their poor mental health.

One possible explanation is that men often enter the workforce earlier and have more consistent exposure to English in work settings, which can help counteract the negative effects of mental health challenges on language learning (Montemitro et al., 2021). Female migrants, on the other hand, tend to enter the labour market later, limiting their opportunities for language exposure (van Kooy et al., 2024). Additionally, they are more likely to have experienced trauma prior to migration, which can have lasting impacts on mental health and further hinder their ability to become proficient in English (Bernhard & Bernhard, 2022).

Having formal education prior to arrival remained crucial for proficiency in understanding spoken English after a decade of residence, and even more so for women. This pattern also held for women in relation to pre-arrival English proficiency at certain time points. This suggests that how migrants develop and perceive their English proficiency over time can differ between men and women, depending on the education and skills they had before migrating.

Formal learning of English in Australia showed mixed results over time for both men and women. For women, formal learning was positively associated with proficiency over most time periods, reaching its peak 3 years after arrival. For men, formal language learning was relevant during the early settlement period (3–6 months) in Australia but was less likely to improve proficiency 10 years after settlement. Informal English learning was positively associated with proficiency during the early settlement period for men and later (especially 3 and 10 years after arrival) in the settlement journey for women.

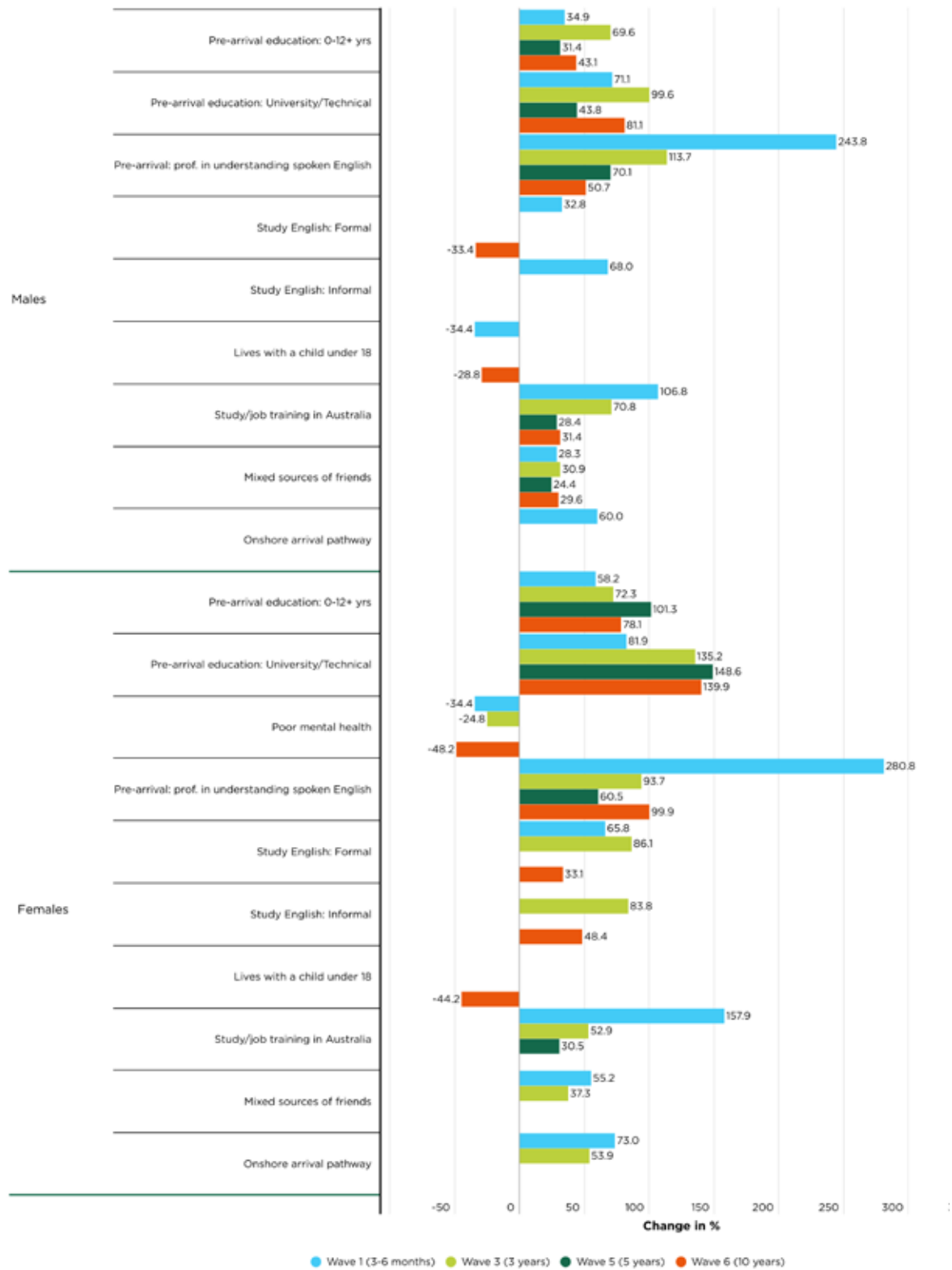
Both men and women who had completed other studies or training in Australia were more likely to be proficient in understanding spoken English for up to 5 years after arrival and, for men, this association extended up to 10 years. The gender difference observed in year 10 may be related to the range of challenges that women face after arrival, including the strong influence of poor mental health discussed earlier and the added responsibilities of caregiving. These factors can interact in ways that affect women's ability to improve their English proficiency.

Both men and women were less likely to report proficiency 10 years after arrival if they had children under 18 years of age, compared to those who had no children under 18, with this negative association greater for women (see also van Kooy et al., 2025). This may be connected to women's caring responsibilities over the longer term (noting that having children under 18 years of age did not have a negative association in the shorter term). This highlights the role female migrants play in caring for children and other mediating factors not included in the analysis, such as additional caring responsibilities, which hinder their ability to acquire English proficiency (Bernhard & Bernhard, 2022).

For both men and women, having friends from a mix of cultural or ethnic backgrounds was more likely to be associated with proficiency in understanding spoken English than having no friends/friends mostly from own ethnic background. For women, this positive link became statistically insignificant after 3 years of residence. Over time, women may become more integrated in the broader community with a greater reliance on informal learning (as noted above), and this shift can reduce the relative significance of their initial social connections in understanding spoken English.

Arrival via the onshore pathway was positively associated with proficiency in understanding spoken English at 3–6 months after arrival for men, and up to 3 years after arrival for women. Men are more likely to enter the workforce soon after arrival, especially through onshore pathways (see also van Kooy et al., 2025), which may provide early and consistent exposure to the English language and may explain why the association weakened after the early settlement period. Over the longer term, women's greater reliance on informal learning methods (as noted above) and other mediating factors (e.g. cultural expectations and gender norms) not included in the analysis may help offset the influence of structured onshore programs, particularly after 3 years of residence.

**Figure 10:** Percentage change in the probability of reporting proficiency in understanding spoken English over time, by sex



**Notes:** Bars to the left of 0.0 on the horizontal axis indicate a negative association with proficiency in understanding spoken English, and bars to the right show a positive association. For the complete regression results, see Tables C1.5-C1.6 in Appendix C.

**Reference groups:** pre-arrival education: no formal education, no mental illness, pre-arrival: proficiency in understanding spoken English: not at all/not well, never studied English, no children under 18, non-completion of study/training in Aus, no friends/mostly from ethnic/religious community, and offshore arrival pathway.

**Controls:** age at arrival, language spoken at home, marital status, and location.

**Source:** BNLA Waves 1, 3, 5 and 6

## Conclusion

Most humanitarian migrants in the BNLA cohort arrived with limited skills in all 4 measures of English language capability, irrespective of sex. Their proficiency in all 4 measures increased over the 10 years of settlement, particularly in oral skills during the early years, but this growth tapered off with duration of residence. Although the proportion of men proficient in oral English skills consistently remained higher than that of women, the gap narrowed considerably after a decade.

Further analysis of proficiency in understanding spoken English shows that the proportions were higher for humanitarian migrants who were younger, had university or technical qualifications on arrival, learned English after arriving, completed other studies or training in Australia and entered the workforce. By contrast, poor mental health was associated with lower proficiency in understanding spoken English. This pattern is seen both shortly after arrival and over the longer term.

Efficiency, exposure and incentives all play a role in acquiring understanding of spoken English, and they influence each other over time. Changes in one of these language components lead to changes in the others over time. More specifically, the strength of the association between factors linked to one language component and understanding spoken English appears to vary depending on how factors from other components are also related to spoken English comprehension.

This indicates that all 3 components were important at different stages of developing an understanding of spoken English. Efficiency in learning the English language through pre-arrival education, exposure to the language through pre-arrival understanding of spoken English and incentives such as completing other studies or job-related training in Australia, as well as having mixed sources of friends, proved advantageous for building proficiency in understanding spoken English over time. However, humanitarian migrants with poor mental health could not benefit from increased exposure or incentives over time. Similarly, those with children under 18 years of age could not benefit from increased efficiency or incentives in the long term.

There were some differences in the findings for men and women over time. Women with poor mental health experienced lower levels of proficiency in understanding spoken English compared to women without poor mental health, both in the short term and after 10 years, whereas there was no significant finding for men. Completing other studies or training in Australia increased the likelihood of men understanding spoken English over a 10-year period but this trend did not hold for women after 10 years. Similarly, having friends from mixed backgrounds was positively associated with proficiency in understanding spoken English over a 10-year period; however, this association did not persist for women in the long term. Furthermore, although there was no significant association between learning English in Australia and increased proficiency in understanding spoken English for men and women combined, especially over the longer term, the results differed when analysed by sex. Women benefited from formal and informal language learning, particularly in the early years of resettlement and even after 10 years. For men, language learning (whether formal or informal) was linked to proficiency in understanding spoken English within 3–6 months after arrival.

These results show that factors contributing to understanding spoken English over time varied by sex and emphasise the responsibility of receiving countries to offer opportunities and incentives for humanitarian migrants to acquire language skills, taking gender roles into consideration.

## Relevance for policy and practice

### Early assessment of skills to support language education upon arrival is vital

Pre-arrival experiences, such as educational attainment and proficiency in understanding spoken English, are important for both men and women in achieving proficiency in understanding spoken English after a decade of residence (see also van Kooy et al., 2024). This finding is crucial for economic integration, as research shows that humanitarian migrants with good English proficiency are likely to be employed and maintain stable jobs in the long term (van Kooy et al., 2024, 2025).

Programs supporting language education for humanitarian migrants (such as AMEP and Skills for Education and Employment [SEE]) should be scaled up within the first few months after arrival, allowing them to build on the skills they acquired prior to arrival. Research commissioned by the settlement sector (currently underway) aligns with this perspective, indicating that migrants who access settlement services early tend to have stronger English proficiency after 5 years in Australia. These early service users are also less likely to require support from an interpreter over time.

In addition, migrants who are illiterate prior to arrival may require different types of language support compared to those with some level of formal education, given their distinct learning needs and starting points (Blake et al., 2019).

## Strengthening mental health support to improve English skills is critical

Poor mental health hampers the development of understanding spoken English over time (see also Montemitro et al., 2021). Australia's Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) plays a foundational role in facilitating access to mental health services for humanitarian entrants. While it does not provide direct clinical care, it supports referrals to specialist providers and promotes culturally responsive, trauma-informed approaches through community-based programs (Slewa-Younan et al., 2018). However, challenges remain in ensuring accessibility, cultural relevance and awareness (Beyond Blue, 2025; Tomasi et al., 2022). These gaps underscore the urgent need to scale up support to ensure fair and inclusive access for all humanitarian migrants.

Research shows that multilevel social connections (i.e. individual as well as community or institutional levels of networks) are key to curbing mental health problems among vulnerable populations, including refugees (Villalonga-Olives et al., 2022). For humanitarian migrants, support from family, friends and community groups helps reduce stress and build a sense of belonging (Ziersch et al., 2023). Access to health care and social services helps migrants adjust and feel more stable in their new environment over time (Blake et al., 2019; Tomasi et al., 2022).

## Programs that support social connections with people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds may enhance the likelihood of understanding spoken English

This brief found that building networks with people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds contributed to proficiency in understanding spoken English in the early years after settlement, and even after a decade of residence for men (see also Betts et al., 2024). Therefore, settlement services that support the development of social networks among humanitarian migrants should be continued – not only because informal support has a lasting positive impact on English proficiency, particularly for men, but also because individuals benefit from participating in networks that foster intercultural understanding and stronger, more connected communities (Smith et al., 2023).

This perspective is further supported by research commissioned by the settlement sector (currently underway), which highlights that humanitarian migrants experience stronger social connections after at least 3 years in Australia when settlement services facilitate meaningful community engagement through diverse channels.

## Policies and programs that support women's access to educational programs and address their health issues may improve their likelihood of understanding spoken English

This brief found gender differences in the proficiency of understanding spoken English among humanitarian migrants in Australia (see also van Kooy et al., 2024). Some of the factors that proved detrimental to an improved understanding of spoken English were more common among women, such as poor mental health. The complex interplay of challenges, such as low levels of English proficiency at the time of migration, poor mental health and caregiving responsibilities, can increase their burden of learning the host language (see also Bernhard & Bernhard, 2022; Dietrich et al., 2019).

On the other hand, factors that are potentially beneficial for acquiring an understanding of spoken English appeared to be ineffective for women at certain points after arrival. Studying or job training post-arrival, for example, was effective for up to 5 years for women but up to 10 years for men, suggesting that men and women may have different levels of incentives for acquiring proficiency in understanding spoken English. This observation opens up avenues for further research to understand the specific types of incentives that are most effective and how they can be tailored to men and women to achieve equitable language learning outcomes.

This brief also identified factors that could alleviate gender-specific differences. Women benefit more from language courses upon arrival, both in the early years and over the longer term. Learning English through informal networks also proved advantageous for women at some points in time. This could mean that language learning (both formal and informal) is essential for women over time, indicating the importance of sustained language learning for women to support their long-term success in settlement.

To support this, the integration of family support programs into formal language learning can play a vital role. While AMEP already offers some support for child care, access remains limited (Department of Home Affairs, 2020; RCAN, 2021), which can be a barrier for caregivers – particularly women – seeking to improve their English skills. Expanding on-site child care services at language learning centres could be a valuable step toward addressing these barriers and promoting equitable participation. Additionally, research shows that remote and home-based learning options tailored to the needs of caregivers offer broader benefits in caregiving contexts (Hung & Bao, 2023). The new AMEP business model, launching in January 2026, is designed to offer online and blended learning models, which may help address existing limitations in child care provision and improve access for diverse learner needs (Department of Home Affairs, 2025a).

It is worth mentioning that formal language learning tends to be less effective for men, except shortly after arrival. This trend may be attributed to a combination of structural (e.g., settlement pressures), social and economic factors, as highlighted in the evaluation of the AMEP program (Mitrou & Nguyen, 2023). Men often prioritise entering the workforce to support their families, which can limit both the time and motivation for formal English learning. Flexible and work-integrated models can be considered to accommodate competing responsibilities (Febring & Henry, 2022). Furthermore, future research that examines English proficiency measures separately for men and women could provide valuable insights to inform more inclusive and responsive program design.

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