CHAPTER 14

Reimagining Language in Higher Education

Engaging with the Linguistic Experiences of Students with Refugee and Asylum Seeker Backgrounds

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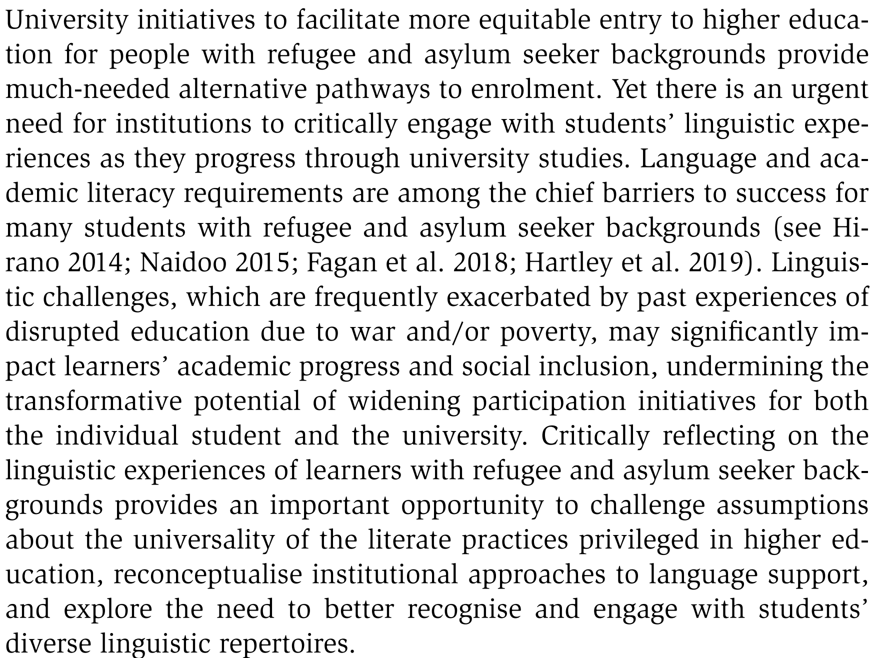

University initiatives to facilitate more equitable entry to higher education for people with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds provide much-needed alternative pathways to enrolment. Yet there is an urgent need for institutions to critically engage with students' linguistic experiences as they progress through university studies. Language and academic literacy requirements are among the chief barriers to success for many students with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds (see Hirano 2014; Naidoo 2015; Fagan et al. 2018; Hartley et al. 2019). Linguistic challenges, which are frequently exacerbated by past experiences of disrupted education due to war and/or poverty, may significantly impact learners' academic progress and social inclusion, undermining the transformative potential of widening participation initiatives for both the individual student and the university. Critically reflecting on the linguistic experiences of learners with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds provides an important opportunity to challenge assumptions about the universality of the literate practices privileged in higher education, reconceptualise institutional approaches to language support, and explore the need to better recognise and engage with students' diverse linguistic repertoires.

While higher education staff and student populations continue to diversify in terms of language background, the literate practices valued in the academy remain comparatively static (Ivanic 1998; Lillis 2001; Wingate 2006). Further, there is a prevailing expectation in higher education that students from traditionally under-represented backgrounds[1] will adopt dominant language forms, frequently with limited opportunities to be apprenticed into such textual practices, and with minimal

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scope for enriching tertiary institutions through the incorporation of alternative linguistic repertoires (Delpit 1988; Morrice 2013; Daddow 2016).

Dominant language forms, such as discipline-specific expectations regarding the navigation and production of text, and engagement with academic discourses and literacies, reflect – and construct – particular epistemological paradigms and ideological traditions (Unsworth 1999; Schleppegrell and de Oliveira 2006). Yet these powerful forms of 'linguistic capital' (Bourdieu 1991) are often treated unproblematically in higher education, with an assumption of universality that belies the linguistic diversity of student (and staff) populations. Such attitudes help perpetuate established patterns of educational marginalisation by denying certain learner groups access to the textual practices valued within the academy (Delpit 1988; Lillis 2001; Daddow 2016).

In this sense, the experiences of many students with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds are indicative of the broader, systemic exclusion of populations with linguistic repertoires that differ from the literate practices foregrounded in higher education (Morrice 2013). Lillis (2001: 39) notes how language practices in education can 'privilege the discursive routines of particular social groups whilst dismissing those of people who, culturally and communally, have access to and engage in a range of other practices'.

Here, I suggest that genuinely engaging with the linguistic repertoires – including strengths and needs – of students with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds offers an important opportunity to transform 'mainstream'[2] instructional practices in higher education. This requires students and staff to collectively explore discipline-specific literacies practices, problematise the cultural and epistemological perspectives embedded within powerful text types, and engage with alternative 'discursive routines' (Lillis 2001: 39). Such approaches may provide opportunities for sharing linguistic repertoires, creating space for all students to incorporate socio-cultural practices and values that may have been traditionally under-represented or disregarded in higher education institutions. For instance, in the Australian university context, important work is being undertaken to foreground the need for educational institutions to better recognise and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' rich and varied linguistic practices and knowledges (see Koramannil 2016; Wilks et al. 2020).[3]

This chapter originates in my own struggles as a scholar-practitioner working with students in so-called 'mainstream' higher education to ensure their access to powerful forms of discipline-specific language,

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while also seeking to value and learn from their linguistic repertoires. The chapter is not intended to provide an exhaustive account of existing literature focused on the linguistic experiences of students with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds,[4] but is a reflective exploration of selected themes emanating from my experiences and identified in research undertaken at the nexus of widening participation, applied linguistics and higher education. I seek to investigate possibilities for honouring refugee and asylum seeker background students' linguistic strengths and needs, and consider ways in which institutional structures and teaching approaches may better facilitate such engagement. The hope is that this chapter will contribute to larger conversations regarding the need to transform linguistic practices within higher education, disrupt deficit framing of students with refugee/asylum seeker experiences, and genuinely commit to linguistically rich, productive and generative learning spaces.

Importantly, I acknowledge that, as a first language speaker of English – one of the dominant means of communication in higher education but certainly not the original or only language of teaching and learning in the place[5] in which I often live and work – I write from a privileged position. I also acknowledge that the issues of language and power discussed in this chapter are complex, deeply personal and highly contested. I recognise that, regardless of attempts to maintain reflexivity, my engagement with the research and practices in my field is filtered through my own cultural and linguistic experiences, ideologies and limitations. Finally, while I use the terms 'students with refugee and asylum seeker experiences' and learners from 'traditionally under-represented backgrounds', I acknowledge the rich diversity characterising these populations.

Higher Education, Language and Learner Outcomes

Language is central to most teaching, learning and epistemological engagement in higher education. Core knowledge and concepts are usually (although not always) communicated linguistically, and an inability to demonstrate cognitive engagement and understanding by using expected academic literacies and language generally has a significant impact on learner outcomes (Harris and Marlowe 2011; Lea and Street 1998; Lillis and Scott 2007; Daddow 2016). Many students from traditionally under-represented backgrounds gain access to higher education through targeted entry programmes, only to struggle with the language required for engagement with academic content, classroom

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participation and assessment when they transition into 'mainstream' contexts (Jacobs 2005; Gray and Irwin 2013; Hirano 2014; Naidoo et al. 2015).

While academic literacy practices are often unconsciously adopted as 'common sensical' or 'natural' by discipline insiders, they represent particular forms of 'linguistic capital' (Bourdieu 1991) that are privileged in the academy but not necessarily obvious or familiar to all students. Yet this important aspect of widening participation in higher education is often overlooked in institutional policy regarding equity initiatives (Briguglio and Watson 2014; Klinger and Murray 2012; McWilliams and Allan 2014; Percy 2014; Burke 2020).

All students can struggle with the academic literacy requirements of higher education; however, learners from traditionally under-represented populations, whose literate practices of home and community may contrast significantly with those of the academy, tend to be most disadvantaged within the linguistic hierarchy of the tertiary institution (Morrice 2013; Rai and Lillis 2013; Daddow 2016). Such students are more likely to be unfamiliar with discipline-specific literacies, to be disadvantaged by a lack of institutional support for apprenticing learners into these textual practices, and to experience the 'rendering invisible' (Morrice 2018) or 'misrecognition' (Fraser 1998) of their linguistic repertoires and identities. As Morrice (2013: 654) observes regarding systemic exclusion in higher education, 'there are commonalities in the experiences of refugees and other non-traditional students'.

For learners continuing to develop proficiency in the language(s) of instruction in higher education, those with diverse first language(s) and literacies backgrounds, and/or those experiencing the ongoing impacts of forced migration, the task of gaining expertise in the linguistic forms required for tertiary learning may involve particular challenges. Yet the relative paucity of research specifically examining the complex linguistic transitions required of students with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds in higher education, particularly as they move beyond intensive language instruction and university preparatory courses to engage with the various text types and discursive practices of discipline area studies in mainstream higher education, may reflect and perpetuate their institutional invisibility.

Further, within the limited corpus of research that specifically examines the linguistic experiences of students with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds in tertiary education, minimal attention is given to students' linguistic strengths. This emphasis on student needs may reflect the urgency of advocating for sector-wide recognition of the many

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barriers to higher education confronting people with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds. However, this foregrounding of students' needs may also unintentionally contribute to the deficit framing of the population, impeding attempts to harness students' linguistic strengths as the basis for ongoing learning and enrichment of institutional practices.

The Complex Linguistic Repertoires of Students with Refugee and Asylum Seeker Backgrounds: Moving beyond Deficit Framing

Many students with histories of forced migration have complex and rich linguistic repertoires, speak a number of languages and dialects, and are experienced at code switching (Delpit 1988) according to communicative context (Baker et al. 2018). However, these linguistic capacities can be disregarded or 'misrecognised' (Fraser 1998) in Australian higher education institutions, where the traditional emphasis on English, print literacy (reading and writing), and a limited set of textual practices reflecting the communicative norms of particular social groups, can leave minimal opportunity for valuing and incorporating alternative ways with language. Lack of awareness regarding the wide-ranging linguistic practices students undertake outside of university may be compounded by enduring conceptualisations of learners with refugee/asylum seeker experiences in deficit terms. Foregrounding student needs (however well-intentioned) and failing to appreciate alternative linguistic strengths, such as highly developed oral language repertoires, can perpetuate the construction of learners as 'lacking', and shifts focus away from the need for institutions to develop responsive and tailored instructional approaches that recognise a diverse range of linguistic resources.

Students with a history of disrupted education who have not had the opportunity to learn the written script of their first language(s) are described in the research literature as 'non-literate'; while those who have acquired partial knowledge of print literacy in their first language(s) are described as being 'semi-literate' in these codes (Burgoyne and Hull 2007; Burt, Peyton and Adams 2003). However, other students with a history of displacement may come from 'preliterate backgrounds', in which their first language(s) do not have a written form, and this will obviously impact their experiences learning print literacy in the language of instruction at university. For example, language specialist staff participating in the first nationwide study of barriers to higher education for people seeking asylum in Australia expressed particular con-

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cern for students learning to engage with print literacy practices for the first time as they simultaneously learn English and discipline content knowledge (Hartley et al. 2018). Such learners are required to develop new understandings of written systems for representing and constructing meaning, from concepts of sound/symbol relationships and grammatical forms through to knowledge of complex schematic structures and linguistic features of academic texts. Accordingly, refugee/asylum seeker background learners' experiences with language are as diverse as the population itself, with students' literate resources and practices informed by past educational experiences, individual circumstances, socio-cultural values and communicative traditions (Fozdar and Hartley 2012; Watkins, Razee and Richters 2012; Hatoss and Huijser 2010; Brooker and Lawrence 2012; Nicholas and Williams 2003).

However, there is very little praxis-driven support for tertiary educators seeking to better understand different orientations to language/literacies, and how these diverse practices can be incorporated in mainstream learning contexts. For instance, students who are pre-, non- or semi-literate in their first language(s) are likely to have highly developed oral language repertoires which represent important foundations for learning, but may require additional assistance with subject-specialist terminology and the conventions and structures of written text (Burgoyne and Hull 2007; Burt, Peyton and Adams 2003). Yet the limited research regarding adults who are pre-, non- and semi-literate in their first language(s) is mostly focused on the earliest stages of print literacy learning in the second language(s), meaning there is an urgent need to explore such students' later experiences in the specific context of academic literacies instruction in higher education.

Vásquez's (2007) investigation of one refugee background learner's experiences attending a university Intensive English Program (IEP) in the United States provides a nuanced and holistic account of the student's highly developed oracy and communicative competence in spoken English, which contrasted with her written English repertoires. O'Rourke (2011), writing in Aotearoa/New Zealand, similarly notes that students with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds frequently have strong oracy skills and less developed academic writing resources. In Vásquez's (2007) study, the student's strong oral language proficiency allowed her to pass the Intensive English Program (IEP) but was insufficient for success in mainstream university studies. Such research illustrates the importance of ensuring refugee and asylum seeker background students' highly developed oracy skills do not result in underestimation of their written academic literacy needs, and that preparatory

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courses align with the language required for success in mainstream studies. Vásquez's (2007) study also highlights the need for staff in preparatory courses and discipline instruction to have opportunities to exchange knowledge regarding learners' linguistic histories and resources to assist with successful student transitions into mainstream courses.

While some students with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds have highly developed oracy in their first and/or additional language(s), other learners articulate a sense of shame, embarrassment, and feelings of infantilisation and isolation due to perceived deficiencies in their spoken language (Kanno and Varghese 2010; Fagan et al. 2018; Sontag 2018). These learners report that self-consciousness regarding pronunciation and communicative competence in the language of instruction at university prevents them from making social connections with peers and attending or verbally participating in class (Fagan et al. 2018). Frequently, students indicate that staff attribute such silence in class to a lack of knowledge or motivation rather than the impact of language anxiety or unfamiliarity with culturally specific discursive practices such as classroom debates, critical reflections or presentations.

Researchers have also noted the tendency for refugee and asylum seeker background students to assume disproportionate responsibility when facing linguistic challenges at university, perceiving such difficulties to stem from their own personal deficiencies rather than resulting from educational exclusion and/or institutional/structural barriers (Kanno and Varghese 2010; Turner and Fozdar 2010; O'Rourke 2011). Kanno and Varghese (2010: 322) refer to such attitudes as evidence of students 'acquiescing to the university's institutional culture that frames the lack of native-level English proficiency as a deficit'. As Morrice (2018: 8) has suggested, 'Forms of knowledge, qualifications, experiences and ways of learning which cannot be accommodated are rendered incomprehensible and invisible. . .'. For learners from traditionally under-represented backgrounds who may struggle to participate in expected communicative practices, 'their diversity is not recognised as an asset and they are denied a role of active contributor and potential transformer' within tertiary institutions (Morrice 2018: 8).

The educational experiences of refugee/asylum seeker background learners – whether those from oracy-focused cultures who may experience challenges with print literacy or those with greater competence in reading or writing but less confidence with oral language – therefore reveal the need for educators to be aware of the various factors that may shape students' communicative practices and individual linguistic strengths and needs. This necessitates professional development for all

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teaching staff, and ongoing consultation and collaboration with learners to explore ways in which linguistic strengths can provide bridges to developing expertise in less familiar textual practices.

Linguistic Diversity and Notions of 'Integration'

A key theme in studies that examine refugee and asylum seeker background learners' linguistic experiences in higher education is the significant time required to navigate academic texts in an additional language/dialect. While the linguistic processes vary according to student proficiency levels, many learners describe complex and time-consuming practices involving careful translation between two or more languages, in order to engage with course content and academic reading (Fagan et al. 2018). Navigating subject-specific vocabulary and specialist terms, as well as unfamiliarity with practices of critical reading and the use of sources in academic writing, are identified as particularly time consuming. For many students with experiences of displacement, ongoing and discipline-specific language tuition is inaccessible due to financial constraints.

Issues of language become particularly fraught in contexts where learners' grades are at stake (Hirano 2014). In their investigation of student experiences at a university in the United States, Kanno and Varghese (2010) found examinations were particularly inequitable for students with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, with the time required to understand the language in order to engage with the content rendering discipline-specific examinations indirect tests of English. This important equity issue relates to broader discussions regarding the consequences of standardised testing, which have been shown to disadvantage already marginalised groups via the problematic rationale that 'equality' of assessment practices results in equitable outcomes (Volante 2008). For students with experiences of displacement and trauma, time-limited, high-stakes examinations add an extra layer of stress to assessment in an additional language, and can be detrimental to mental health and learning outcomes.

Academic staff in Harris and Marlowe's (2011) exploration of the educational experiences of students from refugee backgrounds attending a South Australian university also identified the significant additional time staff dedicated to engaging with meaning in learners' written assignments. With the university system for staff remuneration allocating a set amount of time for the assessment of each student's work regardless of language background, and the absence of clear guidelines concern-

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ing the relative weight that should be ascribed to grammatical accuracy in the allocation of overall grades, academic staff reported feeling overwhelmed and pressured. The responsibility to correctly interpret the intended meaning expressed in student assignments in order to fairly assess conceptual engagement and degree of understanding, rather than language proficiency, was a source of significant stress for staff, many of whom had little to no training in language/literacies education.

Questions regarding institutional practices for assessing language are timely and significant in the linguistically diversified academy, with one student participant in Harris and Marlowe's (2011) study explaining: 'We're not saying give us a pass because "poor us" – I mean when I [show I can] apply the law, why mark me down for punctuation?' (190). Harris and Marlowe (2011: 192) state that acknowledgement of students' differing linguistic and literacies backgrounds 'does not mean that principles of academic integrity or rigorous curricula should be abandoned. Rather, it highlights the necessity to critically engage these concepts in contemporary and comparative contexts'.

Assessment-related practices regarding academic integrity have also been identified as posing significant challenges to students with refugee and asylum seeker experiences. In their study of learners attending Australian higher education institutions, Fagan et al. (2018) documented student struggles with highly culture-specific notions regarding plagiarism, institutional expectations concerning the synthesising of source materials into writing, and the purposes and use of plagiarism detection software (Fagan et al. 2018).

Digital literacy requirements have also been shown to create challenges for students who have not had the opportunity to develop functional and/or critical technological repertoires (Sontag 2018; Baker et al. 2018). Institutional assumptions of digital literacy are particularly problematic and exclusionary given the current push to digitise learning spaces across higher education, especially in the context of remote delivery due to COVID-19 (see Princewill Esenowo, this volume). Fagan et al. (2018) discovered refugee and asylum seeker background learners in Australia were frequently unable to arrange learning assistance sessions, book study spaces and access online sources due to a lack of digital literacy skills.

In addition, confusion regarding institutional expectations surrounding due dates, task requirements and acceptable circumstances for applying for extensions can further hinder progress for many students from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds (Fagan et al. 2018). Institutional failure to explicitly communicate these fundamental and

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culturally specific expectations can prevent students from accessing learning support. The resulting lack of assistance can increase learner isolation, ultimately contributing to attrition, and further perpetuating deficit framing of linguistically diverse populations. In fact, institutional processes that do not take into account the unique circumstances and literacies resources of many learners from refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds have been shown to create structural barriers to inclusion that begin with students' first interactions with universities. Challenges locating information about scholarship opportunities and university entry pathways are particularly common for learners with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds (Hartley et al. 2018). Aside from lack of access to the internet, many students also experience confusion regarding admissions processes that incorporate repurposed documentation originally used for international student enrolments and therefore intended for learners with different circumstances (Hartley et al. 2018). Many students identify the importance of the language support provided by community advocates as key to their navigation of university admissions processes.

Again, such experiences with the opacity of institutional expectations are often encountered by a range of populations within higher education. While students with histories of forced migration are likely to experience specific challenges resulting from significant interruptions to education due to the social, cultural and health implications of seeking refuge, other student populations, including those with First Nations backgrounds, learners from particular socio-economic status groups or geographic locations, those with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds, and students with specific learning or health needs and abilities, are also among those more likely to experience challenges with language-related expectations in higher education. While the specific issues faced by many learners within these populations may vary according to background, the central issue of exclusion and the 'rendering invisible' of 'experiences, knowledges and practices' through the processes of higher education is common (Morrice 2018: 2).

Both the linguistic and academic literacies challenges experienced by many higher education students with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, and the ubiquity of deficit framing of such learners, need to be considered in relation to overarching concepts of 'integration' at both the institutional and societal level. Expectations regarding the universality of dominant language forms, and minimal scope for students to contribute diverse language/literacies repertoires, reflect understand-

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ings of 'integration' as a unidirectional adjustment on the part of the 'newcomer' and rarely on behalf of the 'host'.

Greater acknowledgement of the diverse linguistic practices students bring to higher education would allow for what Morrice (2018: 2) describes as a move 'away from dominant epistemological canons which disqualify and make invisible the knowledge and skills of some learners, towards acknowledgement of the incompleteness of all knowledges'. Further, Morrice (2018: 8) suggests: 'It is only through deconstructing this hegemonic mono-culture of knowledge and recognising that other knowledges have been delegitimized and rendered invisible that global cognitive justice, and consequently global social justice, can be achieved'. Such understandings of integration as a 'two-way' process call for more dynamic conceptualisations of the role of language within higher education, and genuine engagement with the culturally situated nature of discipline literacies and institutional processes.

Possibilities for Collaborative Approaches to Linguistic Support

Despite the increasingly diverse linguistic landscape of higher education, in some contexts there has been comparatively limited institutional attention to the role of academics in scaffolding learner engagement with academic literacies across the disciplines. Rather, universities have responded to increasing linguistic diversification by providing language assistance within bridging and enabling programmes and/or learning centres. Bridging and enabling programmes provide important pathways to tertiary enrolment and offer tailored linguistic and cultural support to students as they commence studies (see Baker and Irwin 2016). Learning centres provide essential language assistance to students after they transition into mainstream studies. However, frequently the latter are physically located away from the teaching undertaken in the faculties, with some scholar-practitioners arguing that this may perpetuate the idea that language and literacies support is the sole responsibility of learning centre staff and that linguistic diversity does not impact discipline instruction (see Wingate 2018; McWilliams and Allan 2014).

This model of language support may also impede collaboration between language specialists and discipline experts, restricting opportunities for knowledge exchange and shared approaches to supporting students through the linguistic transitions they undertake throughout their degree. There is a strong body of literature advocating for greater integration of language and academic literacies support across higher education (see McWilliams and Allan 2014; Daddow 2016; Wingate

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2006, 2018). Collaborative approaches to language support also emphasise the deeply social nature of language learning, and the importance of strong networks for students with experiences of displacement and trauma. The significance of this social support to student engagement with language/literacies learning in higher education is illustrated powerfully in research conducted by Baker et al. (2018), who investigated student uptake of institutional support services in a regional Australian university. While the students described the advisors working in the central learning support services as 'helpful, professional and expert', they expressed a preference for assistance from familiar contacts, including friends or peers, who were not necessarily expert, or from staff members who acted as trusted brokers, described by the researchers as 'warm' sources of support (Baker et al. 2018: 10), drawing on notions of 'hot, warm, and cold information' (Ball and Vincent 1998; Slack et al. 2014).

These trusted brokers were individuals known for having previously assisted students, their friends or wider communities, and the connections were forged outside of the staff members' institutional roles (Baker et al. 2018). The staff took on responsibility for assisting students to navigate the academic literacy and language requirements of their studies in addition to their recognised workload. While preferences for familiar brokers to assist with language needs reflect patterns seen in the support-seeking behaviours of students from a range of traditionally under-represented backgrounds, the students in Baker et al.'s (2018) study link this preference to the unique circumstances of having sought refuge and 'the sense of trust that the participants attached to engaging with persons who are involved in the wider social and personal lives of refugees at the university and in the local community more broadly. . .' (11). Baker et al. (2018) suggest that their study shows the importance of decentralising language assistance and involving 'warm' support people from across the university – trusted brokers who are engaged with the refugee background community more broadly.

Ongoing collaboration between language specialists and discipline experts is essential to the task of providing responsive and tailored linguistic support for learners with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds. Many academics working in discipline content instruction articulate a desire to provide embedded language assistance to students, but lack the experience or knowledge to do so effectively (Harris and Marlowe 2011; Burke 2020). The context-dependent nature of literate practices means targeted student support not only requires specialist knowledge of language and literacies learning, but epistemological ex-

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pertise in the subject matter of the discipline. This necessitates staff collaboration across various university departments, and the foregrounding of student experiences in planning, trialling and evaluating strategies for responsive, inclusive and effective practice.

Important work with translanguaging, or the use of multiple linguistic resources to maximise learner outcomes, is continuing in a range of educational contexts (Garcia and Wei 2014; Mendenhall and Bartlett 2018). García (2009: 140) describes translanguaging as the process of 'accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential'. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Grosjean (1982), proponents of translanguaging argue that 'a bilingual is not two monolinguals in one but a linguistically unique language user whose languages reflect the differential experience a bilingual may have with each language' (McSwan 2017: 171). Accordingly, translanguaging approaches recognise and value the full range of students' linguistic repertoires, and conceive of diverse languages and literacies practices as complementary (Garcia and Kleyn 2018).

The implementation of translanguaging approaches requires careful planning and professional development. Further, application of translanguaging principles may vary according to discipline, student and staff linguistic identities, learning preferences and instructional modes. However, there is a central emphasis on explicitly discussing the text types and communicative practices featured in course content, while creating opportunities for learners to share and utilise the full range of their linguistic knowledge, skills and repertoires. Teaching staff are not required to be proficient in the learners' languages and literate practices but can encourage students to reflect on similarities and differences between these practices and those foregrounded in the academy. Further, teaching staff can suggest that students may want to explore ways of applying their existing linguistic expertise to the learning they are undertaking at university. For example, some students develop dual language resources such as course glossaries or vocabulary journals in which subject-specialist terms can be translated into a variety of languages (Fagan et al. 2018). Similarly, some students find it helpful to undertake particular parts of a task, such as brainstorming, planning or note taking, in multiple languages and/or dialects, or to discuss or describe core concepts from different cultural perspectives or through varied text types.

Other ways of building on students' linguistic strengths involve harnessing individual areas of expertise to develop new repertoires. For ex-

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ample, students with highly developed oracy skills often prefer to begin written output with verbal language activities that activate background knowledge and clarify textual expectations, gradually incorporating forms of print literacy to build towards the final output (Burke 2020). One example of this approach was described by a participant in my small-scale study of academic supports for linguistically diverse learning in a regional Australian university, and involves students verbally explaining a theoretical framework or key concept to their peers, while members of the group record the main points on mini whiteboards, which they collectively turn into formal writing after discussing and refining their ideas (Burke 2020). This peer construction of written output allows for shared navigation of the features and expectations of the text type, and reiterative crafting of the final product, with verbal language providing a strong foundation and overarching medium for negotiating content and process throughout.

Explicit engagement with language, including deconstructing academic text types, modelling assessment task requirements and deconstructing assignment exemplars, also provides important linguistic scaffolding (Burke 2020). These learning supports need to be organically woven into discipline area instruction, as discussing both the course content and the discipline-specific ways in which this content is communicated and assessed helps students engage with text types and discursive practices in context (Daddow 2016). These learning supports can also present opportunities for critical conversations regarding issues of language and power, including the relative status of different linguistic codes (Delpit and Kilgour Dowdy 2002) or dialects, and may support students to consider their own linguistic identities in relation to their participation in higher education, their field of study and more broadly.

Conclusion: Reimagining Language in Higher Education

Central to discussions regarding equitable university participation for students with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds is the need to collectively re-examine our understandings of language in higher education. Each researcher cited in this chapter calls for issues of language to be brought in from the periphery of higher education, to be central to the mission statements and actions of universities, and to explicitly and consciously become 'everyone's business', rather than remaining the sole responsibility of learning centres or language specialists.

Attention to the role of language as a powerful mediator of learning in higher education requires us to recognise that the discursive prac-

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tices particular to each field of study are often products of the Global North; powerful forms of 'linguistic capital' (Bourdieu 1991) that reflect disciplinary histories, boundaries and ideological traditions. To assume universality of these textual practices is to disregard the linguistic diversity of the student population, and deny learners, particularly those from under-represented backgrounds, access to powerful textual practices and core epistemological perspectives. This, in turn, perpetuates already entrenched patterns of educational disadvantage.

Tailored, embedded and ongoing language support informed by student experiences – such as those foregrounded in research discussed in this chapter – must be central to widening participation efforts. Presently siloed structures of the university – in which language experts and discipline specialists rarely have the opportunity to collaborate – need to be reconsidered in order to effect institution-wide change and facilitate the explicit scaffolding of student language development within content area instruction. Indeed, much of the task of reconceptualising the role of language support in higher education requires close and critical scrutinising of the underlying structures of contemporary tertiary institutions. Research reveals the extent to which students with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds currently rely on language support provided by staff who offer this assistance in addition to their official workload. Ensuring all learners have access to language support that assists them to mobilise their existing linguistic repertoires requires purpose-driven professional development and adequate staff compensation as part of institutional equity and diversity policies. Importantly, all staff – including the growing numbers of casually employed academics who undertake the bulk of teaching – must have access to these institutional supports. Of course, investing in professional development resources and compensating staff for the associated workload raises inevitable questions of funding.

Finally, institutional responsibility to ensure all students have access to disciplinary language does not preclude concurrent acknowledgement and valuing of students' linguistic repertoires. Creating spaces for refugee and asylum seeker background learner enrichment of institutional language practices allows us to collectively imagine more linguistically diverse, globally representative classroom cultures. Exploring how these spaces may function across degrees, faculties and institutions necessitates ongoing research and consultation with students from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds – including those who successfully complete tertiary education, those who withdraw from studies, and those who wish to enrol – as well as staff and communities.

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Reimagining higher education to better reflect the diverse linguistic repertoires of the student population is a complicated, wide-ranging and long-term exercise, subject to different views and experiences. However, this work is fundamental to approaching integration as a process characterised by reciprocity, and central to the task of transforming tertiary education. Redressing deeply engrained and entrenched power relations within higher education requires explicit acknowledgement that each of us is positioned in more or less powerful ways in the academy by virtue of the 'linguistic capital' (Bourdieu 1991) we bring. In valuing and supporting the linguistic experiences of students with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, tertiary institutions have an important opportunity to collectively imagine and enact more linguistically rich, productive and generative spaces of higher education.

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Notes

1. I use the term 'traditionally under-represented backgrounds' to refer to populations who have been historically excluded from higher education and whose linguistic repertoires may differ from those literacy practices still privileged in the academy today. I acknowledge that such terms should be problematised.
2. In this chapter, the term 'mainstream' is used to refer to educational contexts in which there is no official provision of additional support in the language(s) of instruction.
3. The continent that is now known as Australia is characterised by rich and enduring linguistic diversity, established over many thousands of years. At least 250 languages and many more dialects were estimated to have been in use among First Nations peoples in 1788 (Biddle and Swee 2012). The languages and literate practices of the world's oldest continuous living cultures endure, despite the events of the colonial and postcolonial period, such as the forced separation of children from their families and communities. Numerous community-led programmes continue to preserve and promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and literacies (Malcolm 2018; Wigglesworth and Simpson 2018).
4. The research accessed here is largely located within the Global North, illustrating both the limitations of my own linguistic expertise as well as the Western-centric nature of the field.

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5. I acknowledge and respect the traditional Custodians of the Land on which I live and work, the Pambalong Clan of the Awabakal people, and I pay my respects to Elders past, present and future. I also acknowledge and respect the rich and enduring linguistic practices and knowledges of the Awabakal people and of all First Nations peoples.

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