

## Book Review

# Review of *Life in a New Language*

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For migrants and refugees, language is a factor that influences integrating into a new society as a citizen, a worker, or a parent. *Life in a New Language* by Piller et al. (2024) describes this process for migrant language learners as keeping “their head above water,” a metaphor that comes from participant Goudarz, an Iranian engineer and migrant who compares learning English pre- and post-migration to swimming in calm waters versus treading water in a raging river. The authors offer this book to migrant- and refugee-receiving countries as “a plea to help smooth the turbulent waters so that new migrants do not sink or fall back right at the start” (Piller et al., 2024, p. 12).

Meant broadly for researchers, university students, policy makers, and service providers, the stories represented in this book are extracted from several ethnographic studies conducted between the years 2000 and 2020 in collaboration with multiple institutions and individuals.

Participants include 130 non-English-speaking background (NESB) adult migrants and refugees who arrived in Australia from 34 different countries between 1970 and 2013. The authors are critical sociolinguists who, like their participants, are all “migrant speakers” and “settlers on Indigenous land,” hailing from Africa, Eastern and Western Asia, and Eastern and Western Europe.

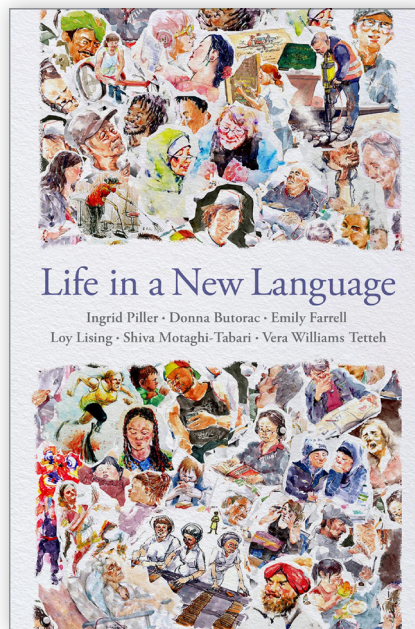
The stories in this book illuminate the nuanced ways

language is contested and leveraged for NESB migrants and refugees in Australia. Chapters 1 and 2 argue that adult language learning in Australia is historically complex and that migrants from NESBs face structural and ideological barriers in meeting their goals. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with obtaining, retaining, and advancing

employment as a migrant or refugee in Australia. Chapter 5 discusses the complexities of migrant parenting and the friction between heritage language maintenance and learning English quickly and fluently. Chapters 6 and 7 explore the ways migrants and refugees experience Australia differently based on their intersectional identities as they relate to language. As the conclusion, Chapter 8 advocates for open science in both quantitative research and qualitative studies, like the ones represented in this book, to make information available for policy makers, the media, and public debate. A final section called “How to Use This Book in Teaching” includes a

bulleted summary of key ideas, discussion questions, and further reading suggestions.

Through storytelling, *Life in a New Language* humanizes the nuanced language learning experiences of NESB migrants and refugees, thereby making a compelling case that “the responsibility for change [...] lies within the receiving society” (Piller et al., 2024, p. 118). It suggests that receiving countries like Australia have a



responsibility to build infrastructure for migrants to access safe, welcoming communities and resources. Part of the suggested change in infrastructure would be to systemically embrace multilingualism as an asset and shift the sole responsibility of meaning making from the NESB migrant or refugee to the English dominant society.

This critical stance is underscored by scholarship in the areas of culturally and linguistically sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017), the raciolinguistic perspective (Flores & Rosa, 2015), and translanguaging theory (García & Wei, 2014), all of which argue for asset-based language education and policy that honor linguistic diversity and epistemic freedom. Given that much of this critical work is directed toward an academic audience, the storytelling tone of *Life in a New Language* creates possibilities for speaking to new audiences beyond academia. For example, the book opens with a whimsical Spanish language epigraph by Antonio Machado (1917) and establishes a narrative tone with the title of the acknowledgments page, “The Story of This Book” (Piller et al., 2024, p. ix). The authors also introduce their participants as storytellers rather than as numbers in a study by listing pseudonyms and explaining how participant voice is represented in the text so as not to essentialize the speaker(s).

The narrative approach affords complex representations of NESB migrants and refugees living between cultures,

languages, and identities, much like Anzaldúa’s (1987) concept of the borderlands, “the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference” (p. 100). Piller et al. (2024) explain that Iranian families, for instance, struggle to create family language policies that simultaneously promote maintaining the Persian language and obtaining English language fluency as quickly as possible. The book also chronicles stories of individuals like Jutta from Austria who assimilates into Australia quickly and happily while others like Isabella from South Sudan mourn their layered identities in their home countries, as they experience being positioned as low literate in Australia.

Overall, *Life in a New Language* is an excellent resource for adult educators and researchers, especially in English-dominant countries like the United States, because it provides nuanced and accessible insight into the systemic turbulent waters NESB migrants and refugees must navigate as they integrate into society. The stories in this book describe the problematic colonial history that has influenced Australian language policy throughout the years, excluding migrants and refugees from vital resources and education. This book might inspire adult educators living in countries with similar political histories, like the U.S., to examine the language policies that have systematically oppressed migrants and refugees and to act by embracing multilingualism in their classrooms and communities.

## References

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