

Chapter 3

*From Phonetic to Proficient: Advancing Refugee
Parents' Literacy
to Foster Educational Involvement*

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Abstract

This study investigates how Emergent Bilinguals shape refugee parents' engagement in their children's education. In 2024, 48 adult refugee parents participated in 13-week English as a Second Language (ESL) classes provided by Catholic Charities in a Midwestern state. Using classroom instruction, home visits, interviews, and language assessments, the study examined participants' English proficiency, literacy development, and the effectiveness of instructional strategies. Limited English skills were found to create significant barriers to school involvement; however, when instruction was individualized, culturally responsive, and supported by multimodal tools and technology, parents demonstrated measurable progress and increased confidence. The findings underscore that personalized, scaffolded literacy instruction enhances both language development and learner self-efficacy. Multimodal strategies effectively improve oral and written proficiency while connecting learning to real-life tasks and strengthening parental involvement in their children's education. Overall, integrating Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) practices with family-focused goals fosters learner autonomy, linguistic competence, and active participation in both school and home contexts. These results suggest that community-based ESL programs can serve as a critical bridge, empowering refugee parents to become active partners in their children's academic success.

Keywords: refugee parents, ESL instruction, literacy development, Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), culturally responsive teaching

Parental involvement is widely recognized as a critical factor in promoting students' academic achievement, motivation, and school engagement (Auerbach, 2007). A substantial body of research demonstrates that when parents actively participate in their children's education through communication with teachers, support for learning at home, and engagement with school activities, students experience stronger academic outcomes and improved attendance (Fan & Chen, 2001). However, refugee parents often encounter significant structural and linguistic barriers that limit their ability to engage fully in their children's schooling (McBrien, 2005). Among the most pressing challenges is limited English proficiency, which constrains communication with school personnel and reduces parents' capacity to assist with homework, interpret school policies, and advocate effectively for their children (Wiese, 2019).

In addition, many refugee parents arrive in the United States with interrupted or limited formal educational experiences due to displacement, conflict, or prolonged stays in refugee camps (WIDA, 2024). The immediate demands of resettlement, including securing employment, housing, and access to essential services, often take precedence over adult education opportunities, even though parental education and language acquisition are closely associated with long-term family stability and children's academic success (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). As their children enter and adapt to the U.S. school system, refugee parents frequently express strong aspirations for educational success but may lack familiarity with school norms, expectations, and communication practices (Warriner, 2007). Consequently, while the desire for involvement is often present, limited linguistic resources and cultural capital can constrain meaningful participation in their children's education.

Purpose of the Study

This study examines how adult refugee parents develop English proficiency within a community-based ESL program and investigates their perceptions of language learning alongside the instructional practices that most effectively build their linguistic confidence and competence. By focusing on the intersection of language acquisition and parental engagement, the study identifies culturally responsive strategies that strengthen parents' capacity to participate more fully in their children's education. Drawing on interviews, classroom observations, and writing samples collected over 13 weeks, the study explores the challenges parents encounter, the supports that enhance their learning, and the approaches that foster their roles as active educational partners. Situated within established family literacy frameworks, the study contributes new insights into how adult ESL instruction can empower refugee families and promote meaningful home-school connections. The research questions were:

- 1) How do refugee parents perceive their own English language proficiency, and how does this affect their ability to support their children's academic development?
- 2) How effective are instructional strategies in improving adult refugee learners' Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)?
- 3) Which instructional strategies are most effective in helping refugee parents at the transitional writing stage build linguistic confidence and writing competence?
- 4) How do improvements in English proficiency and writing ability influence refugee parents' involvement in their children's academic experiences?

Literature Review

This study is grounded in a socio-cognitive theory of second language acquisition, drawing primarily on Stephen Krashen's second language acquisition theory (2003) and Jim Cummins's (2008) language proficiency and academic language development theory. Krashen proposed that language acquisition occurs most effectively when learners are exposed to comprehensible input language that is slightly above their current proficiency level but made understandable through context, visuals, and prior knowledge. Central to Krashen's model is the affective filter hypothesis, which posits that emotional variables such as motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence can either facilitate or impede language acquisition. Extending this perspective, Cummins distinguished between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS refers to the conversational language used in everyday social interactions and typically develops within one to two years. In contrast, CALP involves the academic language required for schooling, including abstract reasoning, academic vocabulary, and discipline-specific discourse, and often requires five to seven years to develop.

These theories underscore the importance of supportive learning environments that address both linguistic input and affective factors, particularly for linguistically diverse learners. Foundational research has repeatedly demonstrated a strong relationship between parental involvement and positive student outcomes, including academic achievement, school readiness, and social-emotional development (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Fan & Chen, 2001). Despite these benefits, immigrant and refugee families often experience systemic barriers that limit their engagement. These challenges include not only language barriers but also unfamiliarity with school systems, limited access to resources, trauma resulting from displacement, and culturally different perceptions of parental roles in education (McBrien, 2005; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008).

More recently, researchers have emphasized the impact of trauma on refugee parents' capacity to engage in schooling, noting that prior experiences of conflict, forced migration, or loss can affect attention, motivation, and confidence in educational settings (Tomren & Opaas, 2024; Gherardi, Flinn, & Jaure, 2020). In response, trauma-informed ESL programs that acknowledge and adapt to these experiences have been shown to improve engagement, reduce anxiety, and foster resilience while supporting language development (Park & Katsiaficas, 2019).

Building on this broader understanding of barriers, Shiffman (2019) reported that many communities are experiencing rapid demographic shifts, which in turn reshape communication patterns between schools and families. Additionally, although parents deeply valued home-school communication, language barriers, cultural differences, and limited access to critical information often hindered meaningful exchanges. She argued that ESL teachers, bilingual staff, and family liaisons should serve as facilitators who help bridge these linguistic and cultural gaps.

Language proficiency emerges as a critical factor in mediating parental engagement. Studies show that when parents develop even basic English literacy, their confidence in communicating with schools and supporting their children increases significantly (Auerbach, 2007). Correspondingly, adult ESL programs that integrate practical, family-focused content have been shown to enhance both language acquisition and parenting efficacy (Warriner, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992). Drawing on Auerbach's (2007) family literacy model, such programs position parents' linguistic growth as inseparable from their ability to participate in school-based activities, reinforcing the idea that family literacy is co-constructed across home, community, and school settings. Likewise, the "funds of knowledge" framework (Moll et al., 1992) shows how refugee parents' cultural and experiential assets can be leveraged to support children's learning when ESL instruction validates and builds on those strengths.

Expanding this line of inquiry, Wiese (2019) asserted that parents' language skills directly influence children's educational outcomes, as reflected in the relationship between students' academic performance and factors such as parental English proficiency and home educational support. Drawing on data from immigrant communities, the study identified patterns in achievement gaps and demonstrated how family language resources can either widen or help close them. These findings reinforce the importance of instructional practices that respect families' languages and cultures.

In terms of instructional approaches, research indicates that guided writing, the use of sentence frames, and the incorporation of learners' cultural backgrounds can promote meaningful progress for adult learners in transitional writing stages (Perry, 2008; Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010). More recent scholarship extends this connection by showing that adult ESL literacy gains have measurable impacts on children's K–12 achievement—including improved homework support, increased school attendance, and stronger parent–teacher communication (Cun, 2022; Boettcher, 2022). Collectively, these studies suggest that adult literacy development is a key mechanism shaping students' long-term academic trajectories.

Despite growing interest in the intersection of refugee resettlement and adult education, limited research focuses specifically on refugee parents in ESL programs and how literacy development translates into educational involvement. Addressing this gap, the present study extends existing knowledge by demonstrating how early-stage English writing development among refugee parents both aligns with and expands current family literacy and parent-engagement frameworks. The intended audience for this work includes teachers of adult refugees seeking practical literacy strategies, literacy researchers examining adult-to-child literacy transfer, and family-engagement coordinators designing culturally responsive programming.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design that integrated quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of adult refugee parents' English literacy development and learning experiences.

Quantitative Elements

The quantitative component consisted of descriptive statistical data derived from participant demographics and formal end-of-study assessments. Participant background data included age, gender, country of origin, length of residence in the United States, household size, educational background, English proficiency levels, and major English-related challenges. These data were summarized using percentages to describe the sample characteristics. In addition, formal end-of-study assessments measured participants' pronunciation, sentence structure, reading, writing, and study skills.

Qualitative Elements

The qualitative component included observational data and reflective responses collected from research assistants (RAs). First, RAs maintained daily observational journals throughout the study, documenting classroom interactions, instructional practices, and student behaviors. These journals captured non-verbal communication (e.g., eye contact, smiling, nodding, body language), levels of engagement, and observable English proficiency across listening, speaking, reading, writing, and the ability to follow instructions. Behavioral patterns such as active participation, quiet engagement, peer support, and classroom disruptions were also recorded.

Second, RAs completed a post-study exit survey at the conclusion of the project. The survey included open-ended questions on the most significant instructional challenges, resources, and supports that were most helpful, factors that facilitated or hindered student progress,

culturally responsive teaching practices, effective instructional strategies, skills and insights gained through participation, and practical recommendations for supporting refugee parents' English learning.

Participants

Forty-eight refugee parents enrolled voluntarily in ESL classes offered by Catholic Charities; all provided informed consent under Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. The informed consent forms outlined the purpose of the study, expectations for participation, the voluntary nature of involvement, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. For parents who were not yet comfortable with English, translators provided by the school district assisted in the consent process.

The participants in this study represented a diverse range of ages, with nearly half (46%) in their 30s, while 17% were in their 20s and another 17% in their 40s. Approximately 13% were in their 50s, and 8% were unsure of their exact age. Most participants were female (62.5%), with males comprising 37.5% of the sample. Detailed information on participants' countries of origin, initial arrival in the United States, household size, highest level of education, English proficiency, and major English-related challenges is presented in the interview analysis section of this study.

Two undergraduate research assistants (RAs) from a university Education Preparation Program were recruited to support data collection and classroom instruction. One RA was assigned to beginner-level sessions held on Mondays and Wednesdays. The other RA worked with a Friday focus group consisting primarily of Cuban students who worked full-time Monday–Thursday and could only attend class on Fridays. Additionally, one of these RAs

conducted home visits accompanied by a translator and caseworker, allowing for more personal interaction, insights into parents' experiences, and assessment of their English proficiency.

Setting

The study took place in the ESL classes at Catholic Charities in a Midwestern state. The principal researcher initially contacted the agency to explore possible collaboration. After receiving approval, the research team, including the principal investigator and two RAs, met with the center's director and ESL coordinator to discuss study logistics. Before beginning data collection, the principal researcher and both RAs completed a full day of training at Catholic Charities. This training familiarized the team with the refugee resettlement process, the structure of the ESL program, and the expectations for partnering with the center.

Procedures

After the IRB application was approved, the principal researcher convened planning meetings with the RAs to review procedures, develop activity plans, and create a detailed research timeline. The ESL coordinator recruited participants by contacting students individually to determine their interest in joining the study. Instruction and data collection occurred over 13 weeks. The RAs used center-provided materials to guide instruction and assessment (Intercambio Uniting Communities 1L, 2019 & Intercambio Uniting Communities 3R, 2019). They implemented a multi-tiered instructional approach, combining:

- Tier 1: Whole-class lectures introducing key concepts
- Tier 2: Small-group activities supporting collaboration and engagement
- Tier 3: Individualized instruction tailored to each participant's English proficiency

Throughout the study, RAs modeled fluent reading, facilitated vocabulary-building activities (including card games and hands-on tasks), and emphasized pronunciation and

sentence structure. Although the original plan included the use of traditional ESL methods, grammar books, and refugee-themed storybooks, early assessments revealed that students struggled to comprehend the storybook texts. As a result, the team adjusted instruction to focus more heavily on direct teaching of pronunciation and simple sentence structures.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the study. All participant data were anonymized using coded identifiers, which were used consistently in transcripts and documents. No names were linked to data beyond participants' roles as students. All records were securely stored and accessible only to the research team.

Data Collection

Instruments

Data were collected using multiple instruments aligned with the research questions:

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

The interview questions were designed to gather demographic information, prior educational experiences, self-perceived English proficiency, and parental engagement practices.

English Language Assessments

Informal assessments measuring listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency during classroom instruction and interviews.

Formal End of the Study Assessments

Formal assessments measuring pronunciation, sentence structure, reading, writing, and study skills were also used.

Writing Samples and Rubric

Writing samples were evaluated using WriteReader's (2019) five-stage writing

development framework (Emergent, Phonetic/Transitional, Conventional, Expanding, Proficient/Academic).

Classroom Observation Protocol and Research Assistants' Journals

Structured field notes documenting instructional strategies, student engagement, and responses to scaffolding techniques were also used in the data collection and analysis.

Exit Survey

A brief survey was used to document perceived areas of improvement and instructional effectiveness.

Data were collected through multiple sources aligned with research questions. Semi-structured interviews gathered participants' self-perceptions of English proficiency, prior educational experiences, and family literacy practices. Some interviews were conducted at the Center while others took place in participants' homes based on their preferences. The Center actively supported the process by providing translators. Depending on language preference, some participants responded in English, whereas others answered in their native language; translators subsequently assisted in translating responses into English.

Classroom observations focused on documenting instructional strategies, levels of learner engagement, and students' responses to various scaffolding techniques implemented during instruction. In addition, research assistants maintained daily journals in which they recorded detailed notes on student behaviors, patterns of classroom participation, and peer interactions observed during whole-class and small-group discussions.

Writing samples were collected throughout the 13-week program and analyzed using WriteReader's (2019) five-stage writing development framework, with rubric descriptors that included accuracy of letter formation, sentence construction, grammar, punctuation, and

vocabulary usage. Assessments used were based on the four language domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Examples included the following:

- Listening: Following verbal instructions during the interview process and classroom activities.
- Speaking: Using target vocabulary in brief conversational prompts as well as during interview responses and classroom discussions.
- Reading: Recognizing high-frequency words and reading sentences aloud.
- Writing: Completing sentence starters and short passages on familiar topics, in addition to maintaining a reading journal completed during each class period.

Data Analysis

Data analysis focused on participants' development in the four core language domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Assessment data, writing samples, and field observations were carefully reviewed to identify patterns of proficiency, areas of difficulty, and the effectiveness of instructional strategies. Writing samples were analyzed using the five stages of writing development outlined by WriteReader (2019): Emergent, Phonetic/Transitional, Conventional, Expanding, and Proficient/Academic. This framework enabled researchers to track learners' progress from basic letter recognition to more conventional sentence construction and narrative fluency.

Qualitative Data Analysis Approach

A descriptive qualitative analysis informed by thematic analysis was used to analyze the reading-related qualitative data. The analysis followed a systematic, multi-step procedure.

For the initial coding procedure, the RAs' observational journal entries related to reading were reviewed and coded using open coding. Codes captured recurring behaviors and instructional conditions, such as *listening before reading*, *finger-pointing*, *difficulty with word endings*, *verbatim modeling*, *slow pacing*, and *inability to read independently*. Categories were generated when related codes were grouped into broader analytic categories, including *reading dependency on oral input*, *decoding challenges*, *instructional scaffolding*, and *emerging reading behaviors*. These categories allowed the researchers to compare reading behaviors across learners and instructional contexts.

The categories were further refined into overarching themes that described patterns of reading development, such as reliance on auditory modeling before reading, difficulty processing morphological markers, and the need for slowed instructional pacing. These themes were compared against assessment results to ensure consistency between observed behaviors and measured performance.

Cross-checking and validation involved discussing analytic interpretations during RA–principal researcher conferences to confirm coding accuracy and reduce individual bias. Quantitative assessment results were used to triangulate qualitative findings, strengthening the credibility of the analysis.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Quantitative data served as the primary strand, establishing participants' literacy levels and learning outcomes through demographic summaries and assessment results. Qualitative data were embedded to contextualize and explain these findings by illuminating how learners engaged with instruction, responded to teaching strategies, and navigated cultural and linguistic

challenges in the classroom. The qualitative observations and reflections were used to interpret and deepen understanding of the quantitative results rather than to test them sequentially.

Interview Analysis

Through in-person interviews, the research assistants collected background information on the students' resettlement experiences and evaluated their English proficiency based on their responses. Figure 1 presents the interview questions used in the study.

Figure 1

Refugee Parent Interview Questions

Refugee Parent Interview Questions	
Secret code for confidentiality, instead of name:	_____
Age:	_____ Today's Date: _____
Male/Female:	_____ Ethnic Heritage: _____
1. Which country are you originally from?	
2. When did you first arrive in the US?	
3. Which city did you arrive in first? (city & state)	
4. How long have you lived in Amarillo?	
5. How many family members are living with you? List them.	
6. What is the highest level of education you have completed in your country?	
a. Never went to school	
b. Graduated from (elementary, middle, or high school)	
c. Some college	
d. Graduated from college	
7. How long have you been in the ESL class? If not, do you want to enroll in the ESL class in the future?	
8. How do you rate your own English proficiency level? (very beginning, intermediate, advanced, highly advanced)	
9. What is your biggest issue with your English? (Speaking, following instructions, making friends, talking to your kids' teachers, asking for help with calling someone, reading, writing, etc.) Choose the top three from these choices.	
10. How do you help your children learn even though you have trouble with the language?	

The data was tabulated using the categories from the research question and the percentages generated.

Listening and Speaking Proficiency

Cummins (2008) identified four developmental stages of Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS): *Pre-Production* (silent or receptive stage), *Early Production*, *Speech Emergence*, and *Intermediate Fluency*. In the *Pre-Production* stage, learners exhibit minimal verbal output while actively developing listening comprehension. Communication is largely nonverbal and supported through gestures, facial expressions, pointing, and other visual cues. Although learners may understand basic classroom routines and common social expressions, they are typically not yet comfortable producing spoken language. During the *Early Production* stage (Cummins, 2008), learners begin to use short utterances and memorized phrases to communicate basic needs and engage in simple social interactions. While grammatical errors are common at this stage, learners are generally able to convey meaning. In the *Speech Emergence* stage, learners participate in simple conversations and express ideas using short sentences. Listening comprehension improves substantially, enabling learners to engage more confidently in everyday classroom and peer interactions. At the *Intermediate Fluency* stage, learners demonstrate near-native conversational fluency in social contexts. The participants' results were recorded using the percentages for the different competencies.

Writing Proficiency

Through the triangulation of interviews, assessments, writing samples, and classroom observations, the study developed a comprehensive understanding of participants' writing development. This multi-source approach also allowed researchers to examine how instructional strategies supported learners' progression from emergent and phonetic writing toward more conventional and contextually appropriate literacy skills.

A more detailed analysis was conducted to identify specific difficulties and inform instructional planning. Writing proficiency is a critical component of English language

development as it directly affects learners' ability to complete forms, communicate with schools, support their children's education, and participate meaningfully in community and educational settings. By examining spelling, sentence construction, punctuation, and overall coherence, the study sought to identify both foundational gaps and emerging strengths in learners' written English. This additional analysis was conducted using the WriteReader (2019) rubric.

Writing samples were analyzed using the five stages of writing development outlined by WriteReader (2019): *Emergent*, *Phonetic/Transitional*, *Conventional*, *Expanding*, and *Proficient/Academic Writing*. *The Emergent Writing Stage* is characterized by copied text, random letters, or isolated symbols, with minimal understanding of phoneme-grapheme correspondence. This stage is common among adults with little or no formal schooling, particularly those from oral language traditions. *The Phonetic/Transitional Writing Stage* involves attempts to spell words based on sound. Although spellings are often non-standard (e.g., *sed* for *said*), they are phonetically plausible and reflect developing phonics knowledge.

In the *Conventional Writing Stage*, learners demonstrate basic sentence fluency, recognizable structures, and mostly correct spelling of high-frequency words. Errors persist, particularly with verb tense and word order, but learners are generally able to express simple ideas in writing. *The Expanding Writing Stage* is marked by longer, more organized texts such as narratives or descriptions. Learners show increasing awareness of audience and purpose, though grammatical accuracy and cohesion continue to develop. *The Proficient/Academic Writing Stage* reflects advanced control of grammar, vocabulary, and organization, typically seen among learners preparing for higher education or professional contexts.

RA Observational Journal

Throughout the study, research assistants (RAs) maintained daily reflective journals based on systematic classroom observations. These journals documented instructional interactions, participation patterns, and non-verbal behaviors such as eye contact, smiling, head nodding, and body language. Observations also included indicators of English language proficiency—listening, speaking, reading, writing, and the ability to follow instructions—as well as behavioral engagement, including active participation, quiet engagement, peer assistance, classroom disruptions, and other notable behaviors.

Research Assistants' Exit Survey

At the conclusion of the study, RAs completed an exit survey consisting of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed reflections on their instructional experiences. The survey prompted RAs to describe the most significant challenges encountered, resources and supports that were most helpful, factors that facilitated or hindered student progress, and ways in which the experience shaped their understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds. RAs also reflected on specific skills and insights gained, identified effective teaching strategies, offered suggestions for program improvement, discussed challenges learners face in developing English proficiency, and provided practical recommendations for supporting refugee parents' language learning.

Results

The study explored the experiences of adult refugee parents, focusing on how their English proficiency and literacy skills influenced both personal growth and engagement in their children's education. This claim is supported by multiple data sources, including participant demographic interviews (covering background, schooling, and resettlement), self-reported English proficiency levels, RA observational journals documenting classroom engagement and instructional responses, and RA exit surveys capturing perceived impacts on parents and

families. Evidence of engagement in children’s education was specifically observed in interview responses and RA reflections, such as parents’ communication with teachers and involvement in school-related literacy tasks.

All percentages reported in the Results section represent baseline descriptive data rather than inferential statistical findings. These figures are based on demographic surveys and end-of-study assessments summarized descriptively.

Participants came from diverse national backgrounds, with the largest groups originating from Cuba and Afghanistan, followed by Somalia, Myanmar, South Sudan, and Venezuela. Most had arrived in the United States recently, with over half resettling in 2024. The majority initially settled in Amarillo, Texas, and more than half had lived in the community for less than one year at the time of data collection.

Household structures were frequently multigenerational, with some families including up to nine members, as indicated by interview data. Educational backgrounds varied widely: over one-quarter reported no formal schooling, slightly more than half had completed high school, a smaller proportion had limited elementary education, and a minority held college degrees.

Participants’ self-assessed English proficiency indicated that most identified as emergent beginners, with smaller percentages reporting beginner or advanced levels. When asked about specific language challenges, speaking—particularly communicating with their children’s teachers—was most frequently cited, followed by writing, reading comprehension, and listening. Figure 2 provides a detailed summary of participants’ demographic characteristics.

To support their children’s learning, parents reported using both English and their native languages, relying on online translation tools, and emphasizing the importance of school attendance as a pathway to their children’s academic success. They also viewed improving their

own English skills as essential for long-term settlement and achieving family aspirations. Interview data further revealed that parents strongly believed their children could achieve better lives through education and that developing their own English proficiency was a critical step toward realizing a brighter future.

Figure 2

Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 48)

Category	Subcategory	n (%)
Country of Origin	Cuba	28%
	Afghanistan	26%
	Somalia	14%
	Myanmar	8%
	South Sudan	4%
	Venezuela	4%
Year of Arrival in U.S.	2024	58.7%
	2021	17.4%
	2022	6.5%
Initial Resettlement Location	Amarillo, TX	76%
	Houston/Dallas/San Antonio	10.9%
Length of Residence in Amarillo	Less than 1 year	55%
Household Characteristics	Three family members living together	22%
	Four family members living together	22%
	Seven family members living together	12%
	Nine family members living together	12%
	Five family members living together	10%
Educational Background	High school graduate	53%
	No formal schooling	27%
	College degree	11%
	Left after 4th or 6th grade	4.5%
Self-Reported English Proficiency	Emergent Beginner	68%
	Beginner	17%
	Advanced	7%
Reported English Skill Challenges	Speaking (e.g., teacher communication)	52.3%
	Writing	20%
	Reading comprehension	16%
	Listening	1.8%

Listening and Speaking Proficiency

In this study, 23% of participants were at the *Pre-Production* stage, 29% were in the *Early Production* stage, and 48% were at the *Speech Emergence* stage; no participants demonstrated *Intermediate Fluency*. Findings from the RA exit survey further indicated that listening and speaking skills were the areas of greatest improvement. Both research assistants reported that several learners were strong listeners; however, clear teacher speech, explicit modeling, and the use of gestures or visual cues were essential for comprehension. While many participants struggled with oral production, they were able to repeat sentences successfully after multiple opportunities for guided practice.

Reading Proficiency

Reading data were drawn from three primary sources: (a) end-of-study reading assessments, (b) research assistant (RA) observational journals, and (c) RA–principal researcher analytic conferences. Together, these data sources captured both learners' demonstrated reading performance and instructional conditions that supported or constrained reading development.

Results indicated that reading posed a significant challenge: 55% of participants were unable to read independently, relying on finger-pointing and verbal repetition to recognize individual words, while 35% struggled with grammatical endings such as *-ed*, *-ing*, and *-s*, requiring direct instruction to comprehend written text. Only 10% demonstrated the ability to read full sentences or a range of words independently. The quantitative reading data consisted of end-of-study assessment results in which participants were asked to read written questions aloud and provide responses. Performance indicators included the ability to recognize high-frequency words, read sentences independently, and accurately interpret grammatical endings such as *-ed*,

–ing, and –s. These data were summarized using descriptive statistics to identify patterns of reading proficiency across participants.

The qualitative reading data were derived from RA daily observational journals. In these reflections, RAs documented students' reading behaviors, instructional supports required, pacing, and observable strategies such as finger-pointing, verbal repetition, and listening before reading. RAs also recorded verbatim comments reflecting instructional challenges, such as students' dependence on modeled language or difficulty decoding grammatical endings. To enhance analytic rigor, RAs met regularly with the principal researcher to discuss emerging patterns and clarify observational interpretations.

Writing Proficiency

Findings from interviews, writing samples, and classroom observations indicated that writing was the most challenging language domain for refugee parent learners in this study. Overall, 83% of participants demonstrated minimal writing proficiency, with production largely limited to copying uppercase letters or writing exclusively in their native language. Only 17% were able to produce individual English words, and even at this level, sentence construction remained inconsistent and difficult.

Classroom observations revealed distinct patterns across proficiency levels. Learners at the low-beginning level frequently reversed letters (e.g., y), showed inconsistent capitalization, and required extensive modeling to produce written forms. High-beginning learners generated longer written responses but continued to experience difficulty with sentence organization, punctuation, and textual cohesion. These challenges limited learners' ability to communicate ideas clearly in written English.

Analysis using the WriteReader (2019) rubric indicated that the majority of participants (83%) were functioning at the Emergent Writing stage, characterized by limited sound–letter correspondence and reliance on copied or symbolic text. The remaining 17% demonstrated features of the Phonetic/Transitional Writing stage, including phonetically plausible spellings alongside weak sentence structure. No participants demonstrated writing behaviors consistent with conventional or advanced stages of writing development.

Additional factors contributing to limited writing development included inconsistent letter formation, restricted English vocabulary, and minimal opportunities for sustained writing practice in meaningful contexts. Collectively, these findings suggest that refugee parent learners in this study were primarily operating at early stages of writing development and required targeted instructional support in phonemic awareness, letter formation, sentence construction, and grammatical accuracy.

Research Question 1

How do refugee parents perceive their own English language proficiency, and how does this affect their ability to support their children's academic development?

The majority of participants perceived their English proficiency as limited, particularly in speaking and writing. These perceived limitations directly affected their confidence and ability to assist with homework, communicate with teachers, and understand school expectations. Several participants expressed hesitation in initiating school-related interactions due to fear of miscommunication.

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated strong intrinsic motivation to improve their English skills. Many maintained vocabulary journals, practiced English with their children at home, and actively sought feedback from instructors.

Research Question 2

How effective are instructional strategies in improving adult refugee learners' basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS)?

Participants' language proficiency levels were distributed as follows: 23% at the Pre-Production stage, 29% at the Early Production stage, and 48% at the Speech Emergence stage. No learners reached Intermediate Fluency during the study period.

RA exit survey data indicated that listening and speaking were the areas of greatest improvement. Observational data showed that learners benefitted significantly from clear teacher speech, explicit modeling, repetition, gestures, and visual supports. Although many participants initially struggled with oral production, repeated guided practice enabled them to produce accurate sentence-level responses.

Instructional strategies such as pronunciation drills, sentence modeling, visual scaffolds, and multimodal teaching approaches supported measurable growth in functional communication skills. Learners demonstrated increased willingness to participate in structured speaking activities by the end of the study.

Research Question 3

Which instructional strategies are most effective in helping refugee parents at the transitional writing stage build linguistic confidence and writing competence?

Analysis of writing samples indicated that sentence frames, guided writing exercises, contextual vocabulary instruction, and structured revision opportunities were particularly effective for transitional-stage learners. These scaffolds reduced writing anxiety and supported the production of grammatically accurate, contextually appropriate sentences.

Over time, participants demonstrated greater independence in composing short paragraphs related to familiar topics such as family routines, school communication, and daily responsibilities. Structured feedback cycles contributed to noticeable gains in organization, sentence clarity, and confidence.

Research Question 4

How do improvements in English proficiency and writing ability influence refugee parents' involvement in their children's academic experiences?

Improvements in English proficiency were associated with increased parental engagement in school-related activities. Participants reported greater confidence in initiating communication with teachers, assisting with homework, reading school notices, and attending school events.

Several parents indicated that enhanced language skills reduced anxiety and empowered them to advocate more effectively for their children. Observational data and survey responses suggested a clear connection between language development and expanded educational involvement.

Discussion

The findings highlight the central role of perceived language proficiency in shaping refugee parents' educational engagement as reflected in interview responses and RA observations. Consistent with Auerbach (2007), limited English proficiency constrained parents' confidence and participation in school contexts. While parents possessed valuable cultural and experiential knowledge, limited literacy skills sometimes restricted their ability to translate that knowledge into active school involvement.

At the same time, participants' strong intrinsic motivation aligns with recent research on adult refugee literacy development, as shown in the interviews and RA surveys. Their use of vocabulary journals and home-based practice reflects goal-oriented learning tied to authentic family responsibilities, as in the observational and survey evidence. These findings suggest that ESL instruction should incorporate personalized strategies, scaffolded tasks, and culturally relevant materials that connect directly to parents' lived experiences.

With respect to BICS development, the data reinforce the importance of structured, multimodal, and repetitive instructional approaches. The observed progression from limited oral production to increased sentence-level participation underscores the effectiveness of modeling, visual supports, and guided practice. These outcomes align with trauma-informed ESL practices that emphasize clarity, predictability, and supportive scaffolding (Bowerman, 2024; WIDA, 2024). For practitioners, this suggests prioritizing contextualized vocabulary, role-playing, conversation circles, and real-life communication simulations.

The reading results suggest that learners' phonics and decoding skills were underdeveloped, consistent with limited exposure to written English both at home and in the classroom. Implementing targeted strategies—such as decodable texts, high-frequency word lists, and guided reading activities—may help learners progressively build independent reading skills while reinforcing their oral language development.

Writing development findings further support scaffolded instruction grounded in learners' experiences. Sentence frames and guided revision opportunities reduced anxiety and promoted gradual independence. These results resonate with family literacy frameworks (Auerbach, 2007) and culturally sustaining pedagogies that build upon learners' lived experiences (Moll et al.,

1992). Designing writing tasks around familiar themes—such as family, migration, and school communication—can foster both competence and ownership.

Strengthening foundational writing skills is essential not only for learners' English development but also for empowering refugee parents to navigate educational systems, support their children's learning, and engage more fully in their communities. While many learners demonstrate emerging strengths such as the ability to sequence events and use functional vocabulary, limited formal schooling and reduced exposure to written English constrain their progress.

Finally, improvements in English proficiency were closely aligned with increased parental involvement, echoing findings from Cun (2022) and Boettcher (2022) that adult literacy growth positively influences children's academic engagement. By explicitly linking language instruction to family engagement goals—such as simulating parent–teacher conferences or interpreting school documents—educators can strengthen the reciprocal relationship between language development and educational participation.

Overall, the study demonstrates that targeted, culturally responsive, and multimodal ESL instruction not only strengthens refugee parents' linguistic competence but also enhances their efficacy as educational partners. Integrating practical English use, structured writing scaffolds, and authentic family engagement tasks can create a mutually reinforcing cycle of language growth and home–school connection, ultimately supporting the long-term academic success of refugee families.

Implications for Literacy Pedagogy

The findings of this study have important implications for literacy instruction for adult refugee learners and underscore the value of culturally relevant instructional procedures embedded throughout the learning process. Results indicate that limited English proficiency—particularly in speaking, reading, and writing—can substantially affect learners’ confidence and their ability to support their children’s academic development. Literacy instruction for adult refugee parents should therefore be personalized, scaffolded, and culturally responsive, intentionally drawing on learners’ lived experiences, linguistic resources, and prior knowledge to make instruction meaningful and accessible (Auerbach, 2007; Moll et al., 1992).

Consistent with the culturally relevant procedures used in this study, instruction that prioritizes oral language, modeling, repetition, and functional literacy tasks is especially effective for learners from oral language traditions or with interrupted formal schooling. The use of community- and family-centered materials—such as those aligned with the *Intercambio* approach—demonstrates how culturally responsive curricula can build confidence while addressing immediate communication needs related to parenting, schooling, and community participation. Tools such as vocabulary journals, contextualized writing tasks, and goal-oriented activities empower learners to engage in self-directed learning while reinforcing practical language use.

The study also highlights the effectiveness of targeted, multimodal strategies for developing basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS). Techniques such as pronunciation drills, sentence modeling, visual scaffolds, role-playing, conversation circles, and technology-supported exercises were particularly effective when delivered through culturally responsive procedures that validated learners’ experiences and emphasized relational learning. When integrated within trauma-informed ESL practices, these approaches supported learners’

emotional safety, increased participation, and fostered sustained engagement (Bowerman, 2024; WIDA, 2024).

For learners at early and transitional stages of writing development, findings suggest that instructional strategies that reduce anxiety and provide clear structure—such as sentence frames, guided writing, contextual vocabulary instruction, and scaffolded revision—are essential. Designing writing tasks around culturally familiar and meaningful themes (e.g., family roles, migration experiences, daily routines) reflects learners’ funds of knowledge and enables them to produce authentic written texts while strengthening linguistic accuracy and confidence (Moll et al., 1992; Auerbach, 2007). Ongoing modeling and feedback further support learners’ ownership of written language.

Finally, the study demonstrates that improvements in English proficiency and writing ability can directly enhance parental engagement in children’s education. Literacy instruction grounded in culturally relevant procedures and linked to real-life tasks—such as communicating with teachers, supporting homework, or navigating school systems—positions parents as active partners in their children’s academic success (Cun, 2022; Boettcher, 2022). By integrating functional literacy, culturally responsive instruction, and family engagement goals, educators can create a reinforcing cycle in which language development strengthens parental efficacy and, in turn, supports children’s educational outcomes.

Limitations of the Current Study

While this study provides important insights into the English learning experiences of refugee parents and their perceived roles in their children’s education, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size and setting limit the generalizability of the findings. The study involved only 48 participants from a single resettlement program in one Midwestern state.

The demographic composition and educational support systems available in this community may not reflect those in other regions with different refugee populations or access to services. For instance, refugee parents in urban areas with more extensive language resources may experience different outcomes compared to those in rural or underserved communities.

Second, the voluntary nature of participation likely introduced a selection bias. Parents who enrolled in ESL classes and agreed to participate in interviews or assessments were likely more motivated or had fewer external constraints (e.g., work schedules, transportation, childcare). As such, the study may not fully capture the experiences of more isolated or less engaged refugee parents who may face even greater barriers to educational involvement.

Third, language barriers during data collection posed challenges. Although interviews were conducted with the aid of RAs and interpreters when needed, some participants struggled to express complex thoughts, emotions, or experiences in English or their native language. As a result, nuances may have been lost, and some data may lack depth or clarity.

Finally, the assessment design had limitations in measuring authentic language gains. Because of students' anxiety, trauma history, or unfamiliarity with formal testing, several participants declined to complete assessments, and those who did participate showed inconsistent performance. For example, some struggled not due to lack of knowledge but due to unfamiliarity with test formats or fear of failure. This limits the ability to draw strong conclusions about the efficacy of instructional strategies solely from quantitative results.

Despite these limitations, the findings provide a valuable foundation for future, more expansive studies. They also underscore the need for more inclusive, trauma-informed, and family-centered approaches to refugee education that extend beyond the classroom and into the lived experiences of families.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes the pivotal role of English language proficiency in shaping refugee parents' ability to support their children's education. Although several participants had strong educational backgrounds, limited English skills presented significant barriers. However, when instruction was individualized, culturally responsive, and supported by multimodal tools and technology, participants made measurable progress and demonstrated increased confidence.

As a result of improved literacy skills, refugee parents were not only able to engage more actively in their children's academic lives but also emerged as stronger advocates and role models. Specifically, instructional strategies such as guided writing with sentence frames, phonics-based activities, journal writing, and collaborative peer exercises proved especially effective. These methods helped parents at the transitional writing stage move from phonetic spelling to more conventional and intelligible written forms.

To build speaking proficiency, the study recommends practical strategies such as practicing English during daily routines, joining ESL conversation groups, using technology for speaking practice, recording and listening to oneself, and celebrating incremental progress.

Future research should consider the potential of parent-child paired learning in after-school programs where refugee parents and their children engage together in meaningful literacy activities. Moreover, incorporating accessible digital tools such as Vocaroo.com may further enhance parents' English language development by offering teacher-recorded guidance, pronunciation practice, and opportunities for parents to record and reflect on their own spoken language.

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