

# Language and Literacy Development of Syrian Refugee Children

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**KEYWORDS:** Syrian, refugee children, bilingual language development, bilingualism, literacy, reading comprehension, school, English, Arabic, simple view of reading model, quantitative methods

## WHAT THE RESEARCH IS ABOUT

**OVERVIEW:** The study looked at English and Arabic language and literacy development in 115 Syrian children with refugee experience, aged 6 to 13, who had recently resettled in Canada.

**OBJECTIVE:** To examine Syrian refugee children’s language and literacy performance in English and Arabic; learn about differences in language and literacy development between younger and older children; and test the Simple View of Reading (SVR) model in both languages.

**RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION:** Canada has resettled more than 57,000 Syrian refugees since 2015 – many are children and adolescents who have experienced interrupted schooling; however, little is known about these children’s language and literacy development. To support the full participation of refugee children and youth in their host country, it is essential to ensure that they acquire fluent language and literacy skills in the language of their host country; at the same time, it is important for children to maintain their first language, which helps provide a sense of belonging.

## HOW THE DATA WERE OBTAINED

The sample for this study included 115 children (54 males, mean age = 9 years, 3 months); 60 from Toronto, 32 from Edmonton, and 23 from Waterloo. Among the 115 children, only 57 (25 males, mean age = 10 years, 6 months) could read in Arabic and were included in the analysis of the Arabic data. The children in the sample had lived in Canada for less than 3 years at the time of the study. Two age groups were explored: 6-9 years old and 10-13 years old.

The researchers used a mix of English and Arabic measures, including the ALEQ-4 questionnaire, the Matrix Analogies Test, the Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Achievement, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, and a shortened version of the Test of Narrative Language. The English results were compared to a normative English sample, but standardized measures were not available in Arabic.

## WHAT THE STUDY FOUND

- ▶ About 14% of the sample could not read English and over half (57%) were unable to read Arabic.
- ▶ Older children (aged 10-13) experienced more challenges in learning English. This may be because they started learning English at a later age and the demands on language were greater in higher grades. However, the older group outperformed the younger group (aged 6-9) in Arabic. This is likely because they had more time and opportunities to gain language and literacy skills in Arabic.
- ▶ English and Arabic language and literacy skills are likely affected by many factors –including the amount of exposure to each language, socioeconomic status (SES), parents’ levels of education, whether the child had experienced interrupted schooling, and how much the child was exposed to the language (e.g., through print and audiovisual media, socialization, etc.). Trauma may also impact language development.
- ▶ Word reading and oral language skills were found to be related to reading comprehension in both English and Arabic, supporting the applicability of the SVR model in both languages.
- ▶ This study suggests that refugee child follow similar, although delayed, developmental trajectories compared to less vulnerable groups. This highlights the need to provide additional support to accelerate the language development of this group.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ Findings that refugee children, particularly those in the older group, performed poorly on the English standardized measures (vocabulary, word reading, and reading comprehension) must be interpreted with caution. This sample was within their first 3 years of learning English, and research has shown that it takes five or more years for English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners to develop academic language proficiency.
- ▶ This study shows the need to support refugee children’s language and literacy skills in English and Arabic, both at school and in the home.
  - For older youth, tutorial classes that combine academic content with language support can help familiarize youth with specific vocabulary needed for school.
  - For children of all ages, same-language peer pairing in schools can help the development of both languages.
- ▶ Language programs should aim to be culturally responsive by engaging the real-life issues that refugee students face and validating the multiple identities and life experiences of students. They should also include trauma-informed approaches when necessary.

- Many factors should be taken into account when testing refugee students' language and cognitive abilities including previous schooling, proficiency in other languages, the language of the assessment, familiarity with testing procedures, familiarity with host country classroom procedures and educational institutions, the assessor or test administrator (a bilingual psychologist, a familiar teacher, or a qualified interpreter), and cultural similarity between host and home country test procedures and materials.
- Future research should examine the effects of SES and socioemotional wellbeing on language and literacy development in refugee children.



[View Project Webpage](#)

## ABOUT CYRRC

The Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition (CYRRC) is a network of researchers, service providers, and government partners working together to produce and share research that facilitates the integration of young refugees and their families in Canada and beyond.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition.

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.



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