

# **SAFETY IMPLICATIONS OF LOW-ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AMONG MIGRANT CONSTRUCTION SITE OPERATIVES**

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## **Abstract**

Language diversity is a prominent feature of the Australian construction industry. Non English speaking background (NESB) migrants fill a high proportion of low-level operative positions and naturally revert to their first-language in order to communicate with their colleagues.

This creates linguistic ghettos in the workplace which further inhibit integration and second language acquisition.

There are many consequences for construction companies; one being an inability to interpret messages regarding workplace hazards conveyed by supervisors, managers and peers.

This paper investigates the extent of this problem and its implications for occupational health and safety risks. It focuses on the experiences of NESB operatives and more specifically, on their difficulties in understanding the content of mandatory government safety accreditation courses. A need is identified to provide mandatory safety training in languages other than English and to supplement this with translated print material. Recommendations are also made to assist construction companies improve their safety policies in accommodating NESB workers.

## **Introduction**

Since its federation in 1901 Australia has consistently relied upon migration for its population growth and in 2004, 54% of Australia's total population growth was attributed to the arrival of new settlers [1].

Approximately 25% of the current working population is foreign-born [2] and 73% of these migrants were born in non-English speaking countries [1]. With such an extensive migrant population, linguistic diversity has inevitably become a distinctive feature of Australia's workforce and it is estimated that 25% of the entire population speaks a language other than English at home [3]. Few other countries can claim a similar level of diversity in its human capital, in either a cultural or linguistic sense [4].

This cultural diversity is reflected strongly in Australia's construction industry which employs approximately 7% of the working population (about 800,000 people). NESB migrants account for almost 12.5% of this figure (about 100,000 people), filling the relatively large number of unskilled, menial and manual jobs [1] [2].

While this cultural diversity has many benefits, it has also resulted in Australian construction sites being characterized by clearly distinguishable cultural and linguistic territories, typically demarked by occupational boundaries [5].

For example, Italians tend to concentrate in concrete trades, Croatians in carpentry trades, Koreans in tiling trades, Maoris in steelwork and scaffolding and Irish in labouring etc. There is evidence that this cultural trade demarcation presents a significant organizational challenge for project managers. For example, Loosemore and Lee found significant communication problems with migrant workers on Australian construction sites and Loosemore and Chau found worrying evidence of racism and discrimination towards them [6] [7]. There is also evidence that migrant workers are exposed to higher safety risks than those born locally. For example, Geraghty identified an alarming number of accidents among migrant workers and an injury rate twice that of local workers [8]. More recently, data from the Australian Bureau of Statistic revealed that injuries to foreign-born workers accounted for 29% of all documented occupational-grievances [3]. This data linked 44,300 work-related injuries to NESB employees, and indicated that a high proportion of work-related injuries occur within trade or labourer-related occupations – which are relatively common in the construction industry and where the highest proportion of migrants are employed.

It would be reasonable to assume that for NESB workers, language could be a contributory factor in this relatively high accident incident rate. Nevertheless, despite some research into communication problems with migrant workers, none has focussed specifically on language and its relationship with safety [6] [9] [10] [11] [12] [13]. To address this deficiency, this paper aims to explore the extent to which language difficulties cause communication problems about safety issues on construction sites. The objective is to make recommendations which can improve the effectiveness of safety communication and thereby reduce the level of accidents among this significant segment of the construction industry's workforce.

### **Culture, language and communication**

Cultural diversity within a workforce manifests itself in many tacit and explicit ways and can be evident in the different physical traits, customs, beliefs, attitudes, values, codes of dress, artefacts, habits and behaviours that characterise a workforce [14] [15]. Cultural factors also determine the ways in which employees encode and decode messages, the meanings they attribute to messages and the conditions under which certain messages may or may not be sent, noticed or interpreted. It also influences the social structure of an organisation by determining who talks to whom, about what and what mediums are used [16]. However, arguably the most distinctive and overt expression of culture is linguistic. Language is a communal possession which consists of a complex system of symbolic representations used to convey meaning during communication in a particular cultural setting [17]. It is not only a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas within a culture but is also a shaper of ideas. As Wardhaugh points out, unwittingly people are all party to a cultural agreement within their ethnic community to divide, arrange, organise, attach significance and codify ideas in a particular way [18]. People who speak different languages will therefore be more likely to view the world differently.

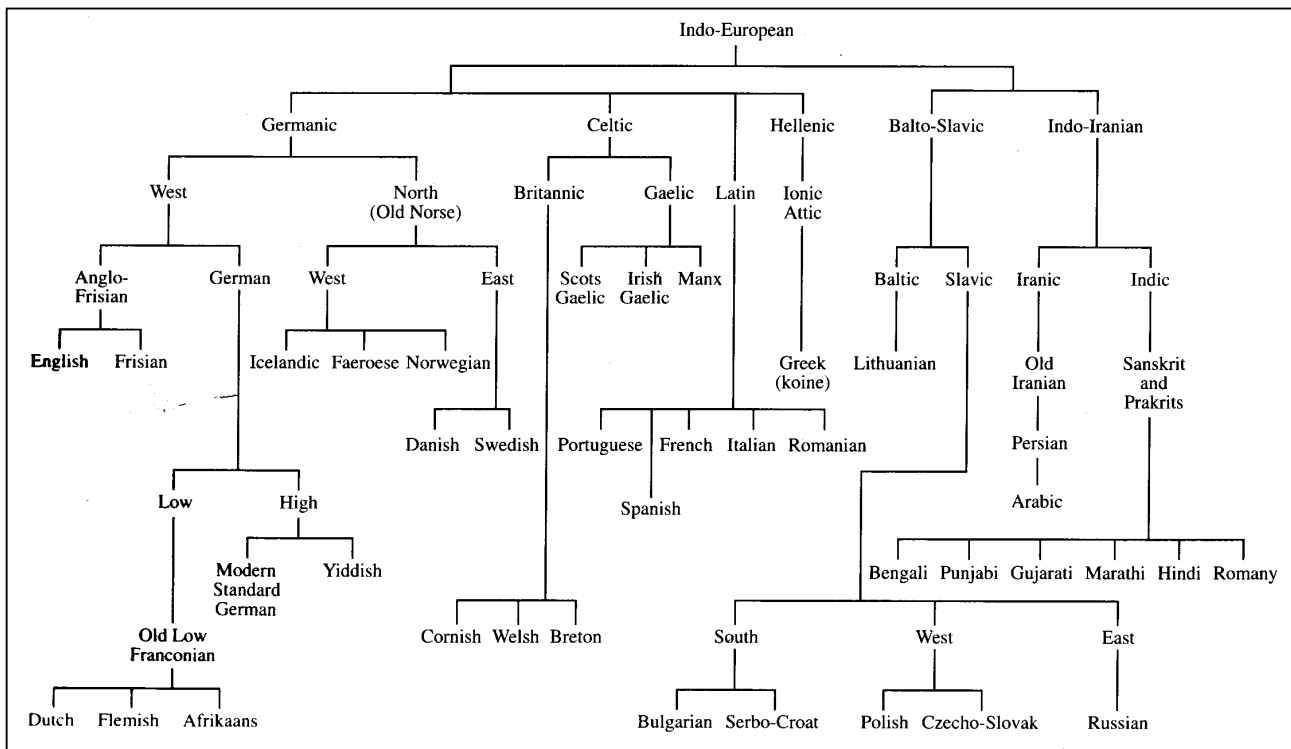
### **The structure of language**

In understanding the potential for communication problems to arise between speakers of different languages, it is useful to have a categorization system. To this end, there are two broad ways to categorise languages, namely; *typological* and *genealogical* [19]. Under *typological* classification, languages are grouped according to their structure. In this approach, subject (S), verb (V) and object (O) words are observed and used as the foundation for comparison in common phases. For example, English is known as an *SVO* language because its speakers share a tendency to organise their sentence structure with the subject first, followed by the verb and ending with the object (Michael (S) – drove (V) – the car (O)). Other linguistic cultures may put the subject last (The car (O) - was driven (V) - by Michael (S)) which explains why some people have difficulty in learning English as a second language.

In contrast to typological classification, the *genealogical* system groups languages according to their historical relationships (see Figure 1). This approach argues that many languages have evolved from a common '*parent language*' and are therefore regarded as belonging to the same '*language family*'. This

is useful for managers because people who come from the same language family tend to experience fewer communication problems because of the larger proportion of common words

**Figure 1 The Indo-European family of languages (Source: [19]).**



### The components of language

Contemporary linguistic theory has identified that languages differ in three main ways, namely: form (grammar), content (semantics/meaning) and function (pragmatics/intention).

#### Form

The study of form in language encompasses the concepts of morphology (word use), syntax (grammar – word structure in sentences) and phonology (sound) [17]. All three aspects of form can cause problems for NESB migrants interpreting instructions on a construction site. For example, consider the complex morphology of the English language, where the verb “dig” has a variety of inflectional forms such as “dig” or “digging”, which should be used in different tenses. Adults learning new languages often find it difficult to differentiate between these inflections and may therefore misunderstand when an instruction has to be carried out. This is complicated by the fact that some words such as “unfortunate”, can be used in the past and current tense without the use of an inflection. Other inflections which can cause confusion are uncaring or disappear. The insertion of these inflections has no bearing on tense but transforms a word into the opposite meaning of the base verbs they are added to. Even more confusing for NESB migrants is the use of inflections such as establishment, which completely change the meaning of the base verb (establish) to a noun. For this reason, those learning a new language often revert to using simple phrases which can themselves cause misinterpretation. For example, the phrase “It is unfortunate” may be replaced with “It is not lucky”.

Syntax (the order of words) can also cause problems for NESB migrants. For example, the sentences “Jack jumped over the dog” and “the dog jumped over Jack” have completely different meanings but use the same words. As Blair et al points out, sentences are not random collections of words and new language speakers often find it difficult to understand the specific word patterns defined as acceptable by the syntactic rules of a language [20]. For example, in English the following sentence makes sense “the

man found the hole quickly” because an object (hole) followed the verb (found). Not realizing this, a NESB migrant may say “the man found quickly” making it unclear what has been found.

Phonology refers to sound patterns in a language. Despite the vast array of sounds which the human voice can produce, each language has adopted a limited set of sounds to be used when using particular words. According to Yorkston, these sounds have become “hard wired” by approximately seven years of age [21]. For example, Australian English is said to involve the production of about 44 different sounds while standard Arabic is said to involve about 62 distinguishable sounds. Surprisingly, few of these sounds are alike which means that an Arab may not have developed the neuromuscular vocal motor skills to be able to make the sounds required to speak English. This results in a phenomenon called an “accent” where an individual adapts a similar native sound to as closely possible mimic the new sound. For example, because the English sound “th” is not a sound found in the French language, they find it difficult to pronounce words such as “this” and “that”, pronouncing them as if they were spelt “zis” and “zat” [20]. In some cases, accents can be strong enough to distort the meaning of an instruction. On other occasions the mental energy needed to adjust for an accent can cause linguistic fatigue in both senders and receivers of messages and have the same affect.

### **Content**

As people develop their competence in a language, they acquire a vocabulary – an understanding of the meaning of different words when used in different contexts (semantics). They also develop a lexicon – an understanding of how words relate to each other. For example, an English speaker would consider the phrase “the bug was swimming in goop” by attributing a liquid semantic to the word goop because the previous words refer to “swimming in”. However, a non English speaker would not make this association so easily and probably ask “what is goop?”. Semantic sophistication develops as a result of successive experiences with a particular word and people store such experiences in their “episodic memory” [20]. When a child learns a first language, there are many years of experiences which are gradually accumulated into a highly refined episodic memory, creating an intimate understanding of how words can mean different things in different contexts. However, for a NESB adult working in the construction industry and learning English as a second language, their episodic memory and lexical knowledge must take time to accumulate.

### **Function**

The practical use of language in social settings is called pragmatics. This refers to the capacity of some expressions to perform some kind of function. Such expressions are called “speech acts” and can be direct or indirect. For example, the request “Please put your safety helmet on?” is a direct speech act because it contains an explicit request to put a helmet on. However, the expression “Do you have your safety helmet on?” is an indirect speech act because it contains an explicit request for verification of helmet ownership and an implicit demand (a hint or suggestion) to put the helmet on. The hidden messages or hints in indirect speech acts such as this are easily missed by NESB migrants meaning that an instruction may go ignored.

### **Method**

The large numbers of NESB operatives in the Australian Construction industry, the challenges facing them in achieving language proficiency and the lack of provision for this in mandatory training, raises serious questions regarding the safety of migrant and non-migrant workers on construction sites. To explore the extent of this potential problem, a survey was conducted on 400 migrant site operatives working in the Sydney metropolitan area in Australia. The survey questions were refined during a preliminary pilot study of 50 migrant operatives and its specific aims were to:

- Establish the proportion of operatives who use a language-other-than-English on-site.

- Determine the percentage of operatives who experience difficulty with understanding English safety instructions.
- Investigate the value of mandatory safety training to foreign born migrant operatives.
- Verify whether or not those responsible for safety training are appreciative of the problems which foreign born migrant operatives face and whether any form of language assistance is offered.

Clearly, given the low English proficiency of the survey respondents, the structure and content of the survey had to be extremely simple and clear. It was also offered in a translated format. The survey was restricted to construction sites in the Sydney metropolitan area because in Australia, new migrants tend to congregate in urban areas to gain work. These sites included 200 large commercial projects in Sydney’s Central Business District which were managed by large multinational contractors, 100 medium sized and varied projects managed by medium sized contractors in inner suburban Sydney and 100 small projects managed by smaller family owned contractors in outer Sydney suburbs.

Given the potential sensitivity of the research and possible reluctance or inability to respond, the survey was administered by a combination of random sampling (300 surveys) and purposeful sampling for those with especially poor literacy skills (100 surveys). In both samples, the survey was distributed to NESB migrants born overseas and administered by a NESB migrant born in Australia who acted as a cultural gatekeeper and as a source of trust for respondents. While the random sample surveys were self-administered, the purposeful sample surveys were administered by the gatekeeper in the form of a structured interview. For those respondents with especially poor literacy skills, the interview enabled questions to be explained in detail and where necessary, in their native language. Anonymity was assured for all respondents and the response rate in the random and purposeful samples were 22% and 100% respectively. This provided an overall response rate of 41.5% of which 84.5% were born overseas and 83.8% spoke a language other than English at home. The respondents came from a variety of occupational backgrounds including formworkers, bricklayers, steel fixers and concreters. They also came from a variety of linguistic backgrounds and migration period (see Table 1).

**Table 1 Sample characteristics (date of migration and linguistic background)**

<b>Date of migration</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Language spoken</b>	<b>%</b>
1950s	1	Italian	20
1960s	11	Arabic	26
1970s	32	Spanish	6
1980's	32	Portuguese	12
1990s	23	Bosnian	5
1	1	Macedonian	7
		Serbian	8
		Croatian	8
		Greek	4
		Other	4
Total	100%	Total	100%

**Table 1 Sample characteristics (date of migration and linguistic background)**

## **Discussion of results**

The following sections discuss the extent and nature of communication problems revolving around safety, which arise from low English language proficiency. It is important to point out that it does not explore a causal relationship between safety risk and English language proficiency. To categorically determine such a relationship would require a detailed study of accident records and follow-up interviews with those named in incident reports to ascertain if English proficiency was a contributory cause. However, even this would be problematic due to peoples' memory constraints, the nomadic nature of construction operatives and unlikelihood of accident records highlighting English proficiency as a causal factor. Furthermore, since most companies in the construction industry fail to record a high proportion of near misses on site, this method would exclude a significant amount of potentially important data.

### **Languages used at work**

The results of the surveys indicated that the vast majority of our respondents (85.7%) used a language other than English at work. While 14.3% of our respondents chose to speak English at work, when those who spoke a language other than English at home, were isolated (83.8% of our sample), this proportion dropped to 8%. This indicates that those who speak a language other than English at home are less likely to integrate linguistically into the workforce and, due to a relative lack of exposure to English, would be less likely to develop effective English language skills. Indeed, given that the date of arrival in Australia among our foreign born respondents ranged fairly uniformly between 1958 and 2001, this suggests that migrants have a continuing propensity to revert to their native language at work, irrespective of their duration of exposure to English. While 58.9% of our respondents declared an interest in developing their English language skills further, this implies that the workplace ghettos identified by other researchers are well ensconced that construction project managers are destined to work within a linguistically and culturally segregated workplace and need to adapt their management strategies accordingly.

These findings confirm broader research into the cognitive processes that govern language acquisition. This has found that humans have a genetic predisposition to learn language until the age of five, when the capacity and inclination to learn a new language deteriorates rapidly and intensive instruction is needed [22]. The important point in relation to the migrants in our study is that few would have been fortunate enough to have received formal language instruction. The only language training received by our respondents had been socially rather than technically based and thus of limited use in better understanding tasks and instructions in the construction environment. While some had undergone basic language instruction, most relied on friends and families with similar problems for social interaction. This lack of opportunity to learn the informal social dimensions of language which must be mastered to enable effective social interaction and integration within the work environment is a problem and has been referred to as "competitive competence" [23] [24]. It not only explains why NESB tend to occupy low social status positions in work [24] and suffer discrimination [7] but also provides a linguistic explanation for the cultural and linguistic ghettos which are common on large inner city construction sites in Australia [7].

### **Language as a barrier to communication**

Nearly half (48.7%) of our respondents admitted to having misunderstood work-based instructions as a result of their poor English proficiency and 66.7% acknowledged that they had made a mistake at some point as a result of this. However, only 58.9% felt that English classes at work would help to alleviate this problem, a response which coincided with a broader cross-sector survey of non English speaking migrants in Australia, which revealed that few see the need to improve their English language skills [25]. It is a surprising and rather disappointing response which can be explained by reference to the concept of "language interference" [20]. Language interference is the mechanism by which NESB workers cope with communication difficulties by falling-back onto similar syntactic rules and similar sounding words from their first language. For example, Chinese people tend to depend on the sound "ze" because it is similar to

the English “s”. Like everyone learning a new language, many tend to retain it as an acceptable accent, long after they have learnt the English language, reaching a point of compromise between their native and new language which they are happy with, despite the inconvenience to native speakers.

In working to alleviate the above barriers problems, Alcorso found little evidence to suggest that employers in Australia offer organized language assistance in the workplace [12]. Requirements and instructions relating to occupational health and safety are still primarily communicated in English and critical on-site safety information and OHS training courses are rarely disseminated in a language that ethnic minority operatives can comprehend. Indeed, even the governing authority for safety in NSW (Workcover NSW), which promotes safety conscious practices through its compulsory “Greencard” certification system, only provides training in English. Furthermore, it assumes a level of technical language ability which is unlikely to be present in migrant workers. The Greencard assessment is also conducted in a way which makes it open to abuse. For example, in one reported case in Australia, a construction site manager faced with a labour shortage, was found to be completing OHS induction assessments for his migrant workers to enable them to commence work on his site.

One reason for not providing language assistance to employees may be cost-related. However, another reason may be apparent evidence that when linguistic support has been provided, little progress has been made in reducing work-related injuries and fatalities among NESB operatives. For example, in the US, Halverston found that the provision of English-language OHS training and on-site precautionary signage was ineffective in reducing work-related injuries and fatalities among NESB operatives [13]. It would seem that even when language assistance is provided, NESB workers can easily misunderstand warnings and common safety precautions and develop a poor awareness of hazards within their occupational setting, heightening the risk of an accident to themselves and to others. Nevertheless, while this evidence may be construed to provide proof that language is not a problem, it may also indicate deficiencies in the way that assistance was provided. Clearly, there is a need to explore this important issue in more depth before any valid judgments can be made.

### **The effectiveness of mandatory safety training**

It is compulsory that all operatives working on construction sites in the state of New South Wales, attain Workcover accreditation by completing Workcover’s mandatory “Greencard” safety induction course. The second part of our survey sought to explore the effectiveness of this training for our respondents, which is exclusively delivered in English-only format. Before discussing our results, it was somewhat surprising to find that only 71.8% of our respondents had experienced this *mandatory* training. While a 100% participation rate would have been optimistic, this low percentage was surprising given the substantial penalties in place for companies with operatives working without accreditation. Clearly more needs to be done to ensure that NESB operatives attend Greencard safety certification courses. While the reasons for non-participation were not explored in depth, 77.5% of our respondents indicated that the English only format of the training was a factor in their decision to avoid safety training. Similarly, of the respondents who had participated in such training, a very large proportion of respondents (89.9%) felt that the training would be more effective if it was in their own language. 68.4% of our respondents said they had moderate or serious difficulties in understanding the written material given, 67.1% with the verbal material given and 55.7% had similar problems undertaking the final examination. These results are not surprising given that 85.7% of our respondents spoke a language other than English at work. Neither is it surprising that only 36.3% of our respondents felt that the training offered them any help with safety at work, a concern for project managers who must assume that all operatives on their construction sites are aware of the safety risks around them. For the 63.7% of respondents that had attended Workcover training and struggled, the normal coping strategy was to work with their friends to pass the test (75.9%), since a similar proportion (72.2%) indicated that no help was available from instructors in understanding the material. However, it also seems common for instructors to allow people to help each other to pass the final examination to ensure that everyone gains their certification.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore the extent to which language differences affect migrant workers' understanding of safety risks on construction sites. The objective was to make recommendations which could improve the effectiveness of safety communication on site and thereby reduce the level of accidents among this significant segment of the construction industry's workforce. It showed that one implication of managing a linguistically diverse workforce is a reduced capacity to communicate with workers about issues such as health and safety. It also showed that migrant workers are often exposed to higher levels of health and safety risks than non migrant workers and that their knowledge of procedures in this area is often lacking. This paper discussed the results of a survey of NESB migrant workers which explored the extent of this problem. It also explored the effectiveness of mandatory training provided by Workcover, the governing safety authority responsible for ensuring a safe workplace for employees and the surrounding community and for ensuring that employees are aware of the regulations which govern their workplace and of the hazards which may be present. The results of the research indicate a strong propensity among NESB migrants to revert to their native language in the workplace, thus hindering their ability to develop competence in the English language. Indeed, many respondents experienced difficulties in understanding work-related instructions and there was strong support for safety training to be provided in a range of languages. English language tuition was less popular and experience indicates that it tends to be inconvenient and biased towards social communication, having a minimal impact the effectiveness of work-related communications. If language instruction is to be provided, it is clear that it needs to be technically based and tailored to the needs of the construction industry. In addition, there are a whole range of other complementary initiatives which project managers can employ to reduce the potential problems highlighted in this research. For example, they can translate safety signage, equipment manuals and hazardous materials labelling and use signage based on images rather than words. The research also indicated that while Workcover's mandatory safety induction course provides a useful framework for educating site operatives about work-related safety regulations and hazards, it is has questionable benefits for NESB migrant workers. This is worrying since they represent such a large proportion of the construction workforce in Australia, particularly on large scale, inner city, high risk construction projects. Language barriers and unaccommodating trainers were discovered to be a major factor in limiting the effectiveness of these courses, a problem which could be easily addressed by providing inductions in a variety of languages, training trainers to be more sensitive to different cultural needs and translating printed material.

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