



# Literacy matters in sustainable livelihood development among refugee adults in South Africa



## Authors:

Kofi P. Quan-Baffour<sup>1</sup>   
Lineo Rose Johnson<sup>1</sup> 

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Department of Adult, Community and Continuing Education, School of Educational Studies, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Lineo Rose Johnson,  
johnslr@unisa.ac.za

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**Background:** Political and economic upheavals in the current millennium globally have displaced millions of people, making cross-border and forced migration a reality. Many refugees are forced out of their countries and flee to other countries to find new languages with which they are not familiar. South Africa as a signatory to the 1954 UN Convention on refugees and stateless persons accepts refugees (asylum seekers) from all over the world. The displaced persons are mostly illiterate in English and the indigenous languages of their new settlement countries.

**Objectives:** The study was set up to investigate the socio-economic value of literacy in the lives of refugee adults in South Africa. Hence, in this article, literacy refers to the ability to read, write, calculate, communicate and function in any language with a basic understanding in one's environment.

**Method:** This ethnographic qualitative study used interviews, observations and focus group meetings to explore how literacy matters in the sustainable development of entrepreneurial activities among the refugee adults and youths in South Africa. The study is grounded in Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy theory and has some implications for adult literacy throughout the developing world where millions of adult refugees find themselves vulnerable.

**Results:** The study revealed that refugee adults learn functional literacy in English and other 11 local South African languages informally as communication skills for the survival of their small businesses and for social and economic use in their 'adopted home'. They find it difficult to get employment in the formal sector and often use their ingenuity to create their own jobs for survival and livelihoods in informal trade and entrepreneurship.

**Conclusion:** The article concludes that within the public adult learning interventions by the Department of Basic Education, where literacy programmes are offered, refugees should be encouraged and supported in attending formal classes to deal with their livelihoods and small businesses for survival.

**Keywords:** functional literacy; sustainable livelihood; communication skills; refugee adults; entrepreneurship; economic use; social use.

## Introduction

Political and socio-economic unrests have become rampant occurrences during the present millennium in many parts of the world, and Africa is no exception. Civil wars and political and economic upheavals continue to displace millions of people on the African continent, making cross-border and forced migration familiar (International Organisation for Migration 2019). Literacy, which for this article is described as the ability to read, write, calculate (numeracy), function and communicate in any language with a basic understanding and social use in one's environment (UNESCO 2005), becomes a challenge to most of these refugee adults. This article focuses on the dearth of adult literacy of indigenous languages among refugees in South Africa, and how their limitations become an impediment to their daily means of survival, socio-economic function, entrepreneurship, and livelihoods. The article is underpinned by Paulo Freire's theory of critical pedagogy and literacy as a social justice issue. The research methodology in the article is guided by qualitative ethnographic enquiry through interviews, focus group meetings and observation. The article used thematic methods to analyse and interpret the findings.

## Background and context

The political decay and dictatorial regimes in the Great Lakes Region, Central African Republic, Somalia, Mali, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, to name just a few, and the economic meltdown in many African countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique and others because of political and

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poor governance are cases in point. Many adults and youths forced out of their countries arrive in other countries where none of the local languages is known. Apart from the colonial languages (English, French, Portuguese and Spanish) which have become the de facto official languages or lingua francas, every African country has several indigenous and ethnic languages (Quattrini 2019).

The refugees or victims of political, religious and economic unrest migrate to countries they regard as safe havens and their adopted homes. These host countries often do not share the lingua francas or local languages that refugees<sup>1</sup> used in their home contexts; therefore, forced migration results in refugees being unable to communicate upon arrival. Following the definition of literacy used previously, refugees are thus illiterate in their countries of refuge. It is possible that most of the refugees leave their home countries with certain qualifications, economic independence and means of survival for their families but as a result of the struggle to reach their countries of refuge, sometimes their ability to make their livelihoods are lost on the way, leaving them destitute and their means of survival reduced to nothing. Their loss can also include their means of communication; as a result, they start to learn foreign languages spoken in their countries of refuge.

Illiteracy, the inability to read and write, is one of the most complex constructs nested within the four levels of the brain, the person, the learning environment, and the cultural context (Thomas, Knowland & Rogers 2020:2). According to Johnson (2016), the impact of adult illiteracy and inability to adapt to cultural and learning environments remains a challenge with governments in formulating and implementing favourable policies. 'The most crucial means in pulling a country out of poverty, and its underdeveloped status is to eradicate illiteracy continuously' (Yeoh & Chu 2012:11). They further affirm that in addition to basic literacy, a pool of productive, trained and skilled human power will also bring social changes to a nation and help to realise the objectives of national policy and development planned by the government. The contemporary literature is pregnant with information on the value of literacy in today's world. To argue that *literacy* – the ability to read and write, and use numbers – plays an essential role in people's socio-economic and political lives in the contemporary world is not an exaggeration.

People with good literacy skills enjoy a higher standard of living, have better opportunities for finding jobs, and continue learning new skills to help them in the workplace. A society's economic prosperity and literacy significantly influence each other as they grow together (Yeoh & Chu 2012). The role of literacy in rural communities in Africa cannot be overemphasised. In the developing world, literacy is an essential instrument for political, social and economic stability within and among nations. Literacy is the foundation for lifelong learning and a kind of transformative development for improving individuals' and communities' quality of life (Quan-Baffour & Romm 2015:459). Literacy never ends; it

1. In this article, refugees include asylum seekers, immigrants and migrants from different countries living in South Africa.

enables individuals to acquire necessary skills, knowledge and values for a better life. It increases productivity and thereby enhances economic development. Indeed, literacy is an indispensable tool for effective participation in today's world of the knowledge economy. As a phenomenon that covers more than necessary reading, writing, and calculating skills, literacy is useful for the individual, family, community, entrepreneurship, economy, and other sectors of the nation. Torres (2010:110) suggests that literacy can and does involve learning and education for a combination of personal satisfaction, healthier family life, more productive livelihoods, services, knowledge of rights and how to insist on them. Literacy enhances livelihoods by assisting small-scale entrepreneurs in accessing credit to establish and manage their businesses. It also empowers community members, particularly parents, with the skills to support the education of children. It enables citizens to have a deeper understanding of local and national affairs at the community level to fully participate in civic or social affairs for development (Johnson 2016; Torres 2009:11).

Norton and Campbell (2010:3) posit that literacy must not be seen only as a set of cognitive skills and should also be recognised as a tool for sociocultural practices associated with reading and writing. The value of literacy covers everyday activities and networks and its traditional role in schools, workplaces, and civic institutions. Literacy is embedded in all human endeavours in today's world, which is why Rogers (2010:66) contends that vocational skills training and literacy learning should be integrated instead of keeping them apart. Thus, in the vocational context, literacy can be integrated into skills training. Using the craft or trade's embedded literacy or trade as the teaching-learning materials, one learns covertly and overtly (Rogers 2010:66).

The role of literacy in health among rural women and their families is enormous. When a woman acquires literacy skills, the benefit spills over to the family and even neighbours. Literacy among parents, particularly women, can reduce malnutrition and infant mortality. A child of a mother with a basic education has a 25% higher chance of survival than one with an illiterate mother (McKay 2000:62). Thus, the mortality rates for children of mothers with no education are twice as high as those for children of mothers with literacy skills. There is a direct link between a woman's education and the welfare of her children. Literacy is critical because it improves healthcare, hygiene, nutrition, family planning, agricultural and other social issues (McKay 2000:57). Literacy forms the basis for lifelong learning, that is, learning throughout life (Torres 2009, 2010).

As signatories to the 1954 UN Convention on refugees, the relatively peaceful countries on the continent, including South Africa, accept refugees from the mainland and even beyond. Most of the refugees in South Africa come from English and non-English-speaking countries. These include countries from the Far and Middle East with Hindi, Arabic and other foreign languages. Those from mostly French-speaking, Spanish-speaking and Portuguese-

speaking African countries are illiterate in English and Afrikaans and South Africa's 11 official indigenous languages. Heugh (2007:4) asserts that the government has thus far failed to take serious cognisance of the relationship between language and literacy on the one hand and social and economic development on the other, for some sectors of society, including refugees in South Africa.

In the context of this article, literacy is seen not only as technical skills required for specific jobs but as a condition for a new cultural identity for survival in a new socio-economic and political environment. Literacy is thus socially situated because it eases communication in the refugee's pristine environment. That includes buying, selling, marketing of products, and other livelihood activities by new people uprooted by war and economic upheavals. Refugees require functional literacy in the dominant languages of their new homeland to survive. UNESCO (2005:22) describes functional literacy as activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning for the individual, group and community to continue reading, writing, and calculating their own and community's development. Percy and Homan (2015:425) affirm that literacy's contextual nature goes beyond using reading and writing in the performance of everyday tasks to include reading for personal purposes, such as developing one's knowledge and potential. Rogers, Patkar and Saraswathi (2004), Street (2014) and Johnson (2016) allude to functional literacy as the process and content of learning to read, write and function relating to the preparation for work and vocational training as well as a means of increasing the productivity of the individual. This is as suggested by Kajee (2011) that some literacy interventions can include addressing those who escape war-torn countries, to provide a better life for their families, to access better education, for employment and healthcare opportunities, and to engage in business.

As used in this article, literacy focuses on challenges that refugees in South Africa who scramble for livelihoods in foreign languages spoken in various provinces of the country face daily. The general lack of employment opportunities in the country and the language barrier exacerbate employment in the formal sector. Even where they use their ingenuity to create their own jobs for survival, the refugees still need literacy skills to manage such small businesses successfully. While there are various studies in adult literacy in South Africa, very few studies have focused particularly on the plight of refugee adults and their literacy challenges. This study therefore contributes to filling the existing gap in research on literacy for refugees in South Africa.

## Objective of the study

This qualitative study's main objective was to explore the value of literacy in various South African languages in order to promote the sustainable development of entrepreneurial activities among refugee adults in South Africa. Based on the introductory background, this article advocates for better livelihoods for refugees in South Africa through literacy either formally or informally.

## Research questions

The following research questions were used in addressing the problem being studied:

1. How does the knowledge and usage of South African languages facilitate entrepreneurial activities among refugee adults in South Africa?
2. How can refugees benefit from learning local languages in their daily interactions and communication with both the local people and their fellow refugees in South Africa?
3. What interventions can the South African Departments of Basic Education, and Small Business Enterprise, in partnership with other stakeholders, create in addressing refugees' financial initiatives and literacy challenges?

## Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in the critical pedagogy theory, of which Paulo Freire is the chief proponent. Through his theory of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire has made an enormous contribution to educational transformation in our time because the struggle for the socio-economic and political emancipation of the oppressed still draws from his insights and experiences in Brazil where he started his work with illiterate, economic and politically marginalised oppressed communities. The ideas and thoughts he expressed in his book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, are needed today as much as when they were first articulated and published in the 1970s (Quan-Baffour 2012). While there are other critical pedagogy theorists such as Ivan Illich, John Holt, Ira Shor, John Taylor Gatto, Matt Hern and Peter McLaren, Paulo Freire's theory stood out as the most relevant to the study and was hence selected for this article for his action-reflection praxis or approach to literacy issues. Unlike some proponents such as Illich on de-schooling society (1971), the underlying principle of Freire's critical pedagogy is to use education as a process and method of setting people free from political, social and economic dilemmas and inadequacies. Therefore, critical pedagogy calls for reflection and action upon the world to transform it (Freire 1974).

Critical pedagogy is based on the premise that men and women are essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege (Dunkerly 2011; McLaren 2009:61; Vassallo 2012:2). Thus, education may either contribute to conformity and perpetuate existing political, economic and cultural order or reject it. Therefore, the theory emphasises the objective and unbiased reflection on existing knowledge and practice (Glass 2010). According to Freire (2000:92), individuals are unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise incomplete reality. From the grassroots literacy, numeracy and skills learning to highly advanced formalised programmes, education should liberate adult men and women from ignorance, poverty and helplessness. From the above perspective, it is assumed that every human being, no matter how ignorant or submerged in the culture of silence is capable of learning or has the right to learn (Freire 1974).

The theory indicates that education should equip individual adults with essential skills and knowledge to navigate adequately well in their environments with confidence. Critical pedagogy, therefore, has a significant influence on the socio-economically and politically oppressed people. That includes refugees, that is, people uprooted from their own countries by natural and human-made disasters who lack communication (language) skills for their places of refuge. They were dispossessed of their humanity because of their vulnerable circumstances as unemployed, marginalised, dispossessed, poor and destitute men and women in society.

Lately, in various countries, particularly in South Africa, the vulnerability of refugees is exacerbated by xenophobia, defined as the fear of or hatred for foreigners or strangers, as embodied in discriminatory attitudes and behaviour, and often culminating in violence, abuses of all types, and exhibitions of hatred (Mogekwu 2005). The theory conscientises and motivates them to seek immediate practical solutions to transform their circumstances through basic education such as literacy and numeracy. Giroux (2010) submits that critical pedagogy allows people to read, write and learn from themselves, engaging in a culture of questioning that demands far more competence than rote learning and application of acquired skills. The theory advocates for adult learners to relate learning to their lived experiences and thereby write themselves in the concrete conditions of their daily lives.

The theory also has some important implications for literacy and adult education (teaching and learning) throughout the developing world where millions of adult refugees find themselves vulnerable. As acknowledged by Quan-Baffour (2012), the educational ideas of Freire have entered scholarly discourse from the most cosmopolitan centres to the most remote corners of the earth. The growing income gap between the rich and the poor in our midst today and the lack of education (knowledge and skills) among the economically active adults could be some of the consequences of lack of and inequality in access to education (Quan-Baffour 2012). The situation demands a critical reflection on education that can equip refugee adults with knowledge and skills to ensure their livelihood and improve their circumstances.

In everyday life, humans engage in literacy to get things done, rather than develop literacy skills per se (Macharia & Lind 2010). The rural women who roast corn or sell fruits by the roadside and taxi ranks or sell indigenous crafts to tourists in the sub-Saharan African towns and cities covertly and overtly employ and practise some form of literacy skills in all their business transactions and communication with their clients. In the world where human rights are often abused or encroached on, civic literacy can make people insist on or fight for their rights and understand their responsibilities as citizens and how the various arms of government function. Literacy thus helps individuals fight for their rights, defend and liberate themselves from all forms of intimidation, abuses, and servitude.

## Research methodology

This article results from an ethnographic study undertaken to determine how literacy matters to the lives of refugee adults in South Africa. The research was ethnographic because it related to the lives and activities of a group of people – refugee adults. Creswell (2014:14) defines ethnography as an inquiry where patterns of behaviour, language and actions of entire cultural groups in natural settings are observed and interviewed to express their issues. The study was positioned in the constructivist paradigm. Thus, it utilises various qualitative research methods in the form of interviews, focus group discussions and observations where the value of literacy among refugees in South Africa was explored. The integrative research approach can facilitate the construction of robust strategies provided the problem situation lets one decide the methodology (Niaz 2008). For this reason, the two researchers used multiple qualitative methods and approaches to data collection, which were likely to result in complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004).

The researchers used face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions and observations. As an ethnographic study the interviews, focus group discussions and observations were extended to a period of 5 months with the respondents to explore how *literacy matters* in the sustainable development of entrepreneurial activities among refugees in South Africa. Sometimes interviews and meetings had to be rescheduled when participants were too busy during the week. In some instances, interviews and focus group discussions were done after hours when participants were at their homes and on weekends for those who took days off, particularly on Sundays after their church services. Each interview session took about 30–40 min to complete, considering that these were very busy people trying to make ends meet. However, the focus group discussions faced several challenges, as many were cancelled due to the respondents' time constraints and the discordance in logistical arrangements. It was also challenging to organise traders in the same businesses to come together for a single meeting for practical and logistical reasons.

The data collection methods were supplemented with field notes that the researchers compiled for their several interactions and discussions with the respondents in their business spaces and selling stalls, meeting them over lunch or short breaks, in-between their busy days. The researchers integrated into the empirical research qualitative research methods where participants were interviewed and observed to get in-depth views on the role of literacy in their sustainable business enterprises. The advantages of ethnographic studies include staying and interacting with respondents in their settings where one gets to know them better and build trust between the researchers and the respondents. Once the respondents grow to trust the researchers or get tired of any pretence, they can share their genuine experiences.

## Population and sampling strategy

The question of sampling arises directly from defining the population on which the study will focus (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2010:100). The refugee adults in South Africa constituted the entire population for this investigation. As Kajee (2011:434) observed, accurate statistics surrounding legal and non-legal immigrants in the country are difficult to establish, but what is clear is that they are a minority, yet are equally deserving of attention in literacies and the education system.

Due to time and financial constraints, the study focused on refugee adults subsets in four cities in the nine provinces, namely Pretoria in Gauteng, Mafikeng in North West, Kimberley in the Northern Cape and Welkom in the Free State. Purposive and snowball or network approach sampling methods were used to ensure reaching the information-rich 100 respondents in their setting and meeting the criteria of issues in the study. The purposive sampling technique was used in selecting 100 participants engaged in livelihood activities in the form of small-scale businesses such as hair and beauty salons, dressmaking, shoemaking or repairs, tuckshops or spaza shops, fruit and vegetable shops, internet cafés and African foodstuff and restaurants. Another determining factor arose from the size of the provinces and hence of the cities. While some of the locals speak English or Afrikaans, there are dominant languages spoken in each province and region. Refugees are therefore obliged to conform linguistically to their context and 'do as the Romans do' by speaking the commonly spoken language.

The 100 participants were refugee adults involved in various entrepreneurial activities mostly located in the city centres, townships and informal settlements<sup>2</sup> of the selected cities and provinces, as mentioned above. After meeting one participant, the researchers requested to be linked to another entrepreneur who is a refugee. They were then able to secure appointments with the next participant through transect walks, and mobile phones, after which arrangements to meet the respondents in their respective business spaces were finalised within the 5-month timeframe. Both male and female refugees participated in the study because they met the criteria for inclusion as refugee business owners. There were 52 female participants, translating to 52%, and 48% male participants. The participants in the study were between 18 and 40 years of age.

## Data analysis

De Vos et al. (2011:309) affirm that the data collection methods in qualitative studies were analysed systematically to provide insights into the behaviour displayed and the meanings and interpretations that participants give to their lifeworlds, through an interpretive analysis. The researchers used the interpretive approach to analyse the data where they

2. In the South African context, city centre refers to the areas where economic activities and markets are found. Townships are residential areas where economic complexes are located for business and industrial purposes; informal settlements are extensions of townships inhabited by shack-dwellers, sometimes with limited essential services, and highly congested.

arranged the data by coding, clustering and comparing the narratives and conversations from the participants as suggested by Roberts, Dowell and Nie (2019).

The themes that were formulated in the subsequent section were drawn from the data that reflected social justice issues and marginalisation and discrimination of refugees as they try to become self-reliant in meeting their economic and financial needs. The themes illustrate some of their daily experiences and encounters with the clients of their small businesses. The thematic analysis using iterative processes therefore facilitated the formulation of themes, which stemmed from the questions using the interview questions as stated below. Some direct verbatim accounts from the participants were used in formulating themes and accordingly formed the sub-headings used in the results and discussion section:

- What they do for a living and the motivation for it.
- When, how and why they started their business and their relationship with their clients.
- The use of various languages in conducting business.
- Challenges encountered working and how they cope with language limitations.
- How the knowledge of language contributes to their business success or failure.

## Trustworthiness and validity of results

Trustworthiness refers to the level of dependability or reliability of the data gathering instruments, the process carried out in data collection, the quality of the data and their validity (Quan-Baffour & Romm 2015:28). The issue of trustworthiness is important in qualitative research in ensuring the dependability and reliability of the instruments. The process also included the field notes that were jotted down by the researchers as they took transect walks around stalls and different business spaces. The observations were also used to triangulate the information the participants provided through interviews and focus group meetings. In order to triangulate the data during the interviews and focus group discussions, the researchers used digital recorders. The recordings were later transcribed by the researchers during the data analysis and report writings. The use of recorders was useful particularly in verifying facts from interview guides and the field notes.

Besides, the researchers requested respondents to repeat or clarify any information or response that was not clear. That was to ensure that the correct information was recorded. The researchers also compared the various respondents' data to see where they differed or corroborated to enhance the findings' credibility.

## Ethical considerations

An ethical application was submitted to the institution as a policy imperative, which issued an ethics approval and a certificate to conduct the study, hence this article. Before the discussion started, the researchers introduced themselves to the participants to break the ice at each site. To adhere to

ethical principles, they informed the interview participants of the purpose and showed each of them that their participation was voluntary. The interviews were conducted in English as most of the participants had basic communication skills in English. In the few cases where participants were unable to express themselves well, the researchers engaged voluntary interpreters who knew the language of the participant.

To allay any possible fears among the participants, the researchers did not ask for their names or any form of identification. The participants were assured that the information provided would be used only for the study and would not be divulged to any individual or organisation. That was to guarantee them that their legal or illegal residence status remained confidential. The researchers also told the participants that they were under no obligation or coercion to participate in the study and could opt out at any stage when they wanted to do so. None of the identified participants withdrew from the study for fear of any unethical issues. Throughout the study, the researchers exercised flexibility and respect for the respondents' time constraints whenever they arose; hence none of the participants complained of the researchers' intrusion in their businesses and privacy.

## Results and discussion

The study was set up to investigate the socio-economic value of literacy in the lives of refugee adults in South Africa. The study was a qualitative research study in which face-to-face interviews, observations, and focus group discussions were conducted with 100 participants deemed information rich. The study results revealed that refugee adults engaged in small businesses must learn functional literacy in English and other vernacular languages informally and formally to develop communication skills for the sustainable development of their small businesses in their adopted home. Similar sentiments are shared in a literacy compilation of studies by UNESCO (2014), emphasising the importance of literacy and education for sustainable development.

The refugee adults in South Africa engage in various self-employment entrepreneurial activities for their livelihoods. When asked about the kind of work they do for a living, the respondents mentioned many entrepreneurial activities. The answers indicated the following breakdown of business ventures:

- Forty-five ( $N = 45$ ) own or work in hair salons and other beauty management (45%).
- Twenty-five ( $N = 25$ ) work in sewing and repairing shoes (25%).
- Fifteen ( $N = 15$ ) were seamstresses, either sewing or patching or mending dresses (15%).
- Ten ( $N = 10$ ) own or operate small restaurants for indigenous dishes (10%).
- Five ( $N = 5$ ) run retail shops (spazas) and internet cafés (5%).

### 'One must be a hustler in this foreign land!'

Asked why most of them were in a specific trade, the responses portrayed previous knowledge of various business ventures usually acquired in their countries of birth and origin. The merchandises were portrayals of what they did in their countries and based on the community needs identified in their locations before starting their businesses. Other responses to the types of businesses indicated that they were based on affordability in establishing such enterprises.

The above information indicates that most refugees in South Africa rely on their ingenuity to initiate entrepreneurial activities to make a living. In their responses, the participants corroborated that job opportunities were scarce and the few were reserved for South African nationals. Thus, to survive in their place of refuge, they must create their own jobs and generally engage in informal trading. As stated by Ramjathan-Keogh (2017), although the laws and policies on migrants, asylum seekers and refugees provide for opportunities that the country offers, in practice these foreigners still face barriers, such as the limitation on the right to work and lack of access to educational opportunities and language barriers hindering their ability to communicate effectively, among others.

Some of the businesses run by these refugees were legally registered with provincial authorities and the South African Revenue Services (i.e. they met income tax obligations). Some respondents revealed that the locals rented their business premises to them due to lack of capital to operate and for rental purposes. The response from an interview with a female hairdresser from the Great Lakes Region and the four focus group discussions in the four provinces epitomise all the participants' feeling. She had this to say (reproduced verbatim):

'Jobs are scarce here. The few that exist are for the locals. Therefore, for refugees to survive, one has no choice but to think out what work to start and fortunately, some of us have some economic and entrepreneurial skills.'

Accordingly, the quest for survival motivates refugees in South Africa to engage in self-employment activities such as small-scale business enterprises. By creating their jobs, they ease the host country's burden because the government does not provide basic human needs such as shelter, food, clothing, children's education and entertainment for refugees. They are also excluded from monthly social grants, and hence they have to engage in small businesses for survival. Rather than the city authorities intimidating and harassing refugees engaged in businesses, as mentioned by some of the participants, the researchers were of the view that the Department of Small Business Enterprises should acknowledge and recognise the economic role played by these informal and small business refugee-entrepreneurs who contribute to the country's economy by employing some locals and in some cases paying taxes. At the same time, their entrepreneurial activities lessen the burden of the government's social grants, as they become self-reliant and provide for their families.

Lanciotti (2019) states that in Uganda and Ethiopia, the refugees in entrepreneurial activities contribute to these countries' economies and should be recognised for employing locals and paying taxes. It is a view in this article that although functional adult literacy (FAL) is crucial for refugees to be able to realise their rights to education, development and meaningful participation, including their self-reliance, this is often neglected and they received no support from governments and other agencies. This implies that the plight of refugees in their quest for better livelihoods and economic independence is far from over.

### Oral proficiency challenge and foreign accent 'bias'

Of those interviewed in the four provinces, 45 respondents were literate and could communicate in English. In navigating their way into their businesses, they concurred that speaking English alone was never enough. They still had to learn local languages spoken in their areas and provinces, as their competitors spoke vernacular. However, the 35 respondents from Pretoria, Gauteng, alluded that there were advantages in that most clients can communicate and understand English well. In the Northern Cape, those in Kimberley face literacy challenges as the province is inhabited by mostly people who speak Afrikaans and another vernacular, Setswana. Thus, as foreigners, they needed to learn a local language fast and informally and sometimes communicate fluently to disguise their original accents:

'One needs to learn and adapt fast. Locals here can be sometimes antagonistic if they hear one with a foreign accent. As refugees, we always strive to integrate with the locals to learn the local language faster and easier.' (Shoemaker and repairer, male, West Africa)

Respondents from the other two areas, Welkom, Free State, and Mafikeng, North West, reported more significant benefits in communicating in English and another local language. 'Clients relate well with owners who speak their language. It is good for business to relate with clients', a fruit and vegetable seller in Mafikeng said. The notion is confirmed by the Organisation for International Migration Report (2020), in the Global Compact for Migration's 23 objectives for safe, orderly and regular migration. Of the 23 objectives, the 16th objective is about empowering migrants and societies to realise full inclusion and social cohesion; the 19th and 20th objectives speak about creating conditions for migrants and diasporas to fully contribute to sustainable development in all countries, promoting faster, safer and cheaper transfer of remittances, and fostering financial inclusion of migrants. The three objectives address particularly the issues around forced migration and literacy, and are well aligned with Freire's critical pedagogy as argued in this article (IOM 2020:297).

### Social justice and cohesion: 'I do not discriminate'

The participants were asked when their businesses started, how they were conducted and what communication issues they experience with their clients. Of the 100 participants

interviewed, 44% ( $N = 44$ ) said their enterprises have been in existence for 6–8 years; 40% ( $N = 40$ ) mentioned 4–5 years and 16% ( $N = 16$ ) said 2–3 years. Regarding their clients, the participants corroborated in their responses that their customers cut across the whole spectrum of society – locals and foreigners, and all races (Black, White, mixed race and Asian). The respondents also revealed to the researchers that each small business employs at least 2–5 individuals. However, some enterprises depend on the season. 'When business is doing well around Easter and Christmas seasons, my restaurant employs temporary workers to complement my permanent staff', a female restaurant owner in Pretoria claimed. The information above is laudable and significant because it indicates that these 50 small business operators have employed between 50 and 100 people made up of locals and fellow refugees for the past eight or more years. As one participant put it:

'I am an Ethiopian first and African second. I do not discriminate. I employ six people to work on a commission basis in my African restaurant and food shop. Two of them are locals, four from Eastern, Western and Central parts of the continent. We work as a big family. Engaging locals and foreigners in my business has its advantages as we learn each other's languages; we know each other's cuisine and exotic foods from other countries. Most importantly, here in Pretoria, we have learnt Sepedi fluently from our local workers and customers.'

The response above indicates that most refugees in South Africa are not too much dependent on the government's grants or handouts because they create jobs for themselves, fellow refugees and even local people (World Bank 2018). That means the perception that refugees and, for that matter, foreigners have taken jobs from the locals is not entirely true. Referring to Paulo Freire's advocacy and promotion of social justice and how critical education can perpetuate discrimination or support it, in this case the refugees see themselves as exercising and promoting social justice principles, without favouring one person over the other (i.e. discrimination, whether local or foreigner) (Freire 1974; Krevh 2017). This view is in stark contrast to that of the locals who were perceived as being hostile to refugees with different accents, as stated above: 'empower migrants and societies to realize full inclusion and social cohesion' (IOM 2020:297).

### Multilingualism versus successful entrepreneurship or 'loss of income'

People whose work provides services – repair of shoes, watches, seamstress, internet café, grocery shops (spaza) and others – interact with lots of people every day. The respondents were asked about the significant challenges facing them in interacting with clients; all (100%) mentioned language barriers. Eighty percent also added frequent harassment by metro police who often seize their goods and extort money from them. The police often accuse them of operating illegally, sometimes soliciting bribes from them, threatening to deport them to their countries of origin, and even disregarding the legal documents when they produce them. Such attitude from the police, as it echoed from the discussions, borders on xenophobia.

Indeed, as adults with different culture and language backgrounds, it cannot be easy to interact fluently with clients in a country where all languages are official. Given the European incursion, English, French, Portuguese and Spanish have become the de facto official languages for many African countries. Some refugees come from Asia and speak Arabic, Hindi and other Far Eastern languages. These refugees are, therefore, illiterate when it comes to the local languages. When asked how they communicate and interact or engage in business transactions, they all said: 'it is not easy'. As two of the three respondents from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bangladesh and Pakistan from the focus group discussions in Pretoria put it:

'We struggle to understand each other all the time. Our English is little, and some of our clients do not speak English. Seeing that literacy in the local languages can boost business we are learning it day by day, and we must learn fast lest we lose business and customers.'

One said:

'Although we sell good merchandise, sometimes we lose good money because customers are impatient when we cannot communicate clearly. They go to other shops and get services there, while we lose money. Language for business use is highly critical.'

It is clear from the information above that literacy matters in the lives of refugee adults engaged in business ventures, regarding how they cope with the different languages spoken by their local clients. Ninety percent of the participants said they rely on local colleagues who work with them and have picked up a few essential words for greeting and pricing their products and services.

### **Multiplicity of languages: 'Today is Zulu, Sotho, tomorrow Xhosa, Shangaan or Ndebele etc.'**

The remaining 10% of the respondents said they had acquired functional literacy in Sepedi, Setswana and Sesotho. These are refugees who operate in towns where those languages are dominant. The case might differ for refugees who work in metropolitan areas such as Pretoria in Gauteng because of different languages.

As affirmed by one seamstress:

'Today you hear Zulu, tomorrow Xhosa, Shangaan or Ndebele. And this makes it challenging to learn the language, as one must have functional communication in all of them. Since I live and work in Mamelodi, I am learning some Sepedi to interact with my clients. I am trying hard every day to speak the language.'

Literacy, especially understanding and speaking local languages, seems a significant challenge to most refugees in South Africa. The response above affirm that literacy in local South African languages poses a great challenge to refugee integration and the sustainability of their livelihoods. As the responses above indicate, there are too many local languages in the country which makes it difficult for refugees to acquire them. Since one cannot learn all the languages the refugees

should learn the predominant language of the region in which they reside. In this way they can overcome some of the biases and can attract and retain more clients to their small enterprises.

Despite the above, in all four provinces, the researchers came across some refugees who were fluent in some local languages, such as Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi and Zulu. These were refugees who have lived in communities and operated their businesses there for a long time or have local spouses and workers who teach them their languages, by speaking with them regularly.

### **Demand of refugees for functional and financial literacy training**

The responses also indicate that one cannot do business effectively without being literate in two or more local languages. When asked whether the respondents were interested in attending literacy classes, they all responded in the affirmative with some reservations. They added that time to leave work to participate in formal classes is itself a challenge. Even if literacy classes can be organised for refugees, it was clear that very few would be able to attend. The respondents pointed out that as self-employed individuals, they are always at work to ensure that they do not miss customers and find it challenging to participate in adult literacy classes. That, therefore, leaves a limited window of opportunities to develop skills related to the effective use of functional literacy for business communication purposes. An article by Jenkins (2020) in the *Financial Times* describes another form, financial literacy, as a requirement and a springboard for refugees to survive their financial challenges as they struggle in their small and medium enterprises, making the economy of their host nation more dynamic in the process. In their Portal Blog (<https://www.afi-global.org/about/>), the Alliance for Financial Inclusion (AFI), a registered organisation promoting and developing evidence-based policy solution to the vulnerable groups across Africa, reports a successful intervention of the Bank of Uganda in training Ugandan refugees on financial literacy. The intervention has led to the development of the national strategy for financial literacy of Uganda (SFLU) where refugees are benefitting from the services of the bank, which is instrumental in training them on financial literacy, helping them learn how to spend, budget, borrow, invest and plan for a future that is not solely reliant on aid (Nabbanja & Zahari 2021).

It is the view of the authors of this article that the Department of Basic Education in South Africa should partner with stakeholders in literacy programmes to accord and engage adult refugees in literacy campaigns. Although the Ugandan project was a specific financial literacy programme, not a general literacy intervention, this article suggests that the knowledge of financial literacy can enhance and strengthen communication skills in a local language for refugees in entrepreneurial activities. The article further suggests that financial literacy should be provided in addition to general



adult literacy classes, because literacy forms part of numeracy, which is included under the aforementioned definition of literacy. This could equip the refugees with necessary communication skills in at least one or two languages spoken in the country. Similarly, the Department of Small Business Enterprises could also provide the refugee business owners with necessary accounting and management skills to ensure the businesses' sustainability and continuous employment opportunities for the unemployed.

## Conclusion

This study was undertaken to explore the importance of literacy to refugee adults in South Africa in their quest to engage in small business enterprises for survival. Literacy, the ability to speak and understand a language to communicate or transact business, is of paramount importance to the sustainability of every business. The study revealed that refugee adults learn functional literacy in English and other languages informally as they communicate with their clients to sustain their small businesses in their adopted home. Although the refugee entrepreneurs indicated lack of time for attending formal literacy classes, as they could not leave enterprises for classes, functional literacy offered in adult training centres could answer their literacy and communication problems. The study concludes that as literacy is a sine qua non to sustainable livelihood activities, refugee adults in South Africa should take advantage of the available literacy programmes to acquire necessary communication skills in the local languages. That would enhance their socio-economic advancement in their adopted home. Thus, over and above the need to learn a new language, the development of literacies, including, financial literacy, as argued in this article, could be a mitigating factor in improving literacy skills for refugees, as they navigate and grapple with their livelihoods and business enterprises in their adopted new homes.

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### Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

### Authors' contributions

K.P.Q.-B contributed to the conceptualisation, formal analysis, investigation and drafting of article; L.R.J. did the methodology, formal analysis, investigation, review and editing, supervision and project administration.

### Ethical considerations

The research followed all institutional ethics protocols before conducting the study, and permission was granted (2021/07/0790188470/19/AM).

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## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

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