

Patriots and traitors

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Much of my work in recent years around language learning and migrant settlement has questioned the straightforward link between language learning and settlement success. Policy makers as well as migrants themselves assume that a key factor that keeps migrants out of the local job market is their lack of English proficiency, and that increased English proficiency will bring employment. Of course, it doesn't usually work that way (see [here](#), [here](#) or [here](#)) because race, gender and education, among other factors, mediate access to employment, too.

Over the past three days the *Sydney Morning Herald* has been reporting on a “natural field experiment” that once again confirms the tenuous link between English language proficiency and settlement success, particularly as measured by employment outcomes. The story is that of Iraqis who worked as translators and interpreters for the Australian army during the 2003 invasion. When Australian forces withdrew from Iraq in 2008, many of those translators and interpreters, who were by then considered traitors in their homeland and the target of insurgents, were granted residency in Australia and airlifted to safety in a secret military mission.

Three years on, the *Sydney Morning Herald* has now surveyed over 200 of these individuals about their current life in Australia (read [here](#) and [here](#)). According to conventional wisdom settling in Australia should be a breeze for these people: as translators and interpreters, they are obviously highly proficient in English; they all have high levels of education, with most of them tertiary educated and having prior experience in their professions; and they've obviously demonstrated their commitment to Australian values in a more personal and tangible way than could ever be measured by any [citizenship test](#).

Unfortunately, the fate of these model migrants is no different from those who our politicians like to exhort to learn English, to get an education and to embrace Australian values so that they can find a job. Of 223 former Iraqi army translators and interpreters now living in six capital cities around Australia, only nine are in full-time employment, and of these only one single person is employed in their area of expertise. Thus, for this group, the Australian national unemployment rate of only 4.9% is turned on its head and pretty much constitutes their employment rate.

The personal testimony of the people interviewed for the story is heart-breaking. They cannot go back to Iraq where they've seen their colleagues killed because of their work for the Australian troops and where they fear their names can still be found on the execution lists of terror commandos. At the same time, they see their life, skills and self-esteem wasting away in Australia, where they survive by relying on welfare.

How many more migrants will have to face that fact that "coming to Australia was the worst decision of my life," as a 28-year-old chemical engineer says in the feature, before we recognize that the problem is systemic and not the consequence of individual failures to learn English, get an education or embrace Australian values? Thanks to the *Sydney Morning Herald* for bringing the issue to a wider audience and thanks also for some excellent journalism!

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Author

Ingrid Piller

Dr Ingrid Piller, FAHA, is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. Ingrid's research interests include intercultural communication, bilingual education and the sociolinguistics of language learning and multilingual