

## Multilingual speakers' participation in an English-dominant society

Proficiency in the language of the country of residence has implications for an individual's level of education, employability, income and social integration. Unemployment, economic hardship, decrease in socioeconomic status, and the availability of educational services can negatively affect people's mental health and impact on their ability to adapt and participate in society. Language skills are key to integration allowing participation in further education, employment and social life.

Australia is a predominately English-speaking country with a unique multicultural composition. While other English-speaking countries such as the US and Canada have a second major language, Australia does not. Although just under one quarter of Australians speak a language other than English at home, the most common of these languages, Mandarin is only spoken by 1.7% of the population.

The aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between the spoken English proficiency of Australians and their educational level, employment (full-time, part-time, unemployed, etc.), and income to provide insight into linguistic diversity in Australia and multilingual speakers' ability to participate in Australia as an English-dominant society.

This study draws on data from 21,507,719 Australian residents who participated in the 2011 National Census and 19,855,287 who participated in the 2006 National Census. Relationships between self-reported English proficiency ("very well", "well", "not well", or "not at all") and Australians' education, employment, and income were analysed using cross-tabulations created using Table Builder Pro, online software for analysing census variables.

In the 2011 census, 23.2% of Australians reported speaking a language other than English at home with 10.3% claiming to also speak English "very well". Multilingual speakers who spoke English "very well" were more likely to have post-graduate qualifications (8.0%) and full-time employment (36.1%) than monolingual people who reported speaking English only (2.4% and 31.6% respectively). However, those who reported speaking English "not well" were much less likely to have post-graduate qualifications (0.8%) or full-time employment (12.6%). The trends for income level were slightly different with the percentage of people who spoke English "very well" only slightly higher than monolingual speakers in all income brackets over \$31,400. For example, 5.9% of people who spoke English "very well" were in the highest income bracket of \$104,000 or more, compared to 5.6% of English-only speakers. However, the percentage of people who spoke English "not well" was higher than monolingual speakers in low income brackets. Similar findings were apparent for the 2006 National Census.

The findings of this study provide insight into the socioeconomic and educational profiles of multilingual speakers and indicate that spoken English proficiency may impact participation in Australian society. The results highlight the importance of supporting multilingualism as well as English proficiency, because English proficient multilingual speakers fared better than monolingual English speakers. This study will inform the understanding of people who provide support for multilingual speakers. The results of this study can be used to encourage a shift in view towards multilingualism in English-dominant countries as the results recognise the value of multilingualism and diversity in an increasingly globalised world.