

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND MIGRANT LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION: A BIBLIOMETRIC REVIEW OF RESEARCH TRENDS (2000–2024)

PROFICIÊNCIA LINGUÍSTICA E INTEGRAÇÃO NO MERCADO DE TRABALHO DOS MIGRANTES: UMA REVISÃO BIBLIOMÉTRICA DAS TENDÊNCIAS DE PESQUISA (2000–2024)

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Abstract

Language proficiency is widely recognised as a key determinant of migrant labour market integration, yet its meaning and value vary across disciplinary, institutional, and geographical contexts. This study presents a bibliometric and qualitative synthesis of 381 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2000 and 2024 that examine language proficiency and migrant labour market outcomes. Using co-authorship analysis and keyword co-occurrence mapping, combined with a targeted review of highly cited and recent influential studies, the paper traces how language proficiency has been conceptualised and empirically assessed across the literature. The findings show that research is dominated by human capital and signalling approaches linking language proficiency to employment and earnings but also reveal persistent inequalities that language skills alone do not resolve. Institutional arrangements, discrimination, health, and socio-demographic factors substantially mediate the labour market value of language proficiency. The study reconceptualises language proficiency as a socially and institutionally mediated resource

Resumo

A proficiência linguística é amplamente reconhecida como um fator determinante para a integração dos migrantes no mercado de trabalho, mas seu significado e valor variam de acordo com o contexto disciplinar, institucional e geográfico. Este estudo apresenta uma síntese bibliométrica e qualitativa de 381 artigos científicos publicados entre 2000 e 2024 que examinam a proficiência linguística e os resultados dos migrantes no mercado de trabalho. Utilizando análise de coautoria e mapeamento de coocorrência de palavras-chave, combinados com uma revisão direcionada de estudos influentes recentes e altamente citados, o artigo traça como a proficiência linguística tem sido conceituada e avaliada empiricamente na literatura. Os resultados mostram que a pesquisa é dominada por abordagens de capital humano e sinalização que vinculam a proficiência linguística ao emprego e aos rendimentos, mas também revelam desigualdades persistentes que as competências linguísticas por si só não resolvem. Arranjos institucionais, discriminação, saúde e fatores



and highlights the need for more integrative and comparative approaches to migrant labour market research.

Keywords: Bibliometric Analysis. Human Capital. Language Proficiency. Migrant Labour Market Integration.

sociodemográficos mediam substancialmente o valor da proficiência linguística no mercado de trabalho. O estudo reconceitua a proficiência linguística como um recurso mediado social e institucionalmente e destaca a necessidade de abordagens mais integrativas e comparativas para a pesquisa sobre o mercado de trabalho migrante.

Palavras-chave: Análise bibliométrica. Capital humano. Proficiência linguística. Integração no mercado de trabalho migrante.

1 INTRODUCTION

Language proficiency is a central determinant of migrant integration, shaping access to employment, occupational mobility, and broader forms of social participation. Across national contexts, the ability to communicate effectively in the host-country language influences not only labour market outcomes but also access to education, public services, and social networks (Schmid, 2023; Pieroni *et al.*, 2024). In contemporary labour markets, language skills are increasingly valued alongside formal qualifications, functioning as indicators of adaptability, productivity, and cultural competence (Marconi, Vergolini and Borgonovi, 2023; Poláková *et al.*, 2023).

Existing scholarship has examined this relationship through multiple theoretical perspectives. Economic approaches typically conceptualise language proficiency as a form of human capital that enhances productivity and earnings (Becker, 1964; Dustmann and Fabbri, 2003), while signalling theory emphasises its role in reducing employer uncertainty when foreign qualifications are difficult to assess (Spence, 1973). More recent research challenges these functionalist perspectives by demonstrating how language operates within broader systems of power, inequality, and institutional regulation. Studies rooted in sociological and critical traditions show that gender, ethnicity, migration status, and credential recognition shape the extent to which language skills translate into labour market advantages (Koopmans, 2016; Dovchin and Dryden, 2022).

Despite extensive empirical work, the literature lacks a systematic account of how these institutional and social mechanisms structure the labour market value of language proficiency. Research remains fragmented across disciplines, with economic studies

prioritising measurable returns, sociological work emphasising inequality and identity, and health-oriented research examining access to services and well-being. Moreover, existing evidence is heavily concentrated in high-income migrant-receiving countries, limiting the generalisability of prevailing theoretical frameworks.

This study addresses these limitations through a bibliometric analysis of 381 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2000 and 2024. By combining co-authorship and keyword co-occurrence analysis with a targeted qualitative synthesis of influential and recent studies, the paper maps how language proficiency has been conceptualised, operationalised, and theorised across disciplines and institutional contexts. Rather than treating language solely as individual human capital, the analysis reframes it as a socially and institutionally mediated resource whose labour market value depends on recognition, regulation, and power relations.

Accordingly, the study is guided by two core questions:

- (1) How has research on language proficiency and migrant labour market outcomes evolved across disciplines and over time?
- (2) How do institutional, social, and policy contexts shape the translation of language proficiency into labour market outcomes?

By answering these questions, the paper provides a structured overview of a fragmented field and advances a more integrated understanding of language proficiency as both an economic and a social form of capital.

2 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Rather than providing an exhaustive literature review, this section outlines the principal theoretical lenses that inform the interpretation of the bibliometric patterns identified later in the analysis.

Research on language proficiency and migrant labour market outcomes has been dominated by two closely related perspectives. Human Capital Theory conceptualises language proficiency as an acquired skill that enhances productivity and labour market performance (Becker, 1964). Empirical studies drawing on this framework consistently show that migrants with stronger language skills experience higher employment probabilities and earnings, particularly in the early stages of settlement (Chiswick and

Miller, 2002; Dustmann and Soest, 2002). This approach underpins policy strategies that prioritise language training as a central mechanism of labour market integration.

Signalling Theory offers a complementary interpretation by emphasising the role of language proficiency in reducing employer uncertainty when foreign qualifications are difficult to assess (Spence, 1973). From this perspective, linguistic fluency functions as an indicator of adaptability, competence, and cultural fit. While empirical evidence suggests that such signals can improve employability, research also demonstrates that they are interpreted unevenly. Accent-based discrimination, racialised hiring practices, and the devaluation of foreign credentials frequently undermine the returns to language proficiency (Oreopoulos, 2011; Dovchin and Dryden, 2022).

More recent scholarship extends these frameworks by situating language proficiency within broader institutional and social contexts. Segmented labour market theory highlights how migrants are often channelled into secondary labour markets where returns to language skills remain limited regardless of proficiency (Leschke and Weiss, 2020). Social capital approaches further demonstrate that the labour market value of language depends on access to networks and institutional resources that facilitate job matching and career advancement (Cheung and Phillimore, 2014). Critical and intersectional research adds an additional layer, showing that gender, age, and ethnicity shape both opportunities for language acquisition and the rewards associated with linguistic competence (Campion, 2018; Morrice *et al.*, 2021).

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that language proficiency is not merely a productivity-enhancing skill but a socially and institutionally mediated resource. While human capital and signalling approaches explain part of the variation in labour market outcomes, they offer limited insight into persistent inequalities that arise from labour market segmentation, institutional recognition regimes, and unequal access to social resources. These theoretical distinctions guide the interpretation of the bibliometric clusters identified in this study, linking economic outcomes to human capital mechanisms, employer evaluation practices to signalling processes, and broader integration dynamics to social and structural determinants that remain largely invisible in conventional econometric models.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data source and scope

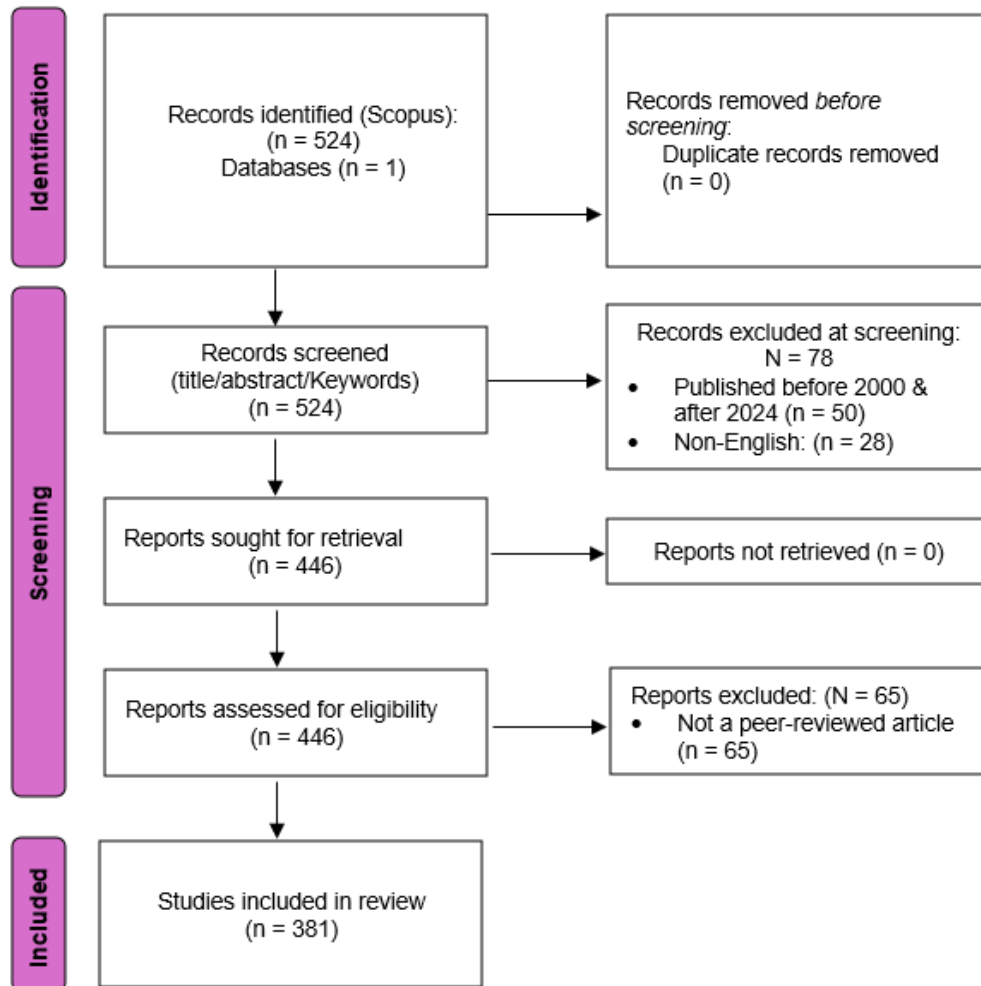
This study draws on bibliographic data extracted from the Scopus database, which provides broad coverage of peer-reviewed journals across the social sciences, economics, public health, and related fields. Scopus offers structured metadata, including citation counts, author affiliations, and keywords, enabling replicable bibliometric analysis. The dataset was restricted to English-language journal articles published between 2000 and 2024 that explicitly examine the relationship between language proficiency and migrant labour market outcomes.

While reliance on a single database entails limitations, Scopus is widely used in bibliometric research due to its interdisciplinary scope and robust citation tracking. Although some economics journals may be more comprehensively indexed in Web of Science, the breadth of Scopus is well suited to mapping research trends and thematic structures across multiple disciplines (Lu, Muhamad and Hanafiah, 2024).

3.2 Literature search strategy

An advanced Boolean query was developed to identify studies addressing language proficiency among migrants and their labour market outcomes. The search string was applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords using the following structure: TITLE-ABS-KEY (("language proficienc*" OR "language skill*" OR "language abilit*") AND ("migrant*" OR "immigrant*" OR refugee* OR "foreign born") AND ("lab*r market" OR "employment outcome*" OR "job market*" OR "occupational attainment" OR "employment*" OR "earning*" OR "wage*")) AND PUBYEAR > 1999 AND PUBYEAR < 2025 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English"))

Inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between January 2000 and December 2024 with a primary focus on language proficiency and migrant employment, wages, or occupational integration. Non-article formats, studies outside the timeframe, and non-English publications were excluded.

Figure 1*PRISMA flow (Screening and Inclusion)*

Source: Adapted from Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines

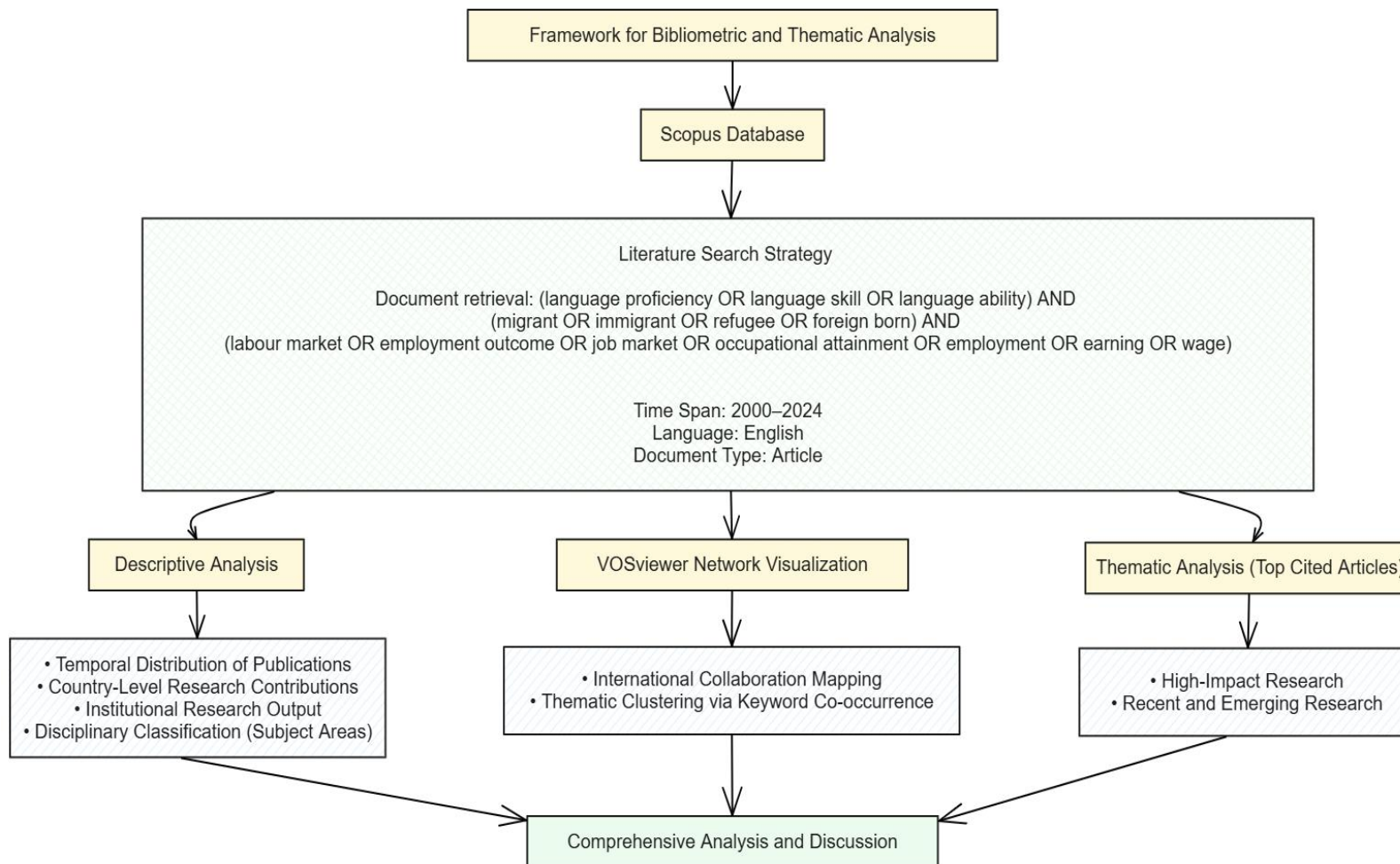
Study selection followed PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Records were exported from Scopus on 23 June 2025, de-duplicated using title, author, and DOI matching, and screened based on titles, abstracts, and keywords. Eligible records proceeded to full-text assessment. The final dataset consists of 381 unique articles. The selection process is summarised in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

3.3 Data processing and analysis

The final dataset was exported in CSV format and standardised to ensure consistency in author names, institutional affiliations, and keywords. Bibliometric analysis was conducted using VOSviewer (version 1.6.20) to generate keyword co-occurrence networks, thematic clusters, and country-level co-authorship maps. Full counting and default normalisation settings were applied, with minimum thresholds for keyword frequency and citation counts selected to enhance interpretability and focus on influential contributions (van Eck and Waltman, 2010).

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive statistics were compiled to examine publication trends over time, leading countries and institutions, and subject-area distributions. Second, network analysis was used to visualise international collaboration patterns and thematic structures based on keyword co-occurrence. Third, highly cited studies (≥ 100 citations) and recent influential contributions published between 2020 and 2024 (30–99 citations) were reviewed to identify foundational and emerging research directions. The overall analytical framework is summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Analytical Framework



Source: Author’s elaboration based on VOSviewer clustering and thematic synthesis

4 FINDINGS

The analysis of 381 articles reveals both the expansion of the topic and its intellectual and geographic distribution. This section first examines descriptive publication patterns before turning to the thematic structures identified through VOSviewer and the influential studies that have shaped the existing body of knowledge related to the influence of language proficiency among migrants in determining their labour market outcomes.

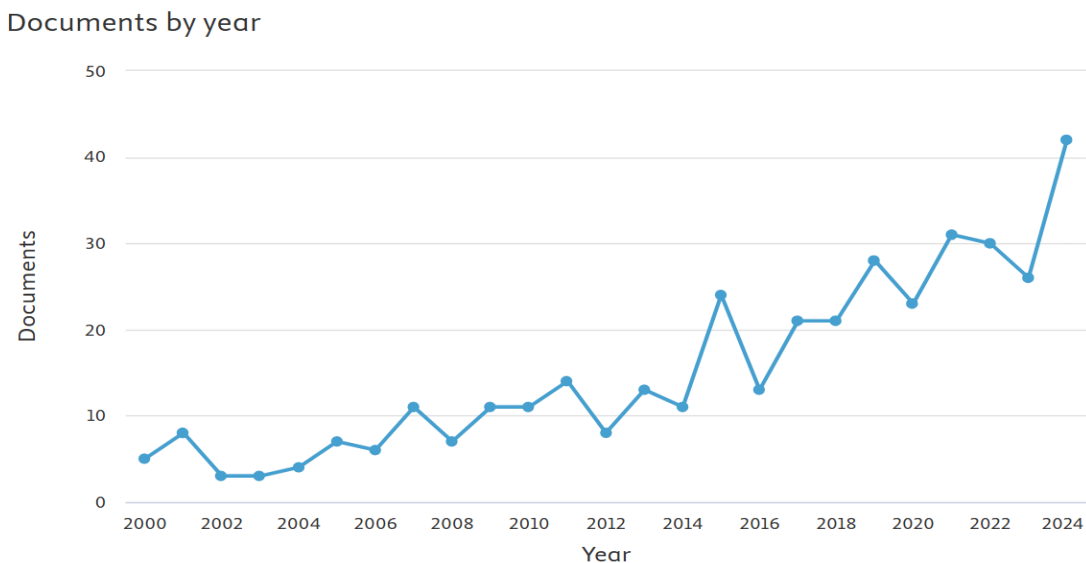
4.1 Descriptive analysis

4.1.1 *Publication trend*

The course of research output shows a gradual build-up from 2000 to 2018, followed by enhancement after 2019. Nearly half of all articles were published between 2019 and 2024, with 2024 marking the peak year. This trend reflects not only the strengthening of global debates on migration but also the growing use of language as a skill to be analysed systematically. The following Figure 3 and Table 1 reflects the publication trend related to this topic.

Figure 3

Number of Research Documents by Year



Source: Scopus database

Table 1

Number of Research Documents by Years

Year	Articles published over the years
2024	42
2023	26
2022	30
2021	31
2020	23
2019	28
2018	21
2017	21
2016	13
2015	24
2014	11
2013	13
2012	8
2011	14
2010	11
2009	11
2008	7
2007	11
2006	6
2005	7
2004	4
2003	3
2002	3
2001	8
2000	5

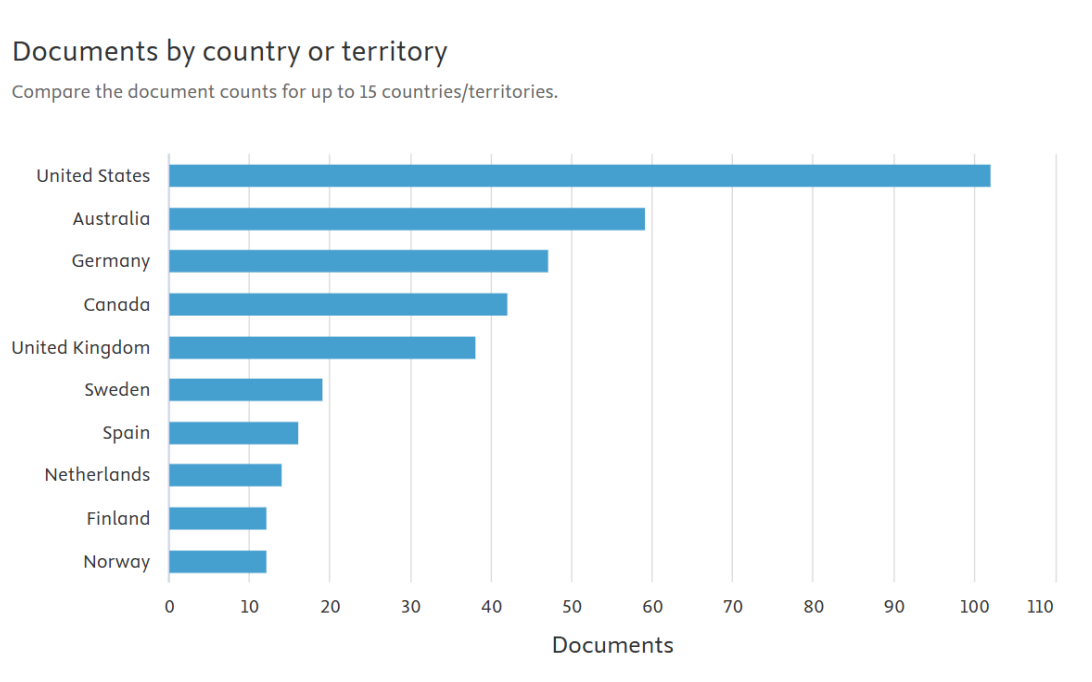
Source: Scopus database

4.1.2 Country-level research contribution

As reflected in figure 4, the literature is dominated by work from high-income, migrant-receiving countries. The United States alone accounts for more than a quarter of all publications, and together with Australia, Germany, Canada, and the United Kingdom makes up 76% of the dataset. Beyond these hubs, contributions are visible from countries such as Sweden, Spain, and the Netherlands, though they remain modest. By contrast, evidence from Eastern Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America is very limited. This concentration underlines the fact that prevailing literature are largely framed through the knowledges of the high-income, migrant-receiving countries, leaving gap in literature identifying the standpoints of the low-income and migrant-sending countries.

Figure 4

Number of Research Documents by Country or Territory



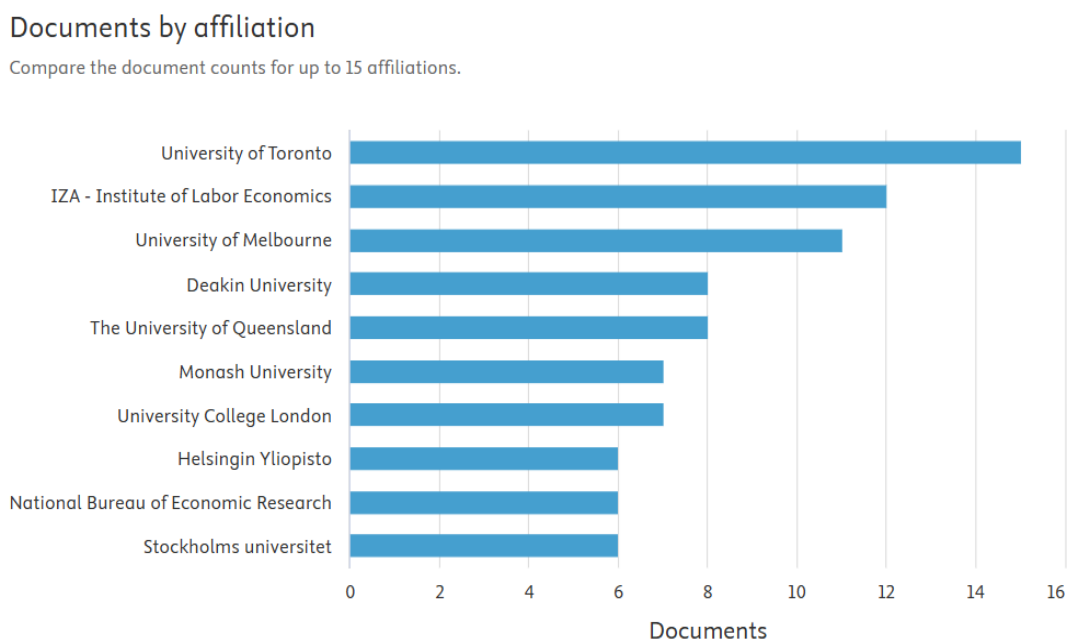
Source: Scopus database

4.1.3 Institutional research output

As shown in Figure 5, at the institutional level, the number of research documents produced by the institutions are similarly concentrated as the country-level. The University of Toronto, IZA Institute of Labor Economics, and the University of Melbourne emerge as leading centres of research in Figure 5. Australian universities such as Deakin, Queensland, and Monash also feature prominently. Outside these well-resourced institutions, output is fragmented. In sum, descriptive statistics reflects that research at institution level is also shaped by the high-income, migrant-receiving nations, in parallel to country-level output discussed earlier.

Figure 5

Number of Research Documents by affiliation of Institution



Source: Scopus database

4.1.4 Disciplinary classification (subject-area)

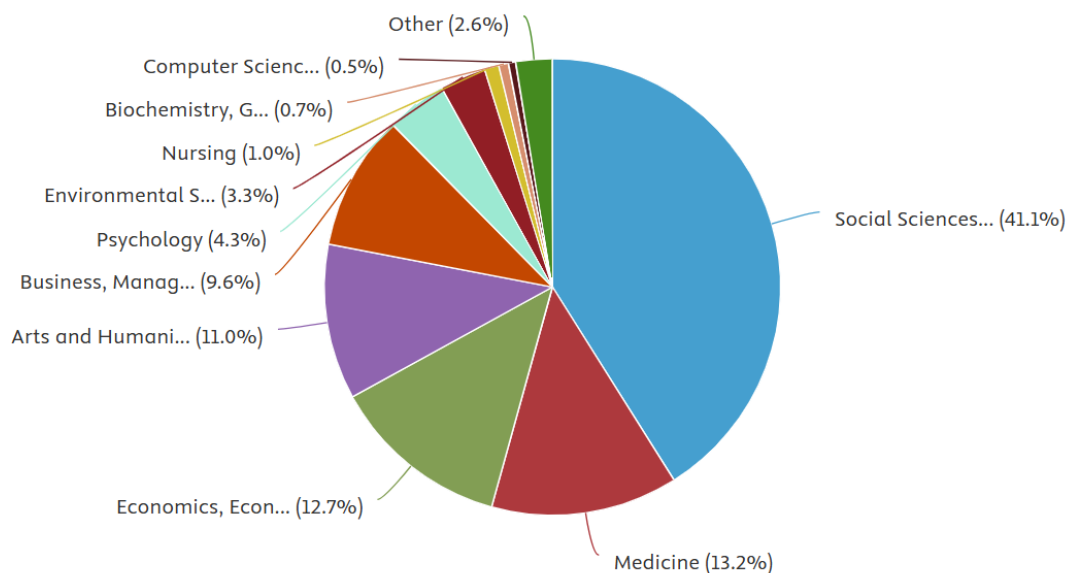
As shown in figure 6 and Table 2, Social Sciences account for the largest share of publications (41.1%), followed by Medicine (13.2%) and Economics (12.7%) (Figure 6; Table 2). Contributions from Arts and Humanities, Business, and Psychology are smaller

but still present. Natural sciences and technical fields appear almost absent. This disciplinary mix indicates a concentration in socially oriented and policy-relevant fields, with comparatively limited representation from applied sciences. This pattern is shaped by both the nature of research output in each discipline and is solely based on Scopus-recorded affiliations rather than a comprehensive ranking.

Figure 6

Number of Research Documents by Subject Area

Documents by subject area



Source: Scopus Database

Table 2

Number of Research Documents by Subject Area

Subject Area	Documents
Social Sciences	239
Medicine	77
Economics, Econometrics and Finance	74
Arts and Humanities	64
Business, Management and Accounting	56
Psychology	25
Environmental Science	19
Nursing	6
Biochemistry, Genetics and Molecular Biology	4
Computer Science	3
Decision Sciences	3

Multidisciplinary	3
Engineering	2
Pharmacology, Toxicology and Pharmaceutics	2
Agricultural and Biological Sciences	1
Earth and Planetary Sciences	1
Health Professions	1
Immunology and Microbiology	1
Neuroscience	1

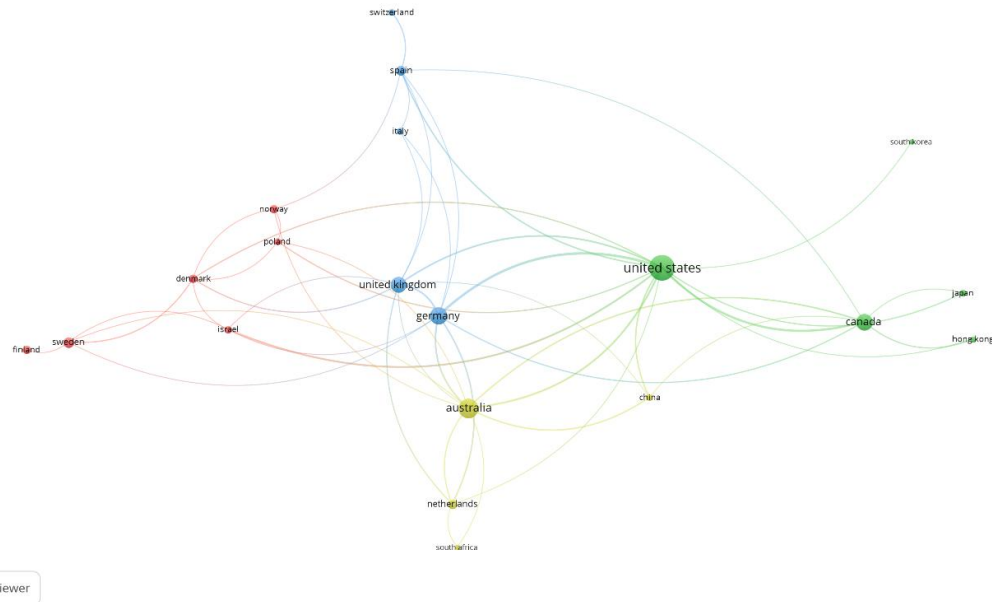
Source: Scopus Database

Note: Documents may carry more than one subject-area tag, hence total across subject areas exceed the number of unique documents (381)

4.2 VOSviewer network visualization

4.2.1 International collaboration mapping

Figure 7 represents the co-authorship network using 381 documents analysed through VOSviewer software. The co-authorship network or the international collaboration mapping reveals a highly centralised and interconnected system anchored by the United States and reflects strong ties with Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Moreover, regional clusters are visible, particularly in Western Europe and the Nordic countries, while Australia connects research across the region of Asia-Pacific. However, there are absence of links in contexts of lower-income, migrant-sending and higher-income, migrant-receiving countries. This also indicates that migration contexts in these regions remain fragmented in the global knowledge sharing network.

Figure 7*International Collaboration Mapping/ Co-Authorship by Country*

Source: VOSviewer

4.2.2 Thematic structure via keywords co-occurrence

Figure 8 presents a keyword co-occurrence network, constructed using author-assigned keywords from the 381 documents in the dataset. The visualisation identifies five clusters, distinguished by colour for clarity (red, green, yellow, blue, and purple). These clusters represent recurrent configurations of concepts based on keyword proximity and co-occurrence frequency. They are not treated as fixed thematic categories, but as empirically derived groupings that reflect dominant and overlapping areas of focus within the literature.

access, and everyday functioning. The strong overlap with adjacent clusters suggests that language proficiency is frequently examined not as an isolated skill, but as embedded in social determinants that shape both labour market participation and well-being.

Cluster 3 (yellow cluster): The yellow cluster is characterised by keywords such as mental health, psychological, depression, stress, socioeconomic factors, risk factors, and longitudinal studies. This grouping highlights research that examines the psychological and emotional dimensions of language proficiency and migration. The visual concentration of mental health-related terms indicates sustained attention to how limited language proficiency intersects with stress, social isolation, and vulnerability, particularly over time. The proximity of longitudinal and epidemiological keywords suggests that this cluster places emphasis on life-course dynamics and the cumulative effects of language-related exclusion on well-being and integration.

Cluster 4 (blue cluster): The blue cluster includes keywords such as female, middle aged, child, family, education status, employment status, and self-report. This cluster reflects research that foregrounds socio-demographic positioning and household contexts in analyses of language proficiency. The co-occurrence of gender, age, and family-related terms suggests attention to how language acquisition and its consequences vary across life stages and social roles. The presence of methodological terms such as self-report and cross-sectional study further indicates that this cluster includes studies focused on individual-level experiences and survey-based assessments of integration and labour market participation.

Cluster 5 (purple cluster): The purple cluster is smaller and more peripheral, with keywords including discrimination, citizenship, acculturation, regression analysis, and comparative study. Its position at the edge of the network suggests a body of work that engages more explicitly with institutional, legal, and comparative dimensions of migration and language proficiency. The relative separation of this cluster indicates that while these issues are connected to the core labour market literature, they remain less integrated into mainstream empirical analyses, often appearing in comparative or policy-oriented studies rather than large-scale econometric models.

Taken together, the network structure illustrates that research on language proficiency and migrant integration is organised around a dense labour market core, surrounded by interconnected clusters addressing health, psychological well-being,

socio-demographic variation, and institutional conditions. The substantial overlap among clusters indicates that language proficiency operates across multiple domains simultaneously, linking economic participation, health, identity, and social positioning. Rather than functioning as a standalone determinant, language proficiency emerges as a relational and context-dependent resource whose effects are shaped by demographic characteristics, health status, institutional recognition, and broader social inequalities. This interconnected structure underscores the need for interdisciplinary approaches that move beyond narrowly economic interpretations of language proficiency in migrant integration research.

4.3 Thematic analysis of top-cited articles

Given the size of the dataset ($n = 381$), a citation-based filtering strategy was applied to identify influential and emerging contributions that have shaped research on language proficiency and migrant integration. Studies with more than 100 citations were selected as indicators of sustained scholarly influence, while recent articles published between 2020 and 2024 with 30–99 citations were included where they demonstrated high topical relevance or conceptual innovation. This process yielded 34 studies, detailed in the Appendix (Tables A.1 and A.2). Table 3 summarises representative studies and their principal contributions.

Rather than reproducing the bibliometric structure, this section synthesises insights from these influential works to clarify how key debates, limitations, and extensions of existing frameworks align with the patterns identified in the network analysis.

Table 3*Representative Highly Cited and Emerging Studies by Thematic Cluster*

Theme	Number of articles	Articles included (authors & year)	Key findings summary
Insights from labour market-focused studies	11	(Dustmann and Soest, 2001, 2002; Chiswick and Miller, 2002, 2003, 2010; Berman, Lang and Siniver, 2003; Dustmann and Fabbri, 2003; Bleakley and Chin, 2004; Aydemir and Skuterud, 2005; Oreopoulos, 2011; Leschke and Weiss, 2020)	Language proficiency significantly boosts immigrant earnings and employment chances. English fluency complements other human capital factors like, education, experience. Studies reveal persistent wage gaps despite language fluency, highlights at discrimination. Recent immigrants face more challenges, even with good language proficiency.
Refugees, vulnerability, and institutional constraints	7	(Hadley, Zodhiates and Sellen, 2007; Connor, 2010; de Vroome and van Tubergen, 2010; Cheung and Phillimore, 2014; Campion, 2018; Morrice <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Stempel and Alemi, 2021)	Language proficiency is essential for refugee employment and social integration. Refugees face unique barriers, like trauma, stigma, and lack of qualifications. Social capital and supportive policies help mitigate negative impacts but do not fully compensate for low language proficiency.
Education, skill formation, and gatekeeping mechanisms	4	(Schnepf, 2007; Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2011; Chun, Lipsitz and Shin, 2013; Baker, Due and Rose, 2021)	Community colleges and targeted Educational Skills Development programs play a key role in immigrant integration. Language policies and tests can be exclusionary. Culturally and linguistically diverse migrants face systemic disadvantages in educational access and skill recognition. Intersectional strategies related to gender, race, and language are important for empowerment and academic success among migrants.
Language, identity, and symbolic exclusion	5	(Mcnamara, 2005; Ahmad <i>et al.</i> , 2009; Koopmans, 2016; Dovchin and Dryden, 2022; Newlands, 2024)	Sociocultural factors like language, gender norms, interethnic ties influence employment gaps and integration outcomes. Discrimination based on names, accents, and race leads to “translingual discrimination.” Language tests serve as gatekeeping tools that reinforce inequality, especially among migrants. Social belonging is tightly linked to linguistic identity and cultural socialization.
Health, well-being, and integration capacity	4	(Beiser and Hou, 2001; Chertkow <i>et al.</i> , 2010; Ahmad <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Kaur <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	Language barriers affect mental health, access to services, and food security among migrants and refugees. Poor language proficiency correlates with higher rates of depression and stress. Structural inequalities in healthcare and housing systems amplify language-related disadvantages. Outreaching and culturally sensitive health communication are crucial.
Migration trajectories and entrepreneurship	3	(Jasso <i>et al.</i> , 2000; Hersch, 2008; Piracha and Vadean, 2010)	Returners with foreign language skills are more likely to become entrepreneurs. Survey data confirms language skills can be effectively measured at arrival and linked to integration success. Migrants in gig

economies often view work as temporary; language and discrimination still influence employability and job quality.

Source: Authors (Note: Influential studies were defined as those with ≥ 100 citations (all years), and “emerging” studies as those published in 2020–2024 with 30–99 citation)

Following thematical findings are based on the thematic analysis using influential and emerging studies.

4.3.1 Insights from labour market-focused studies

Highly cited studies associated with labour market outcomes consistently demonstrate that language proficiency is positively associated with employment probabilities, occupational mobility, and earnings (Chiswick and Miller, 2002; Dustmann and Fabbri, 2003; Bleakley and Chin, 2004). These findings underpin the dominance of human capital and signalling approaches in the field. However, later influential work complicates this relationship by showing that proficiency alone does not eliminate wage penalties or overqualification, pointing instead to persistent discrimination and segmented labour markets (Oreopoulos, 2011; Leschke and Weiss, 2020). Collectively, these studies confirm both the empirical strength and the explanatory limits of economic models that treat language primarily as an individual productivity-enhancing asset.

4.3.2 Refugees, vulnerability, and institutional constraints

Influential research focusing on refugees highlights that language proficiency is necessary but insufficient for successful labour market integration (Connor, 2010; Cheung and Phillimore, 2014; Morrice *et al.*, 2021). These studies show that trauma, disrupted educational trajectories, insecure legal status, and weak credential recognition substantially constrain the labour market returns to language skills. Social capital and supportive institutional arrangements can mitigate these disadvantages but rarely compensate fully for limited proficiency. This body of work illustrates how health, legal, and institutional barriers intersect with language proficiency, reinforcing patterns observed in the bibliometric clusters linking labour market outcomes with health and structural conditions.

4.3.3 Education, skill formation, and gatekeeping mechanisms

Highly cited studies on education and skill development emphasise the role of schooling, community colleges, and targeted training programmes in shaping migrants' integration trajectories (Schnepf, 2007; Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2011; Baker, Due and Rose, 2021). At the same time, these studies demonstrate that language testing regimes and educational credentialing systems can function as gatekeeping mechanisms that disproportionately disadvantage linguistically and culturally diverse migrants. These findings underscore that institutional arrangements mediate whether language proficiency translates into recognised skills and labour market mobility.

4.3.4 Language, identity, and symbolic exclusion

Critical sociolinguistic and policy-oriented studies reveal that language proficiency operates not only as a functional skill but also as a marker of belonging and exclusion (Mcnamara, 2005; Koopmans, 2016; Dovchin and Dryden, 2022). Influential work documents how names, accents, and formal language assessments reproduce symbolic boundaries, leading to what has been described as translingual discrimination. These studies demonstrate that migrants may achieve economic participation while continuing to experience social and symbolic exclusion, reinforcing insights from the cluster analysis regarding the cultural and institutional dimensions of language.

4.3.5 Health, well-being, and integration capacity

A smaller but influential body of research links language proficiency to health outcomes, showing that limited proficiency is associated with poorer mental health, reduced access to healthcare services, and heightened vulnerability to housing and food insecurity (Beiser and Hou, 2001; Ahmad *et al.*, 2021). These studies highlight the bidirectional relationship between health and integration capacity: poor health constrains labour market participation, while stable employment improves access to services and

well-being. Although less central in economic analyses, this literature provides critical context for understanding the broader consequences of language-related exclusion.

4.3.6 Migration typologies and entrepreneurship

Finally, influential studies on migration trajectories demonstrate that language proficiency shapes not only wage employment but also entrepreneurial activity and return migration decisions (Jasso *et al.*, 2000; Piracha and Vadean, 2010). Migrants with stronger language skills are more likely to establish businesses, while recent work suggests that even in gig and platform-based labour markets, language proficiency continues to influence job quality and employability (Newlands, 2024). These findings link labour market outcomes to broader questions of mobility, precarity, and long-term integration.

In sum, these influential and emerging studies reinforce the bibliometric findings by demonstrating that while language proficiency is a necessary condition for migrant integration, its value is shaped by institutional recognition, health status, socio-demographic positioning, and cultural belonging. The literature confirms the centrality of economic integration while revealing the limitations of frameworks that treat language as a neutral form of human capital. Instead, the evidence points to language proficiency as a socially mediated resource whose labour market returns depend on structural, institutional, and relational conditions.

5 DISCUSSION

This study provides a comprehensive examination of how language proficiency has been conceptualised, measured, and theorised within the literature on migrant labour market integration. By synthesising bibliometric evidence from 381 peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2024, the analysis demonstrates that while language proficiency remains one of the most frequently examined explanatory variables in migration research, its meaning, function, and labour market value vary substantially across institutional, disciplinary, and geographical contexts. Taken together, the findings underscore the need to move beyond narrow human capital interpretations towards a more

nanced understanding of language as a socially embedded and institutionally mediated resource.

One of the most consistent findings across the literature is the robust association between language proficiency and labour market outcomes such as employment probability, occupational status, and earnings. This pattern closely aligns with human capital theory, which conceptualises language skills as productivity-enhancing assets that improve job matching, workplace communication, and overall economic performance (Becker, 1964; Chiswick and Miller, 2002; Dustmann and Fabbri, 2003). The persistence of this framework within empirical research reflects its analytical clarity, empirical tractability, and strong policy appeal, particularly in contexts where migrant integration is framed as an issue of individual adaptation and skill acquisition. Language training policies across many migrant-receiving countries are explicitly grounded in this logic, reinforcing the prominence of human capital approaches in both academic and policy debates.

However, the bibliometric and qualitative synthesis presented in this study also reveals the limitations of treating language proficiency as a neutral or universally valued form of human capital. Across a wide range of national contexts and migrant groups, language proficiency alone does not guarantee equal labour market outcomes. Persistent wage gaps, occupational downgrading, and limited career progression remain evident even among migrants with high levels of host-country language proficiency (Dustmann and Soest, 2002; Oreopoulos, 2011; Leschke and Weiss, 2020). These patterns indicate that language skills operate within broader institutional and social structures that condition their recognition and reward, challenging the sufficiency of purely individualised explanations.

Research drawing on signalling theory provides important insights into these dynamics. From this perspective, language proficiency functions as a signal that employers use to infer productivity, adaptability, and cultural fit when evaluating candidates whose formal qualifications or work histories are difficult to assess (Spence, 1973). Empirical studies demonstrate that linguistic fluency can reduce employer uncertainty and improve hiring prospects, particularly in early stages of settlement (Dustmann and Fabbri, 2003; Oreopoulos, 2011). Yet the findings reviewed here also show that signalling processes are far from neutral. Accent discrimination, racialisation,

and implicit bias frequently distort the interpretation of linguistic signals, resulting in systematically lower returns to language proficiency for certain migrant groups, especially migrants from the Global South (Oreopoulos, 2011; Dovchin and Dryden, 2022). In this sense, language proficiency functions not merely as a technical skill but as a socially interpreted signal embedded in unequal power relations.

The analysis further demonstrates that institutional arrangements play a decisive role in shaping the labour market value of language proficiency. Credential recognition systems, labour market regulation, and immigration policies condition whether language skills can be effectively translated into employment opportunities and career advancement. Studies associated with segmented labour market theory show that migrants are often channelled into secondary labour markets characterised by low wages, limited mobility, and weak returns to skills, regardless of language proficiency (Leschke and Weiss, 2020). These institutional constraints help explain why investments in language acquisition alone frequently fail to eliminate structural inequalities in labour market outcomes.

Beyond economic outcomes, the findings highlight the growing, though still marginal, body of research examining language proficiency in relation to health, well-being, and broader forms of social integration. Studies focusing on access to healthcare, mental health, and social participation demonstrate that limited language proficiency can restrict migrants' ability to navigate public services, exacerbate psychological distress, and constrain civic engagement (Beiser and Hou, 2001; Ahmad *et al.*, 2021). Conversely, improved language skills facilitate interaction with institutions and contribute to social inclusion. However, the bibliometric mapping reveals that these perspectives remain underrepresented relative to economically oriented research, reflecting a persistent fragmentation between labour market analysis and broader integration studies. This disciplinary divide limits comprehensive understanding of how language proficiency operates across interconnected domains of migrants' lives.

The thematic structure of the literature also reveals pronounced geographical imbalances. Research output is heavily concentrated in high-income, migrant-receiving countries, particularly in North America, Western Europe, and Australia. While these contexts have generated valuable empirical insights, they capture only a subset of global migration experiences. Migration dynamics in low- and middle-income countries,

emerging destination contexts, and migrant-sending regions remain significantly underexplored (Koopmans, 2016). This concentration limits the generalisability of prevailing theoretical frameworks and risks reproducing Global North-centric assumptions about labour markets, institutions, and integration pathways.

In sum, the findings support a reconceptualization of language proficiency as a relational and institutionally mediated resource rather than a fixed individual attribute. From this perspective, language proficiency can be understood as a form of symbolic capital whose value depends on institutional recognition, social positioning, and broader political-economic conditions (Aliakbari and Khosravian, 2014; Dovchin and Dryden, 2022). This framing helps explain why language skills may yield substantial returns in some contexts while remaining weakly rewarded or actively devalued in others. It also highlights the limitations of policy approaches that focus narrowly on language training without addressing the structural conditions under which linguistic capital is assessed and utilised.

The bibliometric approach adopted in this study contributes methodologically by clarifying how theoretical perspectives, disciplinary boundaries, and empirical priorities have evolved over time. By mapping dominant clusters alongside peripheral and underdeveloped strands, the analysis reveals not only where the field has consolidated but also where conceptual integration remains limited. In doing so, the study demonstrates the value of combining quantitative bibliometric techniques with qualitative synthesis to generate a more systematic and reflexive understanding of fragmented research domains.

6 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has examined the evolution of research on language proficiency and migrant labour market outcomes through a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of 381 peer-reviewed publications published between 2000 and 2024. The findings confirm that language proficiency plays a significant role in shaping employment prospects, earnings, and occupational mobility. However, its effects are neither uniform nor automatic. Instead, the labour market value of language proficiency is mediated by structural inequalities, institutional arrangements, and broader social contexts that condition how linguistic skills are recognised and rewarded.

The analysis demonstrates that much of the existing literature continues to frame language primarily as a form of human capital, while giving comparatively less attention to the institutional, social, and political processes that shape its value. Although recent scholarship increasingly acknowledges the role of discrimination, credential recognition, and social positioning, these dimensions remain unevenly integrated across disciplines. Moreover, the concentration of research in high-income, migrant-receiving countries limits understanding of how language functions in more diverse institutional and socio-economic contexts.

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the need to move beyond language training as a standalone solution to labour market inequality. While investments in language acquisition remain essential, they must be complemented by reforms in credential recognition systems, anti-discrimination measures, and inclusive labour market institutions. Without such structural interventions, language policies risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than mitigating them.

Future research should move beyond narrow, individualised conceptions of language proficiency and adopt more integrative perspectives that account for institutional arrangements, social hierarchies, and power relations. Comparative and longitudinal studies are particularly important for examining how the value of language proficiency evolves over the life course and across different policy regimes. Greater methodological pluralism, including qualitative and mixed methods approaches, would also enhance understanding of the everyday mechanisms through which language mediates inclusion and exclusion.

By situating language proficiency within broader systems of recognition, governance, and inequality, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of migrant labour market integration and provides a foundation for future interdisciplinary research and more equitable policy development.

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APPENDIX

Table A.1

Core Influential Studies

Author (Year)	Title	Citation Count
Dustmann and Fabbri, (2003)	Language proficiency and labour market performance of immigrants in the UK	462
Bleakley and Chin, (2004)	Language skills and earnings: Evidence from childhood immigrants	379
Oreopoulos, (2011)	Why do skilled immigrants struggle in the labor market?	366
Chiswick and Miller, (2002)	Immigrant earnings: Language skills, linguistic concentrations and the business cycle	317
Beiser and Hou, (2001)	Language acquisition, unemployment and depressive disorder among Southeast Asian refugees	292
Dustmann and Soest, (2002)	Language and the earnings of immigrants	235
Chun, Lipsitz and Shin, (2013)	Intersectionality as a social movement strategy: Asian immigrant women advocates	226
Aydemir and Skuterud, (2005)	Explaining the deteriorating entry earnings of Canada's immigrant cohorts	221
Schnepf, (2007)	Immigrants' educational disadvantage: An examination across ten countries	214
Chertkow <i>et al.</i> , (2010)	Multilingualism (but not always bilingualism) delays the onset of Alzheimer disease: Evidence from a bilingual community	208
Cheung and Phillimore, (2014)	Refugees, Social Capital, and Labour Market Integration in the UK	185
Dustmann and Soest, (2001)	Language fluency and earnings: Estimation with misclassified language indicators	181
Ahmad <i>et al.</i> , (2009)	"Why doesn't she seek help for partner abuse?" An exploratory study with South Asian immigrant women	172
Connor, (2010)	Explaining the refugee gap: Economic outcomes of refugees versus other immigrants	171
de Vroome and van Tubergen, (2010)	The employment experience of refugees in the Netherlands	155
Chiswick and Miller, (2003)	The complementarity of language and other human capital: Immigrant earnings in Canada	154
Piracha and Vadean, (2010)	Return Migration and Occupational Choice: Evidence from Albania	150
Koopmans, (2016)	Does assimilation work? Sociocultural determinants of labour market participation of European Muslims	140
Campion, (2018)	The career adaptive refugee: Exploring the structural and personal barriers to refugee resettlement	126
Jasso <i>et al.</i> , (2000)	The New Immigrant Survey Pilot (NIS-P): Overview and new findings about U.S. legal immigrants at admission	124
Chiswick and Miller, (2010)	Occupational language requirements and the value of English in the US labor market	121
Hadley, Zodhiates and Sellen, (2007)	Acculturation, economics and food insecurity among refugees resettled in the USA: A case study of West African refugees	117
Hersch, (2008)	Profiling the new immigrant worker: The effects of skin color and height	110
Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, (2011)	Immigrants in community colleges	107
Berman, Lang and Siniver, (2003)	Language-skill complementarity: Returns to immigrant language acquisition	106

Author (Year)	Title	Citation Count
Mcnamara, (2005)	21st century Shibboleth: Language tests, identity and intergroup conflict	104

Source: Authors (Note: Influential studies were defined as those with ≥ 100 citations (all years))

Table A.2

Recent emerging work

Author (Year)	Title	Citation Count
Morrice <i>et al.</i> , (2021)	'You can't have a good integration when you don't have a good communication': English-language Learning among Resettled Refugees in England	65
Newlands, (2024)	'This isn't forever for me': Perceived employability and migrant gig work in Norway and Sweden	41
Ahmad <i>et al.</i> , (2021)	Depression-level symptoms among Syrian refugees: findings from a Canadian longitudinal study	37
Dovchin and Dryden, (2022)	Translingual Discrimination: Skilled Transnational Migrants in the Labour Market of Australia	36
Leschke and Weiss, (2020)	With a Little Help from My Friends: Social-Network Job Search and Overqualification among Recent Intra-EU Migrants Moving from East to West	34
Kaur <i>et al.</i> , (2021)	Understanding the health and housing experiences of refugees and other migrant populations experiencing homelessness or vulnerable housing: a systematic review using GRADE-CERQual	33
Baker, Due and Rose, (2021)	Transitions from education to employment for culturally and linguistically diverse migrants and refugees in settlement contexts: what do we know?	33
Stempel and Alemi, (2021)	Challenges to the economic integration of Afghan refugees in the U.S.	30

Source: Authors (Note: "emerging" studies as those published in 2020–2024 with 30–99 citation)

Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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