

RISING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER POPULATION: BURMESE REFUGEES

May 2011

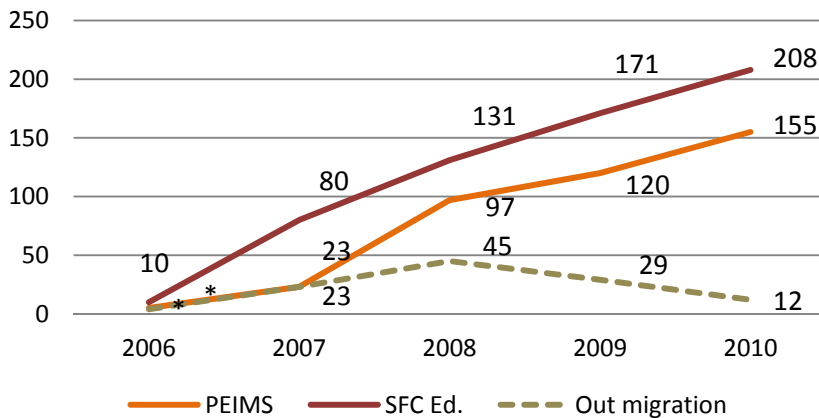


INTRODUCTION

Burmese was the fifth most common language spoken at home among Austin Independent School District's (AISD) English language learners (ELLs) in Fall 2009 ($n = 120$).¹ The number of Burmese-speaking ELLs rose 29% in Fall 2010 to 155 students (Figure 1). Burmese is only one of several languages spoken by the peoples of the Union of Burma (also known as Myanmar²), an Asian country bordering China, India, and Thailand. Karen, Chin, Karen Ni, and Ka Chin are the most common languages spoken at home by the refugee population in Austin³ that currently are not coded in AISD's student information system.

AISD's School, Family, and Community Education Office (SFC Ed) has a family support specialist whose primary focus is serving incoming refugees to the district. According to SFC Ed records, of the 522 refugees enrolled in AISD as of April 5, 2011, 40% were from Burma ($n = 208$), followed by Iraq (16%) and Bhutan (11%). SFC Ed records indicate a 37% increase in Burmese refugees from 2009–2010 to 2010–2011. Austin also experiences out-migration, whereby refugees are resettled in one city, but move to another due to employment or family/social reasons; however, out-migration for AISD Burmese students has been decreasing since 2008 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of Burmese English Language Learners, 2006–2010



Source. AISD Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) 110 records and School, Family, and Community Education (SFC Ed) records

Note. PEIMS only contains Burmese language. Refugee students who do not speak Burmese have a language code of "other" and are not captured in the enrollment count. * Represents five or fewer students



Resettlement and Location in Austin

Two resettlement agencies provide services to Burmese refugee families in the Austin area: Refugee Services of Texas, Inc. (RST), and Caritas Refugee/Resettlement. They help families secure housing and obtain services to help with resettlement. Many Burmese families are settled in proximity to one another. According to Texas Department of Health and Human Services records, 17% of refugees in Travis County in 2010 were from Burma. Download: http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/idcu/health/refugee_health/statistics/

Top 12 Schools for Burmese Enrollment, Spring 2011

Grade level	Number	Percentage
Elementary	118	57
Linder	26	13
Metz	18	9
Sanchez	18	9
Harris	13	6
Reilly	12	6
Cook	9	4
Wooldridge	8	4
Middle	26	13
Martin	7	3
Fulmore	6	3
High	64	31
International	27	13
Travis	17	8
Lanier	12	6

Source. AISD School, Family, and Community Education records, 2011
Note. Only students enrolled in AISD as of April 5, 2011 are included.

¹ Brunner, J. (2010). *Bilingual education/English as a second language summary report, 2009–2010*. (Publication No. 09.67). Austin, TX: Austin Independent School District.

² The country's official name, Union of Myanmar, is not recognized by the United States according to the U.S. State Department.

³ As reported by the Austin Area Director of Refugees Services of Texas, Inc. These languages are not dialects of Burmese.

AISD SERVICES TO REFUGEES

RST projected 372 refugee arrivals for 2011.⁴ Although efforts by resettlement agencies have tried to keep Burmese located in proximity to one another, the apartment complexes in which they reside are zoned for different schools. At times, Burmese students are sent to schools that do not have other Burmese children.

In 2006, the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) funded a 5-year cycle Refugee School Impact Grant (RSIG), administered in Texas by the Office of Immigration and Refugee Affairs (OIRA) at the Texas Health and Human Services Commission. In addition, in September 2010, AISD received a 2-year grant that supports the SFC Ed's Refugee Family Support Office (RFSO) staff of one English/Spanish family support specialist and a half-time English/Burmese support staff member. The RFSO interfaces with schools that enroll refugee students across AISD, as well as with the agencies in Austin that provide services to refugee families, including Caritas, RST, Refugee Health Clinic, Dell Children's Hospital, Project Help, Austin Refugee Roundtable, and Operation School Bell.

The RFSO staff offer new refugee families a parent orientation to AISD. Translation services are provided at parent meetings, including parent-teacher conferences. The RFSO staff provide parents with communications regarding AISD programs, such as prekindergarten, summer school, and ELL programs.

RFSO AND RST RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on their knowledge of the Burmese population, the RFSO and RST made the following recommendations for consideration of AISD administrators:

- Language services that provide refugee students with opportunities for peer integration with non-refugee students
- A centralized intake process for new refugee families that includes an orientation to AISD services and an integrated refugee data collection process that establishes the educational history of each refugee
- Specialized instructional services for teenage students who have had limited or interrupted education
- Staff training and staff dialogue about refugee populations at schools with 10 or more refugee students

⁴ Refugee arrivals were lower than projected for the months of March and April due to additional security clearance implemented by Department of Homeland Security (DHS). In response, the Bureau of Population, Refugee, and Migration (PRM) anticipated a 15% to 20% decrease in its original projection for the fiscal year; thus, the projection reported here was reduced from 465 to 372.

⁵ *Proposed refugee admissions for fiscal year 2011: Report to the Congress. (2011).* US Department of State, Department of Homeland Security, and Department of Health and Human Services. Downloaded April 11, 2011 from <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/148671.pdf>

⁶ Krause, S. (2006). *United States waives restriction on Karen refugee resettlement.* Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Retrieved from <http://www.america.gov/st/washfile-english/2006/September/20060901131416ASesuarK0.3654901.html#ixzz1JEUaing7>



Historical Background

Burma is a multi-ethnic country that has experienced decades of civil unrest, armed conflict, and natural catastrophe, which has forced thousands of refugees to flee into neighboring countries, including Thailand and Malaysia (south of Burma).⁵

To relieve crowded Karen refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border, the United States in 2006 allowed eligible Karen refugees to apply for the U.S. Refugee Admission and Resettlement Program, and approved 2,700 applications.⁶ Karen refugees previously were excluded due to their affiliation with the Karen National Union (KNU) rebel militia, which was defined by the Patriot Act as a terrorist organization.⁶

In 2011, the U.S. ceiling for refugees from East Asia was 19,000, of which 18,500 (97%) were expected to be Burmese.⁵

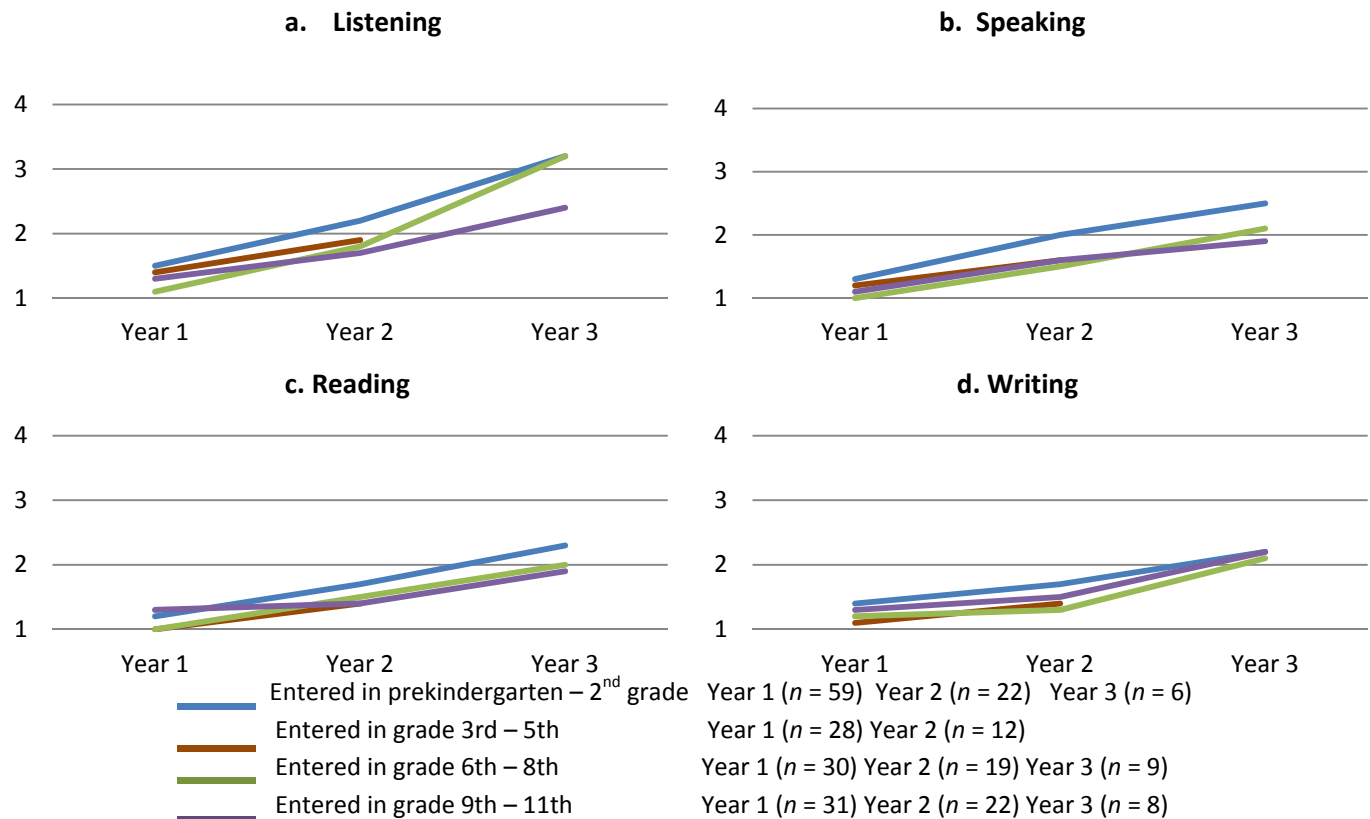
- Hiring of staff with background in refugee languages
- Coordination of family support among RFSO ELL staff, and of school-based services (e.g., Family Resource Centers, Communities in Schools) to provide specialized services, including for mental health issues specific to refugees
- Coordination of interpretation/translation services among RFSO, ELL Department, and Planning and Community Relations, and the financial support for these services beyond the RSIG grant

BURMESE STUDENTS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

In Texas, ELLs' proficiency is assessed annually using the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS) for kindergarten through 12th grade. The four domains assessed by TELPAS are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Students receive a proficiency score and rating (i.e., beginning, intermediate, advanced, advanced high) on each domain. Figures 2a through 2d show the average TELPAS score in each domain according to the number of years Burmese students were in AISD and the grade level at which they entered AISD. Burmese students entering in early elementary grades (i.e., prekindergarten through 2nd grade) performed better on the TELPAS than did other students. Burmese students entering AISD in middle school, on average, had the lowest scores in listening and speaking in their first year. Of the 62 Burmese students with a yearly progress score on TELPAS in their second year, 35% met adequate progress standards ($n = 22$).

Composite range	Numeric value	Rating category
1.0 – 1.5	1	Beginning
1.6 – 2.5	2	Intermediate
2.6 – 3.5	3	Advanced
3.6 – 4.0	4	Advanced high

Figure 2. Burmese Students Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS) Scores, by Domain, Grade Entered AISD, and Year in AISD



Source. AISD TELPAS records from Spring 2007 through Spring 2010

Note. Fewer than five students who entered in grades 3rd through 5th had a third year score. Year does not correspond to academic year (e.g., 2006–2007), but represents the sequential year in AISD.