

Policy Brief

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English language for resettled refugees

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research conducted at the University of Sussex finds that the very diverse needs of resettled refugees in the UK are not being met in relation to English language learning. There is also a great diversity in educational background and employment outlook. Learning English is considered essential for social integration yet there is no national strategy and success is a very hit or miss affair. Contact with English speakers alone does not facilitate language development. Instead, refugees need to develop their language skills before meaningful contacts can be made. Other benefits of learning English include:

- increased confidence in engaging with public services
- improved quality of contact experiences with other people in the UK
- empowerment and greater belief in their own abilities
- greater job satisfaction and satisfaction with education in the UK
- better health

This is the first longitudinal study of its kind and took place over three years. A key finding is that higher levels of English language can increase refugee well-being. Certain groups tend to have lower English language proficiency: women, older refugees, those with limited pre-migration education and those with poor health. These groups face particular challenges, are most likely to struggle to learn English and are most at risk of exclusion. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes are essential to enable contact and integration.

Key findings

- **Resettled refugees are a diverse group with wide-ranging language-learning needs that are not being met**
- **Day-to-day social contact alone is not sufficient to learn English**
- **English Language skills lead to more contact with other communities**
- **The most vulnerable refugees struggle to attend classes**
- **Accessible English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes are needed by all and not just those on work-related benefits**
- **Intensive, tailored courses are needed**
- **Higher-level and fast-track (ESOL) courses should be provided to those that need them for faster employment prospects**

DEFINITION OF RESETTLED REFUGEES

Unlike those who enter the UK as asylum seekers, resettled refugees have rights broadly similar to UK citizens on arrival and therefore have access to English language classes. The two main resettlement programmes in the UK are the Gateway Protection Programme and the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme.

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OVERVIEW

English language learning for resettled refugees is delivered through English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programmes. The Department for Education is responsible for ESOL policy and this has been largely focused on employability¹.

There are many other benefits that are relevant to other government department agendas. Despite cross-governmental interest there is no national ESOL strategy. This has led to shortcomings in the quality of provision and understanding about the scale of need. This has knock-on effects at both individual and societal levels.

The diverse needs of those requiring ESOL are also poorly understood^{2&3}. Researchers at the University of Sussex conducted an investigation into the gaps in ESOL provision and barriers to English learning for resettled refugees.

The research draws on the answers to a questionnaire by 280 resettled refugees who originate from Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq and Somalia. The questionnaire was conducted three times in the period 2014 - 2016. One hundred and eighty refugees filled out the questionnaires three times, each time about a year apart, which allowed multiple analyses looking at different variables. Thirty of these refugees were then interviewed to explore their experiences of ESOL provision in more depth.

The refugees, aged between 18 and 80-years old, were resettled in England in the period 2006 - 2010 in either: Greater Manchester, Norwich, Brighton & Hove or Sheffield.

Resettled Refugee Quotas

The UK Government selects refugees for resettlement on the grounds of their vulnerability. This includes medical needs, disabilities and survivors of torture or violence. Higher levels of poor health (mental and physical), and caring responsibilities are to be expected in these communities.

INITIAL ACCESS TO ESOL

On arrival resettled refugees are assigned caseworkers to assist them in settling into their new life in the UK. One of the areas of assistance is signing up for ESOL classes.

Classes vary by location; Brighton & Hove ran bespoke classes for newly arrived refugees before moving them into mainstream ESOL provision; in Greater Manchester and Norwich some people accessed mainstream ESOL from the beginning. Most refugees who did not speak any English received supplementary English classes in the early days.

ESOL DELIVERY

Most ESOL is delivered with funding from the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) typically on accredited courses through Further Education colleges and Adult Education centres. SFA also fund a limited amount of non-accredited provision through the new Adult Education Budget. Patterns of delivery vary widely between 4 and 12.5 hours a week on programmes 17-36 weeks duration³.

Respondents reported waiting lists for provision and lack of courses at higher levels.

ESOL Qualifications

Nationally recognised qualifications were introduced in 2004 under the Skills for Life (SfL) initiative.

There are three levels; Entry (with three sub-levels), Level 1 and Level 2. There are three units at each level: Speaking & listening, reading, and writing. Students need to enrol at a level higher than they currently possess which can be quite a leap and a disincentive³. From 2013 ESOL qualifications have been given a fixed amount of funding regardless of the hours an individual needs to complete it.

FUNDING

ESOL funding has decreased significantly since 2008. Fee remission is now only available to those on active benefits such as Job Seekers Allowance or Employment Support Allowance.

All ESOL funding ceases once employment has been obtained. There is no government funding for ESOL in the workplace².

Those on other non-employment type benefits may be able to seek funding but this is at the discretion of the provider. Cuts to funding for ESOL and changes in eligibility for free classes has led to a dramatic drop in participation in ESOL learning⁴.

Short-term project funding from other Government Departments, e.g. Department for Communities and Local Government and the Home Office has been made available for a limited number of ESOL initiatives. Such funding targets particular groups such as women or Syrian refugees.

ESOL EFFECTIVENESS

The majority of refugees reported that they found the classes useful, particularly mixed nationality classes. Benefits from the classes extended beyond learning English to an important social element. Attendees found it useful to meet people from different nationalities and backgrounds so that they could develop networks with other communities and

practice English outside the classroom. Language was also highlighted as the key to their integration: it made communication with other people possible and was crucial to leading independent lives. Hence the value and importance of classes stretched beyond increased chances of employment.

The norm of ESOL classes being held twice a week for two hours was reported as being insufficient. After five years in the UK some refugees found they still depended on interpreters. A significant majority reported English language as the biggest barrier to securing employment. Poor language skills also seem to underpin the 'revolving door' between Job Centre and multiple short-term employment contracts which many refugees seemed to be stuck in.

Paper-based learning was too difficult and ineffective at lower levels and for those who were not literate. Those who had little or no previous education reported feeling too shy or embarrassed to ask for help in class. ESOL

Caring responsibilities at home create another barrier to attending ESOL classes. Figure 1 shows that those with caring responsibilities, or who experienced poor health, had the lowest language levels. Women with children are constrained by a lack of childcare facilities.

Refugees are resettled on grounds of their vulnerability and there are often high levels of mental and physical health needs in such communities. Providing care for those suffering poor health makes class attendance a struggle.

Stresses caused by financial worries, health issues and concerns for family left behind can impair concentration in ESOL classes and affect learning success.

Findings indicated that better English language skills leads to more contact with other people in the UK over time, but not vice versa. In turn, more contact with other people in the UK leads to better well-being over time, but again, not the other way around. That is, people need the

Pre-migration education predicts the level of language skill and capacity to learn

Refugees were asked to rate their own English speaking, reading, writing and understanding, and the improvement of their language proficiency since arrival on a scale from 1-5. The average score of these ratings was used as an indicator of language proficiency.

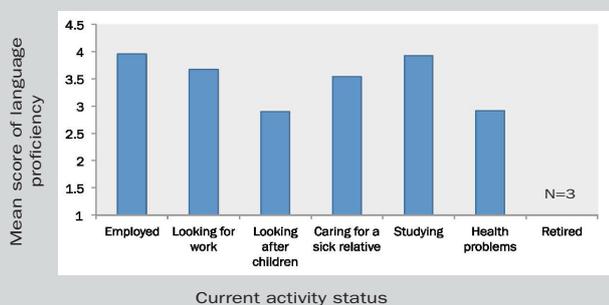


Figure 1: English Language proficiency by type of employment of the resettled refugees

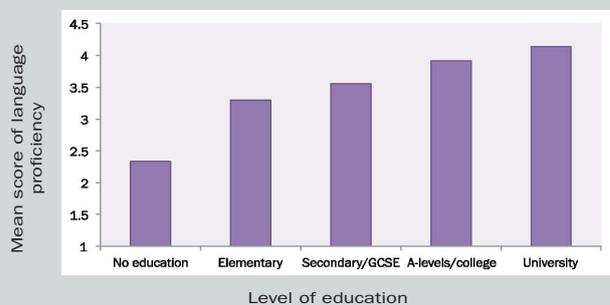


Figure 2: English Language proficiency by type of education level of the resettled refugees

classes did not meet the needs of all refugees for a range of reasons.

BARRIERS TO LEARNING ENGLISH

In ESOL classes learners are grouped in terms of their language level. However within each group there can be a diverse range of educational backgrounds spanning from those who have never been to school to those with higher levels of education. Interview responses suggest that for some resettled refugees ESOL classes go too fast making it extremely difficult for them to make progress. These are refugees who on arrival speak very little, if any English, have limited pre-migration education and may not be literate in their own language/s. ESOL classes can go too slowly or are too easy for those that are more highly educated.

necessary language skills before they can make these contacts, thereby highlighting the importance of ESOL classes.

Daily interactions alone are insufficient for learning English. There were few opportunities for resettled refugees to meet and talk with other people in the UK. Contact rarely progressed beyond polite greetings. In this situation resettled refugees are likely to feel isolated in this country.

Funding for ESOL targets particular refugees and excludes others. Fees for classes are not paid for those that are retired, not seeking employment, or who are caring for children or relatives. Once in employment funding for ESOL stops. As employment is often poorly paid and may be part-time it gives severely limited, if

Policy recommendations

ESOL STRATEGY - NATIONAL AND LOCAL

A national strategy for England to enable proper assessment of need; every city/region to have its own locally responsive strategy

RECOGNISE DIVERSITY OF NEEDS

Resettled refugees are a very diverse group with wide-ranging learning needs - ESOL classes need to be more flexible and individually tailored

HIGHER LEVEL ESOL COURSES

Fast-track/higher-level ESOL courses are needed for more highly educated resettled refugees to enable them to join the labour market quickly at appropriate levels

COURSE INTENSITY

Longer more frequent provision is needed for new arrivals, facilitating greater integration and improving employment prospects

SUPPORT FOR HOME CARERS

Carers (most likely to be women) are vulnerable to being isolated as they are more likely to be providing care at home therefore solutions are needed

ESOL FOR ALL

English language should be recognised as a life skill and be freely available to all

LEARNING PROGRESSION

Provision needs clear signposting and appropriate progression pathways

INFORMAL LEARNING

Informal and additional support is needed for those with no formal education

any, financial means for ESOL classes. The entry level jobs available to those with limited language proficiency do not generally require language use or provide opportunities to improve language skills.

The ease with which English is learnt correlates with: pre-migration level of education, employment status and youth.

There are also significant gender differences: Men rated their language proficiency higher than women, and were more likely to access ESOL classes. Men's higher language skills can in turn be due to education level and employment status.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Recent article in The Guardian:

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/nov/16/language-barrier-refugees-english-classes-integration-esol>

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