

## **Refugees Welcome: Community-based language learning for adults seeking sanctuary in England**

Currently there are 89 million people forcibly displaced around the world in what is referred to as the global “refugee crisis”. In the UK, 2023 saw asylum accommodations become sites of anti-refugee protests, whilst the UK government’s “Illegal Immigration Bill” aimed to curb the crossing of people seeking safety via irregular means. Forced migrants are therefore faced with the challenging context of a post-9/11, post-Brexit hostile immigration environment, further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic and a nation-wide cost-of-living-crisis.

As well as economic uncertainty and divided public opinion, the current UK asylum backlog of around 160,000 people means that people might wait between one and three years for a decision (Refugee Council, 2023), during which time adults cannot legally work. Those who can work, but don’t yet have English language proficiency, can be left vulnerable to low wages and poor working conditions (Bonet, 2021). Whilst children have access to basic education where their language skills are supported, adults are often left with few language learning opportunities in the face of governmental budget cuts from English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), despite the fact that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include the right to education which encompasses “lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UNESCO, n.d.).

In the context described above, I wanted to examine the role of multicultural refugee community centres in supporting language learning in a safe and welcoming environment, as well as how curricular and pedagogical choices can create space for student involvement in decision-making and thus ownership over their learning. Language is well known to be a key facilitator of newcomers’ wellbeing and integration since language affects access to employment, housing, education and health, as well as an understanding of citizenship and rights and the creation of social connections within their new community (Adkins, Sample, & Birman, 1999; Ager & Strang, 2004; Watkins, Razee, & Richters, 2012; Thondhlana & Madziva, 2017; Fontana, 2018; Chick & Hannagan-Lewis, 2019; Hawkins et al, 2021). Recent findings stress the importance of language development for adults not only for employment, social interaction, and access to accurate information, but also in relation to their sense of personal well-being, dignity, and autonomy (Ćatibušić, Gallagher & Karazic, 2019). Language classes can therefore play an important role in supporting adults and their families upon arrival in a new country; and community-based organisations (CBOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are increasingly filling the gap where government provision is lacking (Chick, 2017).

My research questions therefore explore 1) *how community-based English language programmes create a counterspace in a hostile national environment* and 2) *how participatory curricular and pedagogical choices foster both learning and wellbeing for adult refugees and asylum seekers* as they try to not only survive but thrive in a new country. This work will contribute to the fields of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and refugee education, shedding new light on how classroom decisions around curricula and pedagogy can foster empowerment and belonging, which is necessary as education does not exist in a vacuum from the wider political contexts in which they take place (Warriner, 2007; Painter-Farrel, 2023).

My background is as an educator in both language and pedagogy, so I returned to my native country of England to explore such questions in 2022. My community-engaged ethnographic

research spends one academic year in a refugee community centre in the North of England which is refugee-led and staffed by mostly immigrant employees. Like many community centres, it hosts a range of activities for adults and children from homework club to women's wellbeing sessions. Brazilian community educator, Paulo Freire (1998) claimed: "There is no such thing as teaching without research and research without teaching" (p.35). In the same vein, my project takes a teacher-as-researcher-and-activist approach to produce a qualitative case study of community-based language learning whilst being immersed in the educational activities of the organisation. Inspired by Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis' (1997) call to move away from documenting failure, I instead consider "what is good here?", in the hope that the lessons provided can be of use to refugee-serving organisations and other institutions teaching migrants. Qualitative data was collected ethnographically as I was immersed in deep 'hanging out' (Geertz, 1998) at the organisation as a participant observation as I volunteered my time as a teacher for the Conversation Class, the Intermediate General English class, and a third content and language integrated learning (CLIL) class that I created for students interested in higher education.

British teacher-researcher Lawrence Stenhouse argued: "I am declaring teaching an art... All good art is an enquiry and an experiment. It is by virtue of being an artist that the teacher is a researcher" (in Rudduck & Hopkins, 1985). I co-designed two classes with the language learners according to their needs and interests, and it is this "teacher-as-researcher" process that I am capturing in my project. The Intermediate English class did not follow a syllabus as the centre did not have set resources. I therefore asked the students what topics, skills, and grammar they feel they have already mastered, and what they wanted to learn or practice. The research class started in January 2023 to address the issue that only 6% of refugees are in HE compared with 40% of non-refugees (UNHCR, 2023a), and research has shown that targeted support is necessary to increase this number (Gately, 2015). In this class, I teach academic vocabulary and research skills and by the end of the course we conducted a small-scale research project together, with myself as the facilitator. This CLIL course modelled research skills in class as both a teaching method and a data collection method ("learning by doing"). Throughout the course, I built in opportunities for students to make choices about their learning and our research, with different methods used and activities scaffolded according to the language skills students already have. For example, both working with methods that don't rely on language - such as using maps or photos - and methods that develop language skills such as interviews or focus group discussions; all the while supporting translanguaging<sup>1</sup> amongst students who speak the same language. These methods therefore serve as both pedagogical tools and data collection methods.

As my initial summer pilot research turned into a year's worth of ethnographic doctoral research, I am yet to collate and disseminate findings. I plan to write a report for the NGO I have been working with, and I will present a poster at a national language conference in June called "We are the Coursebook: Possibilities in Participatory ESOL".

The ability to travel back to my home country, the UK, for research was important for me both personally and professionally, and ensured that I could start my doctoral data collection. I am therefore grateful to IRIS for supporting my work, as well as for their flexibility in my travel timings as the pandemic delayed my initial trip in 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> The term translanguaging originates from the Welsh language revival in 1980s Britain though is now widely used in bilingual or English learning contexts. It involves using all of the learners' linguistic repertoire to communicate in terms of both making sense of and interacting with the world.