

LET REFUGEES LEARN

Challenges and opportunities to improve language provision to refugees in England



AMAL

Amal is 23 and from Syria.

“Almost all of life is restricted because we don't speak English at all. It is not a good situation.”

BEATRIZ

Beatriz is 19 and from Syria.

“Studying accounting has helped me learn a lot of English. There are a lot of words in maths in English I don't know.”

MARCUS

Marcus is 19 and from Sudan.

“I can read without any problem. My spelling is not good. It's fifty-fifty. I have writing problems. My writing skills are not good and I can't say very much.”

MICHAEL

Michael is from a village in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

“At the Job Centre, they sometimes didn't call the interpreter.... Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. When they don't, you don't understand. They say, 'OK, that's not a problem'. But I just didn't know what was happening. I didn't know it - if it was important or not.”

RICHARD

Richard is 41, from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

“There's too many barriers because of English. I'm not able to read and understand requirements. My English is very low. It's the biggest barrier.”

Executive summary**Introduction**

Refugees are people, like you and me. They have been forced to flee their homes by war or persecution, often leaving behind virtually all their worldly possessions. Once they have been recognised as refugees here in the UK, they have a chance to rebuild their lives in safety.

But new challenges very rapidly arise. This report is concerned with one such challenge – learning English.

Refugees in the UK have great determination and desire to learn English. They know that it is essential to making friends with their neighbours, to education, and above all to finding work. It is critical to their independence and to successful integration.

The primary way for refugees to access English language learning is through classes for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). This is a regulated programme made available through ESOL providers (usually Further Education colleges) and, in some instances, is fully financed by government.

However, in recent years funding cuts have resulted in shortages of provision, waiting lists, and other barriers to participation, particularly for women.

As a result, refugees in the UK are finding it harder to acquire vital language skills to put them on track to successful integration. This needs to change, fast, so that refugees can access the classes and support they need. This not only benefits the individual, but also benefits the wider society to which the individual can contribute.

For this report, Refugee Action has investigated refugees' experiences of learning the English language through ESOL. Our research explores

not only individuals' experiences with accessing courses, but also their backgrounds and aspirations. It provides a picture of what refugees have done, can do, and what they wish to do with their lives now that they live in the UK. This report focuses on provision in England. ESOL provision in the UK is a devolved issue – each UK nation operates and funds its own system.

So what's our government doing so far?

Government research shows that English skills are critical to integration in UK society, to social and academic development, and to meeting basic needs. Successive UK governments have repeatedly identified the social and economic benefits of being able to speak English as one of the key drivers behind the provision of ESOL. Politicians on all sides have highlighted the importance of this.

“We want a strong and unified country with opportunity for everybody. Opportunity isn't there if you're discriminated against or you can't speak English” – David Cameron, Prime Minister (January 2016)

“Everyone coming to live in Britain should speak English, or learn to speak English as a first step to integration” – Yvette Cooper, Shadow Home Secretary (April 2014)

Despite this, there have been year on year cuts to ESOL. Funding has gone from around £212m in 2008-09 to just £95m through the Skills Funding Agency (SFA); and a one-off extra £20m in 2016 for projects over the next few years. This means that ESOL funding has been cut by 55% since 2009.

In addition to this decline in funding, the prospects for high quality provision are reduced by the fact that England – unlike Scotland and Wales – does not have a strategy for ESOL, to set and measure progress against clear agreed objectives. Instead, while responsibility for ESOL provision in England is led by the SFA,



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provision is split across multiple government departments, each with their own objectives and priorities. This creates an unclear picture of what funding is available and how many students are accessing it.

The Prime Minister's announcement in January of £20m funding for English language teaching for Muslim women to help combat the threat of radicalisation demonstrated that where there's a perceived political need, leadership can be shown and funding sourced for ESOL. While this additional funding is welcome, it doesn't come close to matching ongoing cuts to ESOL provision.

Refugees' experiences

Refugees have a strong drive and desire to learn English as part of building their new life in Britain.

Refugees' level of education and experience of learning before arrival in the UK of course

varies greatly and this affects their experience of learning English and how much support they need here. There is no 'one size fits all' English course – for all learners and most especially refugees it must be tailored to the individual's need.

Our research shows that refugees are extremely resourceful. If they are not getting the provision they need they are finding ways to learn for themselves by, for example, using online resources. This is a great illustration of their appetite to learn, but it often doesn't lead to the best learning outcomes.

The reasons that refugees want to learn are multiple. Without exception those we interviewed want to work – our research includes a nurse, teachers, an aspiring mechanic and a sportsman, all of whom want to get back into work. It's clear that, with English, they are more likely to achieve this. Refugees also want to learn so that they can meet their

neighbours, go shopping, visit the doctor and volunteer their time to their community. Refugees with low levels of English often feel isolated.

"ESOL classes – it helps me to speak to neighbours. When the GP asks if I need an interpreter, now I say, 'No. I will try. I will speak to the doctor myself.' Going to ESOL is very important to me because the language we speak in this country is English"

– Michael

"I want to learn English because I want to continue studying in the UK. I want to study education [so that I can become] a primary school teacher here"

– Sarah

In theory, refugees in England are eligible for fully-funded provision on the condition that they have attained refugee status and meet the necessary income requirements. Once a learner is in paid work they have to co-fund the course. However, our research demonstrates that in reality refugees often face significant barriers to learning and accessing a course. These include:

- **Long waiting lists.** We spoke to refugees still on waiting lists who have been in the country for several months and others now in classes who experienced lengthy waits.

"I am waiting for the college to get me into Entry Level 1 for ESOL. I've been on the waiting list since I arrived. When I arrived I enrolled myself and I'm still waiting for the course"

– Marcus

- **Being assigned the wrong class.** Among the refugees we spoke to were some who were enrolled on classes lower than their assessed level because the more suitable class was full. They expressed frustration at not progressing their learning, and as a result some stopped attending their classes.

"Two weeks and there was nothing new to me. They did not teach me anything new. So I dropped the class. I asked them to transfer me but they said no. So I went to the Job Centre, told them of my situation, and [the representative] called three different colleges to enrol me into Level 1 but all were full. Job Centre advised me to learn online – he advised me to learn from the internet like I already do."

- **Gender barriers.** Women can be particularly affected – often it's the male member of the household who is enrolled at the Job Centre, women may not get the same support to join an ESOL course. Furthermore, many women with child care responsibilities find it very difficult to attend classes. Refugee Action case-workers try to find provision that includes a crèche but this often proves difficult.

"If I get a school now, I'm ready to start. Even if I'm asked to come with my baby, I'll come with my baby. I'd love a school close to where I live so I can get my daughter from school. I really want to go to school"

- **Distance.** Colleges with places available can be very far from refugees' homes, and in these cases travel time and costs are often prohibitive.

"It's hard because I have children...it's hard"

– Sarah



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● **Learning hours.** Some of the refugees we spoke to were unhappy to spend so little time in the classroom each week; cutting the hours of learning is a further direct consequence of funding cuts.

“Smaller classes would help. The most important is the time. Two hours in one week is nothing. There needs to be three or four classes per week” – Amal

Recommendations

Refugee Action believes that if the UK recognises an individual’s status as a refugee and grants them protection, we should provide that person with the tools to fully integrate into our society and successfully build a new life for themselves. Access to high quality English provision is absolutely essential to this.

Refugee Action calls on the government to act on five essential recommendations:

1. Create a fund to specifically support refugees learning English.

This should enable all refugees that require English lessons to have free, accessible ESOL for their first two years in England. It would be beneficial to the refugees involved, to their new neighbours and communities, and to the UK as a whole. Our analysis shows this would cost around £1600 per refugee per year. This would require the Government to invest £47m a year to achieve this goal.

The cost of two years’ ESOL for each refugee is effectively fully reimbursed to the taxpayer following an individual’s first eight months of employment at the national average wage; and within 15 months at the lower wage of £18,000 per year.

2. Publish an ESOL strategy for England.

This should set clear national targets for ESOL provision and attainment. It should also enshrine refugees’ access to ESOL as an entitlement and ensure that refugees do not wait to enrol in

ESOL and access the provision they require. It can draw on the experience of those already in place in Scotland and Wales.

3. Ensure full and equal access to ESOL, particularly for women.

Female refugees’ ability to attend English language classes can be improved by ensuring they have access to childcare facilities. In addition, in all cases where ESOL providers are located far from the homes of refugees and public transport is required to participate, funding should be made available to cover travel costs.

4. Provide asylum seekers with the right to access free English language learning.

This would support their integration from the point they initially make their asylum claim. Currently, people seeking asylum are not eligible for government-funded English language teaching until they have waited six months for a decision on their asylum application, at which time they can receive partial funding to cover 50% of the course.

This learning can be delivered through a combination of formal and informal means; however, given the very low levels of income which asylum seekers are required to live on, it is essential that this teaching is available without charge. Free English teaching from the point of claiming asylum is currently available in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

5. Facilitate a national framework for community-based language support.

Community support for refugees wishing to learn English can be a vital compliment to (but not a replacement for) formal, accredited ESOL learning for refugees. Government should bring together civil society, the private sector, local government and other key stakeholders, to develop a framework which enables all interested parties to pool resources and good practice to increase the provision and quality of community-based language support.

ABDUL

Abdul is 50 years old and from Sudan.

“I know some simple words to deal with people. Now I’m in the school and I try to make sentences correctly. I really enjoy learning in order to communicate with people around me.”

JANE

Jane is 29 and from Rwanda.

“If I get a school now, I’m ready to start. Even if I’m asked to come with my baby, I’ll come with my baby. I’d love a school close to where I live so I can get my daughter from school.”

MO

Mo is 29 and from Syria.

“I want to study at university. I want to talk to people. I don’t want people to think I’m different from them. It’s for life here. I need the English to communicate with people.”

PAULINE

Pauline is 22, from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

“One thing I’ve realised, when you can’t talk to people, it’s really very hard. They smile but can’t talk to you and you can’t talk to them.”

SARAH

Sarah is 26 and from Syria.

“I told [the Job Centre] I wanted to learn English and was promised a college closer to me but it didn’t happen.”

This report depended on the refugees who participated in interviews and their willingness to discuss their experiences with learning English since they have lived in England. Additionally, the professionals, who work in various roles in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) course provision, are greatly appreciated for taking time to be interviewed. Refugee Action colleagues based in offices throughout England made time to provide insight into the issues investigated despite their heavy workloads. Thanks also to the experts on ESOL, representing Action for ESOL, the Learning and Work Institute, and Refugee Council, who reviewed the report.

To protect the anonymity of our case studies, Refugee Action have used representative images of people in this report.
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