English language training for refugees in London and the regions

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy).
This is one of a series of scoping studies commissioned by the Home Office to gain a rapid understanding of what was happening ‘on the ground’ in support of refugees and their integration. The aim of these studies was to inform future research and development in this area rather than to be comprehensive evaluations of policy or practice. They were conducted in spring 2001, just six months after the launch of the Home Office ‘Refugee Integration Strategy’ and only a year after Home Office dispersal policy came into operation. As a result, dispersal policies and practices had not had time to bed down fully and some of the issues highlighted in this study have since been addressed.

What follows is a summary of a preliminary study investigating the provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in selected parts of London and other locations to which the Home Office disperses asylum seekers.

Key points

- The main barrier for refugees wanting to access ESOL is the shortage of classes and long waiting lists across London and the regions.
- Recruitment and training of ESOL teachers is a priority, particularly in the regions where there is a real shortage of qualified ESOL teachers.
- Basic to higher levels of English are taught on most ESOL courses but there is a lack of English for professional or vocational development. Newcastle University is investigating fast-track programmes for refugee doctors.
- ESOL providers need to take age, gender and class into account. For example, women could be offered classes at more ‘child friendly’ times plus free or low-cost creche facilities.
- The importance of regular funding and an organisational infrastructure to develop facilities was emphasised by many of the smaller ESOL providers.
- Co-ordination between ESOL providers and Refugee Community organisations is crucial for sharing information and expertise, and for contacting some of the more ‘hard-to-reach’ communities.
- Differences between case study areas seemed to be rooted in specific settlement and immigration histories. This suggests that local strategies rather than general models may be more appropriate in meeting the new demands for ESOL.

Introduction

The Consultation Paper on the Integration of Recognised Refugees in the UK (Home Office, 1999) states that language is the key to integration and that ‘identification of the different language needs of individuals, groups or age ranges will help in planning responses to actual needs’. In a broader European perspective, the provision of adequate language training is regarded as one of the touchstones of effective integration policy (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2000). Full economic and social participation of refugees in the UK depends partly on familiarity with the English language. It is crucial therefore for the integration of refugees into local labour markets and communities in the UK that the provision of ESOL is adequate and appropriate.

This research is a first step in mapping ESOL provision in London and the regions with the aim of disseminating good practice and raising issues for further development.

Aims and methods

The main aims of this study were to:

- assess the availability and quality of ESOL in selected parts of London and areas to which asylum seekers are dispersed by the Home Office
• explore the views and experiences of providers and others involved in the provision of ESOL
• highlight existing good practice
• identify ways of improving provision based on the needs of refugees.

The methodology comprised:

• a preliminary literature review of English language provision in the UK using conventional library sources, including educational and training journals

• targeted field work in four London boroughs (Newham, Haringey, Tower Hamlets and Ealing), the East Midlands and (in less detail) the North East.

The four London boroughs were chosen because of the high concentrations of refugees and asylum seekers living there. The East Midlands and North East regions were chosen because they receive a large proportion of dispersed asylum seekers.

Interviews were carried out with 100 ESOL providers, including further education colleges, adult education colleges, training organisations, and voluntary and community groups. Others interviewed included members of regional consortia, representatives from refugee community organisations (RCOs) and local councillors.

Provision of ESOL

The main providers of ESOL nationally are:

• Further Education Colleges
• Adult Education Colleges
• Training organisations
• Voluntary and community groups.

Provision of ESOL in London

Newham

The FE and Adult Education sectors are the principal providers in Newham and the broad scope of outreach work is complemented by an extensive network of training, voluntary and community groups. The statutory provision through the Adult Education network is well developed and provides a point of access for refugee groups into mainstream provision. There is also evidence of co-ordinated training provision through the Newham Training Network – an umbrella organisation for local voluntary sector training. Although there is a strong case for community-based provision, many of the smaller ESOL providers face a number of funding and networking issues. Dialogue between statutory providers and refugee communities and the fuller social participation of refugees were seen as necessary to effective language acquisition.

Haringey

The College of North East London is the principal ESOL provider in Haringey. It co-ordinates with the ESOL network project, which provides support and training for ESOL tutors. The network of providers consists of about 30 organisations of varying sizes, composition and scope. In general, the ESOL network project provides a focal point for the sharing of good practice. Some refugee groups face problems accessing mainstream provision as a result of poor literacy in their own language. The nature of funding regimes and the targets and outcomes expected by funders pose significant difficulties for smaller providers, who lack infrastructure and networking capacity.
Tower Hamlets

Tower Hamlets College is the largest provider of ESOL in this area and operates an outreach system through the ESOL Community Forum. The majority of provision is at the beginners and intermediate level but Praxis – a well-established organisation for 50 refugee communities across London – fills a gap in provision at higher levels in Tower Hamlets. Praxis, through its own network of refugee groups, also provides entry points for refugees and asylum seekers to access ESOL provision. Women’s organisations, such as the London Black Women’s Health Action Group have been active in setting up women-only provision in order to counter the difficulties which these groups face in accessing mainstream provision.

Ealing

Ealing Tertiary College is the largest ESOL provider in the borough and has four sites. Despite the large refugee and asylum seeker population, there is relatively undeveloped ESOL provision from within the training and voluntary sectors. Southall is the site with the largest number of asylum seekers in the borough. There are over 2,000 students enrolled on ESOL courses. The main statutory and voluntary provision is also located in Southall.

ESOL provision in the East Midlands

Leicester City Council is the leading authority in the region and the largest cities in the consortium for Asylum Seeker Support are Leicester and Nottingham. Leicester, Nottingham and Derby have been the main areas of NASS dispersal to date. In Leicester, the two principal ESOL providers are Leicester College of Further Education and the Adult Education College. There do not appear to be any independent ESOL providers. One factor explaining the concentration of provision may be that the English Language Service at Leicester College (established in the 1970s) has adopted a proactive stance towards ESOL provision. It has developed outreach work and established links with national organisations like the Refugee Education and Training Advisory Service. Leicester College has recently appointed an asylum seeker co-ordinator for ESOL to raise the profile of asylum seekers across the college.

In Nottingham, the main ESOL providers include the Peoples College of Tertiary Education, Nottingham Community College, South Nottingham College, New College Nottingham, and Broxtowe College. There is no evidence of significant independent ESOL provision apart from some franchised arrangements and partnerships with the major colleges. Current issues of concern are:

- waiting lists
- teacher recruitment
- the sustainability of projects in a rapidly changing environment.

ESOL provision in the North East

The Genesis 2000 Project has launched a number of pilot schemes including a recent initiative to ‘research and establish the current provision of English language provision within the region’ at four levels – local authority, community, vocational and further and higher education. Genesis 2000 extends beyond an examination of ESOL provision to questions of course guidance, the role of employers and trainers and the careers service. At the time of fieldwork, the North East Consortium for Asylum Support Services was waiting for a decision on the continuation of funding for this project. Representatives from the region concluded that there was an urgent need for action research involving the refugee communities themselves in needs assessment, and the analysis and evaluation of appropriate ESOL provision.

Co-ordination

Co-ordination, of services, information and expertise, is crucial to an inclusive integration strategy. In London there is clear evidence of active co-ordination of ESOL, through networks and professional organisations such as the Greater London ESOL Network (GLEN) and the National Association for the Teaching of English and other Community Languages (NATECLA).
A key function of the ESOL networks is to encourage dialogue between statutory providers and refugee communities. The relationships that have been developed with voluntary organisations and some of the more established refugee groups are particularly important. As the Report of the Working Group on ESOL emphasises in relation to outreach work (DfEE, 2000): ‘this area of work is crucial in reaching those individuals and groups who are likely to resist more traditional provision’. However, it is important to note that a significant proportion of the smaller refugee organisations and training bodies may well be outside the main ESOL networks and face specific funding and networking problems.

In the East Midlands, Leicester is characterised by longstanding co-operation between the two major providers, Leicester College and Leicester Adult education college, notably in the post-16 education network. The East Midlands Consortium for Asylum Seekers Support is also closely involved.

In Nottingham, collaborative working between colleges providing ESOL is a relatively new phenomenon. Basic Educational Guidance (BEGIN) is a significant attempt to co-ordinate information and ESOL provision across the city. Although it has been in operation as a Basic Skills unit for over 20 years, it has only recently become an ESOL ‘specialist’ as a result of Home Office dispersal policy. Its central role is to work in partnership with local colleges to ensure the coherence of ESOL provision across the city and its activities include organising a central database of enrolments/waiting lists, sharing best practice between the partners and identifying ESOL contacts in each partner college. It also collects and disseminates data relating to asylum seekers to all of the partners. This model of centralised co-ordination and information sharing is important and may be relevant for other areas; particularly those involved in the reception of Home Office dispersed asylum seekers. BEGIN’s model of centralised co-ordination and information sharing

Co-ordination between ESOL providers and local authorities in the North East at the time of this research was relatively weak. Stakeholders felt that the fragmentation of providers, including the voluntary sector, local authorities and community and adult education, and the diversity of funding streams created barriers to the dissemination of information and good practice.

Funding

The importance of regular funding streams and an organisational infrastructure to develop facilities was emphasised by many of the smaller ESOL providers. In particular, there is a clear need for funding of dedicated administrative posts, responsible for networking with statutory providers and funding bodies.

ESOL providers in the regions noted the impacts of dispersal policy on funding arrangements. They claimed that the lack of information about the numbers and basic demographics of asylum seekers arriving in their locality affects their ability to plan or secure appropriate budgets. In addition, the high mobility of both asylum seeker and refugee groups can mean that student numbers change throughout the course. This makes conventional course evaluation problematic, in terms of retention and examination results. These factors need to be taken into consideration by funding bodies.

ESOL teachers

Recruitment and training are priority issues for almost all ESOL providers, but particularly in the regions, where there is a real shortage of qualified ESOL teachers. The diversity of language needs as a result of the arrival of asylum seekers from a range of countries has increased the need for ESOL teachers. Also, more bilingual teachers are required because a large proportion of those now requiring ESOL seem to have very little knowledge of English. With the appropriate training, bilingual teachers could be recruited from within the refugee communities.

Providers reported that ESOL teachers required training in the specific difficulties facing refugees. They also suggested that ESOL teachers needed additional support networks because they often act as personal advisors or confidants to refugees and asylum seekers.
Accessibility of ESOL

The main barrier for refugees wanting to access ESOL is the shortage of classes and long waiting lists across London and the regions. For example, waiting lists are currently running at over 1,000 for classes with the Newham Community Education and Youth Service.

Reports by the Further Education Unit (FEU, 1994) and DfEE (2000) noted that a lack of advice and guidance about ESOL was also preventing refugees from gaining access to courses, and, in particular the right types of courses.

The lack of literacy in their own language can be a problem for some refugees. As discussed above, this could be remedied in part by recruiting more bilingual ESOL teachers. Alternatively, ESOL classes could be better tailored to suit the needs of illiterates and semi-literates.

Conversely, the level of English on most ESOL courses is too low to provide any real help for refugees trying to gain entry to the UK labour market. In particular, there is a noticeable lack of English for professional or vocational development, such as short-term professional development packages. This can be de-motivating for refugees, who may feel that the classes offer little benefit, and it may ultimately have a negative impact on class retention. Newcastle University is currently investigating fast-track programmes for refugee doctors.

ESOL providers need to take account of the differences between and within refugee groups in terms of age, gender and class and how these might affect the capacity of an individual to access ESOL provision. For example, women may be prevented from attending classes because of childcare responsibilities. Offering classes at more ‘child friendly’ times or offering free or low-cost creche facilities would be beneficial.

Travel costs could be a problem for refugees on low incomes and living a significant distance from ESOL providers. Stakeholders felt that additional support should be given where necessary to outreach programmes which facilitate access to ESOL in the community, via partnership and franchising arrangements.

Both statutory providers and refugee representatives reported that ESOL classes alone are not enough. To ensure that refugees retain interest in classes and to ensure that they are able to practice their new language skills, the full participation of refugees in employment and cultural activities is a necessary condition.

Conclusions

Whilst examples of good practice and innovation are clearly evident in London and the regions, there are wider issues with availability and accessibility of ESOL. Providers experience problems with training and recruitment. Refugees face barriers to ESOL provision where classes do not take account of employment needs, levels of literacy, income, or childcare responsibilities.

This research suggests that co-ordination and dialogue between ESOL providers and RCOs is crucial for sharing information and expertise, and for contacting some of the more ‘hard-to-reach’ communities. Whilst there is evidence of active co-ordination of ESOL, particularly in London, through networks and professional organisations such as GLEN and NATECLA, stakeholders felt that this required further funding and support.

Some of the differences between the case study areas, in terms of scale and scope of ESOL provision seem to be rooted in specific settlement and immigration histories. This makes the issue of comparison and the dissemination of good practice between locations problematic. Local strategies rather than general models may be more appropriate in meeting the new demands for ESOL.
Learning Skills Council (LSC)

The LSC was set up in April 2001 (after this research was commissioned) and many co-ordination problems are now being addressed:

- the 47 local LSC offices are working closely with providers to improve the quality and quantity of provision
- many local offices have carried out research into local provision for refugees and asylum seekers
- local offices are able to fund initiatives when they identify unmet needs.

During 2002, there have been many initiatives relating to asylum seekers and refugees and the LSC plans to publish guidance for local offices.

Abbreviations

BEGIN Basic Educational Guidance
ESOL English for Speakers of Other Languages
GLEN Greater London ESOL Network
NASS National Asylum Support Service
NATECLA National Association for the Teaching of English and other Community Languages
RCOs Refugee Community Organisations

References


