



Seetec

**Female Asylum Seekers and Refugees' Experiences
of ESOL – Executive Summary**

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Background to the research:

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes are funded by the UK government and local authorities with the aim of providing language learning for people who are settling in the UK, whether that be migrants, asylum seekers or refugees. These classes predominantly focus on providing learners with the language and knowledge they will need in the UK. Whilst ESOL classes are available to both men and women, there has been some evidence to suggest that despite a higher number of men applying for asylum, there are many women who require English lessons and that face challenges to access suitable ESOL courses (Cooke, 2006; Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2018; Sidaway, 2020). This research was commissioned to Seetec's Practice Research Unit by Seetec Outsource to better understand how their ESOL provision can support women in local communities and to contribute to existing evidence that can be utilised to create greater equality in ESOL and reduce barriers to learning for women.

Rationale for this research

Research shows women learning ESOL are more likely to have low-level English and be impacted on a larger scale by some of the challenges that ESOL learners face, such as access barriers and childcare responsibilities (Department for Education, 2019; Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2016). Gaining a better understanding of their experiences is essential when it comes to offering effective and accessible ESOL provision. Equally important is identifying differences in the experiences of female learners from different ethnicities to ensure that any best practice is offered to all communities. By understanding the barriers faced by certain communities we allow for more refined provision to be developed, therefore widening access to ESOL classes for all women.

Aims and research questions:

The primary aim of this research project was to explore how female asylum seekers and refugees experience ESOL provision, and in particular, any challenges involved in doing so. A secondary aim was to explore how this ESOL provision impacted their family life, their children's language learning, and their personal future aspirations. The research questions were as follows:

1. How do female asylum seekers and refugees experience ESOL provision including accessing classes, attending, and completing the course?
2. What can be done to improve female asylum seeker and refugee learners' experience of ESOL provision?
3. Is ESOL provision experienced differently by female asylum seekers and refugees from different ethnic backgrounds? If so, how?
4. What are female asylum seekers and refugees' opinions on how ESOL impacts their family life and their children's language learning?

Methodology

This explorative research project gathered data through two methods. The first was an anonymous online questionnaire open to all learners who had attended an ESOL class in England to gather some quantifiable and generalisable data which was used comparatively to identify how men and women experience ESOL. The second method utilised four focus groups with women organised by ethnicity with the aim of identifying whether there were similarities or differences in experience. All participants were recruited via email, there were 106 respondents to the online questionnaire as well as 15 focus group participants from a range of ethnic groups. All participant documents were written with accessible language, evaluated by a Flesch reading ease score. All participants were informed that the research was independent, participation was voluntary and anonymous, and it would not affect their ESOL provision in any way.

Addressing the research questions:

RQ1 and 2: How do female asylum seekers and refugees experience ESOL provision and what can be done to improve their experiences?

ESOL learners' journeys start with their motivations to attend a course. Participants in this study cited knowledge of British society and integration into local communities as motivating factors but also highlighted the associated lack of choice and negative consequences of not learning English. Moreover, ESOL was a form of personal investment for learners who cited increased confidence as a strong motivating factor. When looking for a course, participants told us of an average waiting time of 6-months in addition to the mandated 6-month waiting time to become eligible for AEB funding, aligning with the Department for Education's (2019) report on access to ESOL. However, participants also described repeatedly experiencing lengthy waiting times when moving from one level to another, building up frustration.

Regarding barriers to accessing ESOL, participants stated that the barrier created by travel costs was mitigated by providers who subsidise travel for their ESOL learners. A noteworthy finding in this report was participants sharing that cost is asylum seekers and refugees biggest concern and therefore it should be explicitly stated that the course is free to the learner. Participants shared that one deciding factor on whether to attend a course is the timetable, with the duration of the course one of the participants' largest frustrations. Participants preferred shorter and more intense courses as they positively impact motivation throughout their learning journey. Moreover, participants cited the importance of having choice of timing with morning classes being popular for women with school-aged children due to childcare responsibilities.

Participants recognised childcare as a significant barrier to ESOL for women, preventing them from joining courses and also impacting their attendance due to school holidays, child sickness or other related responsibilities. Participants shared that they were not informed about their childcare options despite a majority of questionnaire respondents preferring formal childcare. Considering gender equality within access to ESOL, 83% of participants believed that there is equality in England, and some believed that there was more opportunity for women due to women-only classes. Contrastingly, some women recognised that men have more opportunities to learn English due to their increased contact with the language in their everyday lives, whilst female participants also stated that men have more time to focus on their learning compared to women who also have to focus on their households and children. Overall, participants stated that the biggest challenge to gender equality was difference in culture, with suggestions for improved government policy to encourage gender equality in learning for people settling in the UK.

Participants particularly valued the inclusion of colloquial language in the ESOL curriculum, cited as invaluable to community integration. Furthermore, cultural knowledge about living in the UK, including social norms and British values, were the aspects of the curriculum that learners enjoyed the most. To aid language acquisition, participants preferred learning language functionally which allows classroom language to easily be related to their everyday lives, suggesting that organising syllabi and schemes of work by language functions would be most beneficial for learners.

Participants highlighted progression after ESOL classes as one of their biggest challenges. Participants spoke of waiting times and lack of clarity when progressing to the next level of ESOL classes, whilst participants searching for a job stated a need to develop employability language and knowledge on how the UK system functions. Overall, ESOL learners spoke of needing well-rounded support after their ESOL classes to continue their education or find suitable work.

RQ3: Is ESOL provision experienced differently by female asylum seekers and refugees from different ethnic backgrounds? If so, how?

Participants from Asian backgrounds in this study cited that men have more opportunities to learn English than women due to increased contact with the language and due to cultural gender norms meaning that women have most of the household and childcare responsibilities. Alternatively, women from White backgrounds stated that there is equal opportunity for all.

For participants on additional government schemes for asylum seekers and refugees, there were differences in the experiences of Ukrainian and Afghan women. Ukrainians were motivated by a perceived need to learn English to be able to work and live in the UK mostly from a survival perspective. Afghan participants also cited ESOL as 'compulsory' but raised how they must 'honour' their learning, suggesting gratitude for learning opportunities, reinforced when they later discussed how education was banned for women in their country and that their confidence as women had grown since living in the UK. These experiences demonstrate different perspectives on education. Ukrainian participants also cited the additional support they had including community groups and sponsors as extremely valuable in their ESOL journey, they suggested that this support would be beneficial to others, recognising the improved experiences of this community of learners.

Participants in this study represented all ethnic groups that were identified by the UK Government for the 2021 Census, however, there was a very limited number of focus group participants from a Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African background which may be an indication of further barriers to accessing ESOL courses for this community and should be explored further.

RQ4: How does ESOL impact learners' family lives and their children's language learning?

Participants shared that encouragement from their children was a motivating factor in their language learning journey. Notable is participants experiences of their children being actively involved in their parents' learning by supporting with homework and discussing lessons, creating effective learning environments at home and positively impacting ESOL learners' family lives.

When discussing languages used at home, participants described various scenarios, some children preferred to speak English whilst others used their first languages. Despite their children's preferences, the majority of participants encouraged the use of their first languages at home to maintain their cultural heritage and aid their children's bilingual development. This was due to participants insistence that their children should not 'delete' or forget their languages. Participants in this study provided evidence of children who lost their first languages and therefore needed to use translation to communicate with their parents, demonstrating the potential detrimental impact on family life when parents are not able to communicate in English.

Conclusion

This research sits within the wider field of emergent research considering how foreign nationals experience ESOL education in England, exploring how these particular experiences are understood through a gendered lens. In addition, this research has also considered the implications for those from refugee and asylum seeker communities, highlighting the associated barriers to education that they may encounter, what they consider to be effective curriculum and the impact of ESOL on their personal, professional, and family lives.

Recommendations:

- **Equal support should be provided to all asylum seekers and refugees.** Government schemes, such as the Homes for Ukraine scheme, provide improved access to information, quicker access funding, and broader opportunities to speak English and integrate into local communities. This additional support should be available to all asylum seekers and refugees, as recommended by Ukrainian participants.
- **Implement policies that protect women's right to learn.** Women in this study recognised that there is equality for men and women in the UK, however they cited cultural differences as a barrier for some women who want to learn English. Government policies should encourage women's language learning and protect their rights to

attend ESOL classes, as recommended by Afghan participants. For these policies to be effective, participants suggested explicit parameters, for example, all women should be able to learn English for at least one hour per week.

- **ESOL provision should be accredited.** Participant's motivations for attending ESOL classes were varied, but many cited self-improvement and future work or study opportunities as driving factors. Certificates provide valuable evidence of achievements, positively impacting learners' motivation and progression.
- **Design class timetables with learners at the centre.** Frequent classes improve language acquisition and knowledge building while allowing learners to progress quickly, reducing asylum seekers and refugees' feelings of impatience. Moreover, providing a choice of class time reduces barriers to learning for workers and parents with childcare responsibilities.
- **ESOL curriculum should reflect the local environment.** Local accents and colloquial language were identified as integral to participants ability to effectively communicate outside of the classroom. This should be embedded alongside British values, traditions, and cultural norms.
- **Advertise ESOL classes as free to learners.** Asylum seekers and refugees cited cost as their biggest concern. Although ESOL courses are funded, prospective learners were not aware of whether they had to pay or not. Advertising the courses as free to the learners would reduce anxiety and increase engagement with ESOL providers. Moreover, travel costs should be subsidised by ESOL providers to minimise associated costs becoming a barrier to learning.
- **Provide learners with clear progression routes.** Automatically enrol learners on the next level of ESOL provision once they have completed a level. Improve the AEB contract exit process to ensure that learners are provided with progression opportunities at alternative AEB providers if their provider does not receive funding for the next academic year. Advise learners on their potential progression routes and give careers information, advice and guidance that demonstrates how they can achieve their goals.
- **Inform parents of childcare options and increase childcare provision for ESOL learners.** Informing parents of their childcare options allows them to make informed decisions which benefit their families. However, increasing information and access to childcare will increase the demand and therefore childcare provision in colleges or ESOL providers should be expanded to meet this need. Accessible childcare would be invaluable to learners who either do not attend due to childcare responsibilities, or who miss classes due to school holidays.

For a more detailed account of this research and the associated recommendations, please see the main report.

For further information on this research, please contact Holly Dono at holly.dono@seetec.ac.uk