Seetec

Female Asylum Seekers and Refugees' Experiences of ESOL

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The Research Team

This research was conducted by the Practice Research Unit, comprising of Holly Dono (research lead) with support from Jess Lawrence during the focus groups and from both Jess Lawrence and Dr Kerry Ellis-Devitt during early analysis and editing. The lead researcher can be contacted via email at holly.dono@seetec.co.uk

About the Practice Research Unit

The Practice Research Unit (PRU) is part of Seetec's vision to provide evidence-led operations and services. Through innovative research and robust evaluations, the PRU supports the wider organisation by examining how we deliver services, where we might need to develop our services, and what the important issues are affecting those who receive our services – all with the goal of improving participants' future outcomes and wellbeing. Our main areas of focus are justice, social care and education. The Unit also undertakes externally commissioned research, and is active in the research community, as part of our commitment to further knowledge in these sectors.

Acknowledgements

The Practice Research Unit would like to thank all participants for sharing their experiences with the research team and dedicating their valuable time to this project. Your contributions have facilitated a better understanding of ESOL provision in England, particularly the north of England, and how it is experienced by women from different backgrounds. Your participation in this research will hopefully inform the design and delivery of future ESOL provision, increasing access and equality and therefore improving outcomes for all women in our communities.

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Introduction

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. Often reflecting global politics, ESOL classes support displaced individuals from around the globe, over the last decade there has been an influx of 20,000 Syrian, 21,400 Afghan and 154,500 Ukrainian potential learners as the government introduced relocation and resettlement schemes due to international conflicts, this is in addition to those arriving and applying for asylum in the UK of which there were 74,751 in 2022 (Sturge, 2023). 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 study aims to explore the experiences of women in England when looking for an ESOL course, attending classes and the impact that learning has on their lives. In particular, this study will focus on the experiences of female asylum seekers and refugees, identifying any differences in how different ethnic groups experience ESOL provision. 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.

This report first details some of the existing evidence on how ESOL provision is experienced, and the potential challenges that people can encounter, it then describes the design of this study and how data was collected. Finally, the report presents the questionnaire and focus group findings, giving a brief conclusion and some recommendations for ESOL providers and decision makers in the field.

Literature Review

UK Government ESOL Policy and Funding

In the year ending March 2023, the United Kingdom granted 22,648 people asylum, protection or resettlement whilst simultaneously receiving 75,492 asylum applications – a 33% increase on the previous year (Home Office, 2023). Adult refugees and asylum seekers who need English language support are provided funded language learning up to Level 2 through English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, which focus on developing language skills for adults who live in the UK. The number of people accessing ESOL classes is steadily increasing (Department for Education, 2019) and the majority of ESOL providers are reporting growing waiting lists of more than 1,000 students; accredited to a lack of funding (Foster and Bolton, 2017).

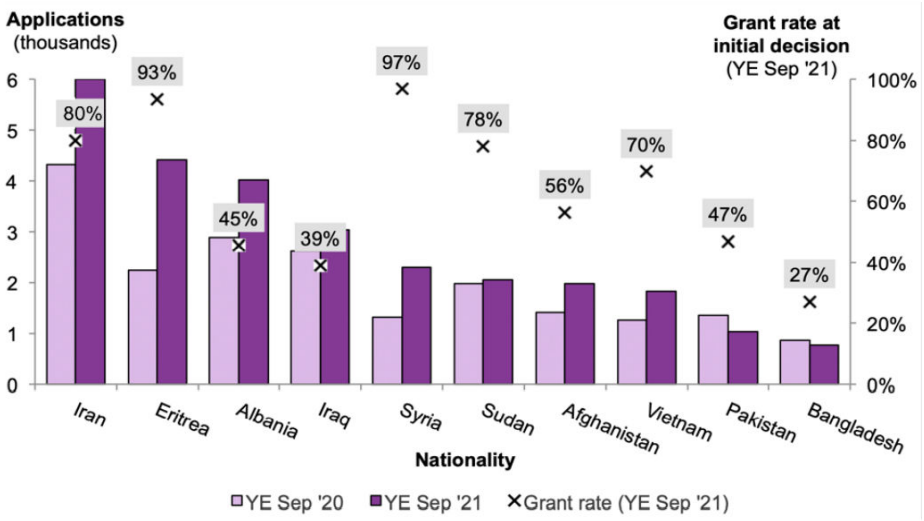
Funding for ESOL has changed over recent years; it is now funded through the Adult Education Budget (AEB), which is provided by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and sponsored by the Department for Education. Throughout those changes, AEB funding has undergone a number of cuts and therefore the amount of ESOL learners able to access provision has reduced (Department for Education, 2019). AEB-funded further education colleges and independent training providers deliver the ESOL courses and eligibility states that in order for learners to access these free classes, they must have been in the UK for at least six months and demonstrate that they are either unemployed or in receipt of qualifying means-based benefits (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2021).

The UK government encourages engagement with ESOL classes for a multitude of reasons, the first being for citizenship purposes where applicants need to demonstrate their understanding of the English language alongside an assessment of their knowledge of British society and culture (Han, Starkley and Green, 2010). Another huge motivator is that according to The Casey Review (2016), having good English language skills are a "strong enabler of integration" (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2016, p.8); integration, it is argued, allows British values to be demonstrated in communities, enabling everyone to participate in society and create greater cohesion between communities. Furthermore, the ESOL for Integration Fund Prospectus, aimed at increasing integration by providing additional specific ESOL funding, stated that "lack of English skills presents a clear barrier to social and economic mobility" (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2020, p.5). The UK government encourages ESOL programmes to aid refugees and asylum seekers integration into their local communities and improve their future prospects.

UK ESOL demographic

According to Home Office 2020–2021 statistics, only 22% of all individuals applying for asylum in the UK were female, compared to 78% males (Home Office, 2021). A third of these females were under 18 and therefore would be engaged in formal education, which further reduces the number of female asylum seekers and refugees who are eligible for ESOL courses. Despite these figures, Foster and Bolton (2017) recorded that 70% of ESOL courses in England had female learners in their cohorts (Sidaway, 2020), which shows that despite a lower number of female asylum applicants, many women are engaged in English learning and therefore have a need or desire to acquire better English language skills.

The most common nationalities applying for asylum are documented by the Home Office in the following table:



Source: Home Office (2021, Table 3)

The number of applications from these countries are increasing, with the exception of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Despite this, ESOL services for Pakistani and Bangladeshi learners are still vital, as findings from The Casey Review (2016) stated that people from these nationalities have the lowest English proficiency of all Black or Minority Ethnic groups (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2018).

This data discusses the number of people applying for asylum in the UK, yet not all people applying for asylum will be able to, or will need to, access ESOL provision. Some asylum seekers may already have a good command of the English language or may not have access to public funds - restricting them from attending ESOL classes. When discussing the demographics of ESOL, there is less data available, and the learner profile will vary dependent on the area where the course is held. One study showed that the demographic of learner backgrounds in London included not just asylum seekers but also refugees who have had their asylum application accepted, as well as EU nationals, spouses, economic migrants and people with family members or work permits. This breadth of demographic demonstrates that there is a much wider audience for ESOL than the numbers represented by asylum applications, which needs to be investigated (Cooke, 2006).

As stated, the ESOL population comprises of many asylum seekers and refugees who in turn have varied educational backgrounds. Mulvey's 2015 study on refugee integration in Scotland found that 42% of refugees have thirteen years or more formal education, higher than the general UK population with an equivalent of 12.6%. Many refugees arrive with existing qualifications, certificates and careers bringing their experience and skills yet one of the biggest barriers to their employment in the UK is their language ability (Kone, Z; Ruiz, I; Vargas-Silva, C, 2019; Mulvey, 2015) demonstrating the value of language learning and ESOL classes.

Challenges for ESOL learners

According to the latest Department for Education report on access to ESOL, there are a number of barriers that learners can potentially face. In their 2019 report 'English for Speakers of Other Languages: Access and Progression', the Department for Education discuss the lack of ESOL provision, determining it to be due to funding rules which create long waiting lists, as well as the lack of community based ESOL which would help some learners who cannot travel or have alternative commitments such as childcare (Department for Education, 2019).

Furthermore, the impact of the lack of provision is compounded by low uptake due to the travel costs of getting to the course. Travel can be expensive for eligible learners who have qualified for the funded courses as they either don't have the right to work, are unemployed or qualify for income support (Refugee Action, 2019). Where the ESOL courses are delivered remotely, there can still be challenges due to a lack of access to the internet (Learning and Work Institute, 2021).

Other barriers mentioned include low self-confidence, which can deter learners from enrolling on ESOL courses, especially in cases where they have low level English. The Learning and Work Institute (2017) found there to be much demand for both Pre-Entry and Entry Level ESOL, demonstrating that there are many learners with low-level English, which may be impacting their confidence to participate in ESOL. Moreover, Tshabangu-Soko and Caron (2011) found that participants who were pre-literate or non-literate preferred to be taught by a teacher who spoke their own language rather than always communicating in English, which can further deter potential learners. Past education experiences are also a factor that potentially creates challenges for learners who have no or very little previous education, especially for learners who are illiterate, as the classroom is a new and potentially intimidating environment for them.

In addition, there are challenges which have presented differently for men and women. In Tshabangu-Soko and Caron's 2011 study, the male learners reported that their working hours were not compatible with the standard ESOL class and that they instead need evening or weekend classes to be able to continue in their jobs. Men in Tshabangu-Soko and Caron's study also stated that good English language skills weren't necessary for them in their minimum wage positions.

How female learners are disproportionately affected.

Firstly, women requiring ESOL classes generally seem to need support for a longer period of time than men, which therefore influences their experiences. This is demonstrated in The Casey Review, which also found that women from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds are twice as likely as men to have poor English (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2016, p.14). These findings are strengthened by Choudry's 2022 thesis that explores the barriers experienced by Muslim women in education. The thesis found that due to their English language needs, women were economically inactive, isolated, and unable to engage with their local communities, therefore creating a lack of contact with local English speakers which means ESOL provision is needed for a prolonged period of time (Choudry, 2022).

In relation to access challenges, barriers relating to limited, or absence of past education disproportionately affect female learners as there are instances where women are not able to attend school in their countries (Department for Education, 2019). Female learners may also experience access barriers to classes due to religious or personal preferences such as potentially favouring single-sex classes or requiring prayer facilities (Collinson and Collinson, 2007). In addition to these challenges, for female learners, the greatest barrier to their learning identified in the literature was childcare, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section (National Centre for Social Research, 2005; Tshabangu-Soko and Caron, 2011).

Childcare

Throughout the literature, one of the most common themes when discussing access to ESOL provision were the disparities between male and female learner experiences. The main concern for female learners is balancing ESOL classes with responsibilities as carers for their families, especially for those with young children. Access to childcare or support for childcare costs for ESOL learners are "unclear and determined on a case-by-case basis" (Refugee Council and University of Birmingham, 2007, p.17). Due to this, there aren't clear procedures or services that learners can access, leaving them unable to attend ESOL classes, this has been reported across a range of ethnic groups (Tshabangu-Soko and Caron, 2011). This barrier could affect male learners, however, a report by the Refugee Council and University of Birmingham found that it mainly impacts female learners, as despite the fact that some learners were living with spouses "there did not seem to be much burden sharing" (2007, p.17) even if the male partner was unemployed. This finding was mirrored in a study on using ICT with ESOL learners where only female learners cited family reasons as the factor that restricted their choice (Webb, 2006).

Another barrier that migrant parents face is lack of access to information on the childcare available to them. Many studies have found that the most ethnically and linguistically isolated groups hadn't received any information about childcare, making it more difficult for them to navigate complex schooling and childcare systems (NatCen, 2005; Stahl, Schober and Spiess, 2017). Childcare concerns also extend to the form of childcare available to learners, such as whether they have formal or informal arrangements and the effects of those environments on their children.

Formal childcare is varied but mostly includes nursery and reception classes, childminders, creches or playgroups. It has been observed that some parents prefer formal arrangements for their children as they see a number of advantages, such as socialising with others, cultural proximity to the host country, academic success and learning English from native speakers (Obeng, 2007). Despite this, children with migrant parents are less likely to be enrolled in formal childcare (Zangger and Widmer, 2019) which may be due to access of information, affordability, or in the case of one study, a lack of childcare spaces in their local area (NatCen, 2005). Furthermore, evidence has shown some parents prefer not to send their children to formal childcare as it is not reflective of what they teach at home, children cannot use their native language with the adults caring for them, classes are not embedded with the same values or cultural beliefs as their parents, and in some cases, children are even returning home hungry as they aren't accustomed to the food on offer (NatCen, 2005; Obeng, 2007; Zangger and Widmer, 2019). NatCen has recommended that childcare providers need to incorporate diversity in their centres including racial, religious, and cultural differences.

By contrast, informal childcare that is instead provided by family, friends or neighbours, often becomes the preferred route. Studies of Latino parents in the United States of America (Delgado, 2009; Fram and Kim, 2008) has

suggested that ethnic groups prefer informal childcare as they can replicate the values, norms and discipline that is "consistent with parents' expectations and practices" (Fram and Kim, 2008, p.576). By allowing family or friends to care for their children, the care provided at home is replicated across the different settings and provides continuity. Informal arrangements are also sometimes preferred by families due to their cost-effectiveness; affordability is a major factor when choosing childcare, whether they are perceived or actual costs. In some ethnic groups, offering free childcare to the community is part of their culture and therefore is much more accessible to parents (Obeng, 2017).

As shown in the literature, there are some advantages to both forms of childcare, yet there seems to be differences in care preferences between different ethnic groups. For example, there is more demand for formal childcare from African communities than Latino communities (Delgado, 2009; Tshabangu-Soko and Caron, 2011).

Impact of barriers to learning

Concern that children will lose their first language

Sidaway's 2020 study, exploring the motivations of female ESOL learners, found that adult learners expressed worries about losing or forgetting their first language in the process of learning English, whilst others were also apprehensive that their children would become monolingual, solely communicating in English. Despite their concerns, these parents wanted to continue with their ESOL classes due to pressures from their children insisting that their parents speak English, as well as a desire to be able to support their children as they progress through the British education system. In the wider literature, there is a paucity of information regarding how learners feel their language skills impacts their family life or their children.

Integration into society

The Home Office's Indicators of Integration Framework (2019) stated the importance of language as a facilitator for integration. Language learning can aid multiple forms of integration, including both social and economic. ESOL courses can help with social integration by improving language skills and helping to provide information on the local area, as well as how learners can complete daily tasks such as shopping, travel and accessing services (Phillimore, 2010; Refugee Council and University of Birmingham, 2007). Furthermore, social integration is aided by language learning, as learners can communicate and make friends, expanding their understanding of cultural norms and preventing feelings of sadness or loneliness (Refugee Council and University of Birmingham, 2007). Economically, barriers to learning English can impact employment opportunities, with language skills identified as the main barrier to work for learners (Phillimore, 2010). Unemployment can cause further negative consequences as those without work don't have an income, which unfortunately has been shown to lead to stress-related health issues and domestic violence in some cases (Tshabangu-Soko and Caron, 2011).

Recommendations to minimise these barriers

As discussed throughout the literature, there are numerous barriers to learning that potential ESOL learners can face; some are widespread, and others disproportionately affect female learners more than male learners. The impact of those barriers has also been documented in a number of studies that highlight the implications for learners' lives as well as their integration into host country communities. In order to reduce the impact of the barriers and to increase access to ESOL, various recommendations have been made to help minimise barriers to learning.

There are three main areas for improvement that can be identified from the literature. The first is related to travel costs and affordability of attending ESOL classes that aren't close to the learner's home. The report 'Let Refugees Learn' (Refugee Action, 2019) suggests that funding should be made available to cover travel costs in an attempt to

remove this barrier. Secondly, for African refugees with low-level literacy, the language of instruction within the classroom was identified as a potential barrier due to communication issues. Therefore, having an instructor that speaks their language is important (Tshabangu-Soko and Caron, 2011). Thirdly, adequate provision of childcare facilities is the major recommendation throughout a number of studies. However, the definition of what adequate provision entails was not discussed, and therefore this suggestion may not be implemented effectively (Refugee Action, 2019).

Rationale for this research

For this project, several areas to explore have been identified. The first area is to identify and compare how female asylum seeker and refugee ESOL learners from different ethnicities experience ESOL provision. This study focuses on the female experience as it has been documented that women learning ESOL are more likely to have low-level English and are also impacted on a larger scale by some of the challenges that ESOL learners face (Department for Education, 2019; Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2016). Gaining a better understanding of their experiences will hopefully inform the creation of more effective and accessible ESOL provision. In addition, there has been some research into the experiences of individual groups but nothing that compares experiences across ethnic groups. Identifying whether there are differences in the experiences of female learners from different ethnicities will ensure that any best practice is offered to all communities appropriately. Furthermore, increased data on any barriers faced by certain groups of female learners would allow for more refined provision or interventions to be developed, therefore widening the access to ESOL classes for all women.

Moreover, when childcare was identified in the literature as the main barrier for female learners, it was advised that childcare should be provided. However, there is little literature on the childcare preferences of ESOL learners, so this should be explored further. By identifying the preferences of parents, the childcare provided can be tailored to ensure it is suitable for those it is intended to support.

Finally, regarding the impact of ESOL classes on family life, there were some comments in the literature on how female parents feel about their children's language learning journey and the languages used in their homes, but there isn't substantial data about how ESOL learners believe their learning affects their children or family life (Deglado, 2009; Obeng, 2007). This is an important area to research, as the impact on learners' family lives can be a strong deciding factor when choosing which language(s) to use in the home. Moreover, understanding the impact can also give an insight into the integration of the family into life in the UK and whether ESOL classes aid this integration, as suggested by the UK government in their Indicators of Integration Framework (Home Office, 2019).

Methodology

Research Aims and Questions

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of female asylum seeker and refugee learners who are participating/have participated in ESOL courses in the UK, to better understand any of the challenges that they may face. Taking into consideration this exploratory aim as well as the existing literature, the following research questions were identified:

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?

These research questions sought the experiences and opinions of participants. The project collected this information through mainly qualitative methodology and a mixed-methods design which utilised an online questionnaire and focus groups.

Sample

The target population for the online questionnaire was adult learners who had studied or were studying ESOL. The questionnaire was open to all adult learners in order to capture a general picture of how ESOL is experienced. Participants identified as male or female, which enabled comparisons to be drawn between the experiences of men and women However, when it came to the focus groups, the target population was adult female asylum seeker and refugee learners who were studying or had studied ESOL. This focus group population was chosen to gain a better understanding of the female experience in order to answer the research questions. The focus group sample included participants from four different ethnic groups in order to understand whether ethnicity has any impact on their experience of ESOL.

Recruitment

Questionnaire participants were recruited via email directly to learners and also to ESOL providers to disseminate to their learners. There was a total of 106 respondents, comprised of 73 female and 33 male participants. The focus group included 73 participants who had experienced Seetec provision and 33 who had attended ESOL classes with another provider.

Focus group participants were also recruited via email and by researchers presenting the project to learners in their ESOL classes. The sample size was 15; 14 participants were internal, and one was external. The sample size was 15, 5 of the participants had studied ESOL with Seetec exclusively whilst 9 participants had experiences of Seetec provision as well as ESOL classes at other providers, one participant had never studied at Seetec.

As this project aims to understand how learners from different ethnic backgrounds experience ESOL, the ethnicities of participants were recorded and are represented in **Table 1** and **Table 2** below.

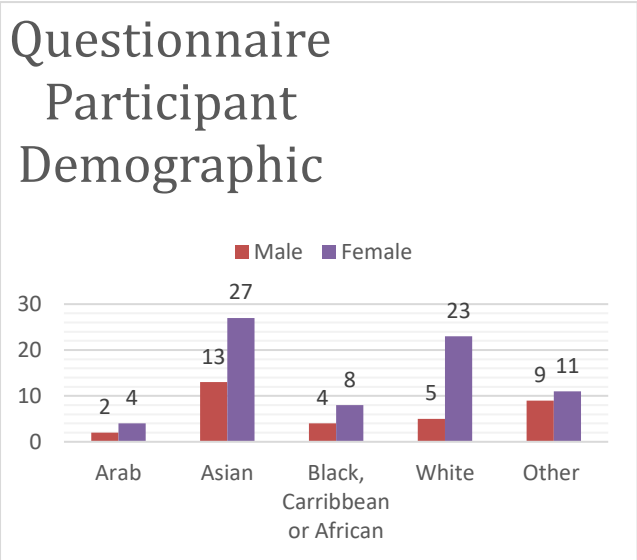


Table 1

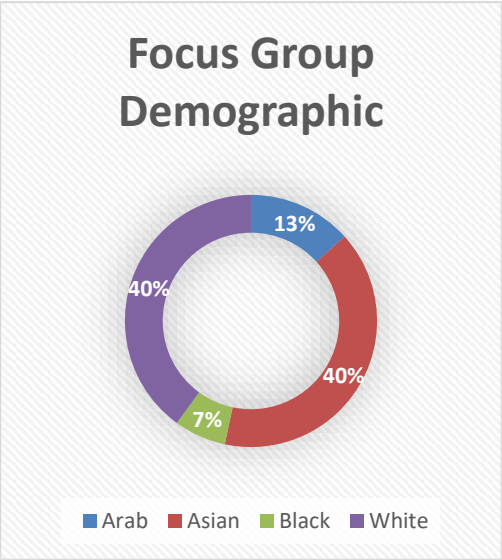


Table 2

Focus group participants will be referred to using a numbered code throughout this report; the corresponding ethnicities are demonstrated below in **Table 3**:

Participant Number	Ethnicity	Occupation	Studied ESOL at Seetec.	Studied ESOL at another provider.
P1	White	Business owner – e-commerce	Yes	Yes
P2	White	Recruitment manager	Yes	No
P3	Arab	N/A	Yes	No
P4	Black	Psychologist	Yes	No
P5	Arab	Scientist	Yes	Yes
P6	Arab	N/A	Yes	No
P7	Asian	Volunteer teacher	Yes	No
P8	White	Tax officer	Yes	Yes
P9	White	Carer	Yes	Yes
P10	White	Factory worker	No	Yes
P11	White	Insurance Agent	Yes	Yes
P12	Arab	Pharmacist	Yes	Yes
P13	Asian	Journalist	Yes	Yes
P14	Asian	Journalist	Yes	Yes
P15	Asian	Journalist	Yes	Yes

Table 3

Methods

As previously mentioned, mixed methods were utilised for this study and data collection occurred over two stages. Firstly, an anonymous online questionnaire was conducted which consisted of both closed and open-ended questions. This questionnaire was hosted on Microsoft Forms and was open to all learners who had attended ESOL classes. The purpose was to gather some quantifiable and generalisable data which could also be used comparatively to identify any similarities or differences between how men and women experience finding and attending ESOL classes. The full questionnaire is attached in **Appendix A**.

The second stage utilised focus groups with female asylum seeker and refugee participants to explore their experiences and opinions about being an ESOL learner. The focus groups followed a semi-structured topic guide

(**Appendix B**). The semi-structured approach afforded participants flexibility in guiding the discussion to share the information that they believed was relevant to the study. Overall, four focus groups were conducted, organised by ethnicity with the aim of identifying whether there were similarities or differences in the experiences of different ethnic groups.

Originally, the design was to have four focus groups with the corresponding ethnicities of: Asian or Asian British; Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African; Arab and White, aligning with the Government's 2021 Census ethnic groups which were advised by the Office for National Statistics (Gov UK, 2023). However, due to a very small participant number of only one woman from the Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African ethnic background, the groups were adjusted to consist of two focus groups with participants who identify as being White and two focus groups with participants who identify as being Asian, Arab, Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African. There were no focus group participants who identified as Mixed or multiple ethnic groups. The low participation numbers from the Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African community is also reflected in the questionnaire responses with only six participants who identified as being from this background. The low number of participants could be an indication of wider issues for learners from this background when accessing ESOL classes and further research is recommended to further understand this community's experience.

Although there is a greater number of ethnic backgrounds included in the latter two focus groups, there is also a greater number of participants in these focus groups, allowing for some balance within the collected data. The two focus groups with White participants were also further distinguished by one group of Ukrainian participants and another group with participants from several countries including Ukraine, this is pertinent to the current political conversations surrounding how Ukrainians have experienced ESOL and their life in the UK.

Data Collection

The online questionnaire was open from October 2022 to January 2023. It was hosted by Microsoft Forms; data was exported to Microsoft Excel for analysis. The average completion time was 17 minutes, 48 seconds. The questionnaire included questions on finding an ESOL class, length of time the participants waited for a class, difficulties faced, perceived differences between access for men and women and their children's language learning (see **Appendix A**).

Focus groups were conducted in January 2023 over two days. They took place face-to-face in Seetec offices Northern England and were facilitated by two researchers from the Practice Research Unit. The focus groups lasted an average of 51 minutes 19 seconds. The focus groups discussed a wide variety of topics which related to female learners' experiences of ESOL, including their experience of their ESOL class, accessing courses, the impact that ESOL had had on their lives, gender differences and their future aspirations (see **Appendix B**).

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was used to explore the questionnaire and focus group data and identify the key themes that came from participants' contributions. The process of thematic analysis started with familiarisation of the data, which was then coded. The process of identifying codes took place over several weeks and also involved co-analysis between two researchers for quality assurance. Codes were then organised into themes emerging from the data; these themes form the foundation of the discussion and findings of this study.

Ethics

This research followed the ethical guidelines set out in the Practice Research Unit's code of ethics (https://www.seetecoutsource.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Seetec-Outsource-Code-of-Ethics.pdf). Due to the Practice Research Unit's position within the wider Seetec Group, this research follows the ethical guidelines established regarding insider research. All participants who were receiving or had received Seetec services were reassured that

their participation was anonymous and would not impact the service they received. There was potential for role conflict as the lead researcher had previously worked as an ESOL Tutor at Seetec, , however, this was mitigated due to their current role being fully situated within the Practice Research Unit as a researcher, any remaining risk was minimised by the co-facilitation of focus groups and analysis. Both the PRU and Seetec are fully committed to ethical research and therefore the research findings are presented fairly and equitably without alteration.

The questionnaire included an opening description of the project and how the information would be used. Here it was stated that participation was voluntary, and responses would be anonymised by not requesting the participant's name and removing email addresses from data analysis. Moreover, the right to withdraw was stated and the researchers' contact details included, giving participants the tools to withdraw either from the project or to withdraw their personal details if they wished to do so. Following this, the first question of the questionnaire acted as the informed consent. By choosing 'yes', participants gave their consent and were able to begin the questionnaire, however, by choosing 'no', participants were taken to the end of the questionnaire.

Focus group participants were recruited via email, which included an information sheet. This provided details on the purpose of the project, the researchers undertaking the study and what taking part would involve. In addition, there was information on the right to withdraw from the project, that participation would be voluntary and that responses would be anonymised. Researchers' contact details were included to ensure participants were able to contact the researchers before, during or after data collection. As well as being provided in advance, the information sheet was discussed in person prior to data collection and time was allowed to ask any questions.

All focus group participants were also asked to provide their informed consent to participate in the study. The researcher read through the document, with the participants and time was given for any questions to be asked. Participants were reminded of confidentiality and their obligation not to share information disclosed by others during the focus group. As focus group participants dedicated a significant amount of their personal time to travel to and participate in the study, they all received a £20 VEX gift card as a 'thank you' plus the cost of their travel expenses.

Finally, a large ethical consideration for this project was working with ESOL learners who have English as an additional language. Following the guidelines in the Practice Research Unit's code of ethics, all questions and documents were written considerately and aimed to an appropriate level of English. This was confirmed by completing Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level tests; scores for each document used with participants can be found in **Table 4.** The average Flesch reading ease score for all research documents in this project is 67.2, which equates to 'Plain English'. The average Flesch-Kincaid grade level for the documents used is 6.7, which equates to the level of English easily understood by Grade 6 learners or 11–12-year-olds. This demonstrates the understandability of the documents and aligns with the requirement for focus group participants to have a minimum speaking and listening capability of Entry Level 3 (or B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)). This English language requirement was chosen to ensure that participants had the language ability to comprehend the information sheet, consent form and engage meaningfully in the group discussion.

DOCUMENT	FLESCH READING SCORE	FLESCH-KINCAID GRADE LEVEL
INFORMATION SHEET	62	8.4
CONSENT FORM	71	5.4
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE	71	6.2
QUESTIONNAIRE	64.9	6.8
AVERAGE	67.2	6.7

Table 4

Findings

Chapter 1: Understanding the motivating factors behind choosing to attend ESOL classes.

This chapter explores the key motivating factors for attending an ESOL class that emerged from this study. This chapter begins with a discussion on the concept of choice regarding learning English, moving on to explore work aspirations and further study opportunities as motivating factors. Finally, the chapter ends on the notion of self-improvement and how ESOL is an investment for female asylum seeker and refugee learners.

1.1 Choice and learning English in the UK

The majority of participants cited the fact that they are living in an English-speaking country as a motivating factor to attend an ESOL class. The constant effort required to understand and communicate was reflected in **P9**'s statement:

P9: '*You need communication for everyone, supermarkets, for everybody you need to talk with the people.'*

The use of the term 'need' exemplifies the importance of having a good command of English in order to avoid being ostracised from their local communities and therefore a lack of choice. For Ukrainian participants, residing in an English-speaking country was also a major driving factor behind their participation in ESOL classes, however, their experience was also shrouded in uncertainty:

P1: *We need to speak with English people because we live in an English country. But I don't know how P2 [feels], I don't know about my future. I can't come to Ukraine now, because we have a war, and I hope that after the war, I will come. But how much time is the war going to be in our country? I don't know, and I understand that next year, if I don't go to my country, I will live in the UK and I will find a job for me. I need English. I need to speak, write, and read in English better.*

Unfortunately, as P1 highlights, Ukrainian refugees are currently unable to return to their countries and do not know how long this situation will continue for. This demonstration of a lack of autonomy or control over their future, further reinforces the notion that participants felt as though they did not have a choice over whether to learn English.

Afghan participants spoke about their perceived obligation to learn English from a slightly different angle. P14 discusses their experience of learning English in Afghanistan and in the UK:

P14: *One thing is in Afghanistan when we studied English there was no use for it, just we studied, and we didn't use it in any sources or any places. So that is like, if we want to study something we should be honoured. If we don't be, we will forget it… So, when we come here, we need to speak English, so it is compulsory for us, so that is why we start from the basics.*

P14 infers a level of frustration that they had to start again from the beginning, insinuating time lost which could potentially be demotivating. Moreover, the use of the word 'honoured' was very interesting and could suggest a feeling of gratitude to learn and use English. This idea was supported by participants' later discussion on the challenges they were facing to obtain their qualification certificates from Afghanistan due to imposed restrictions on women's learning.

Aligning the contributions of all participants, English is seen as 'compulsory' which reinforces the fact that participants believe that they don't have a choice, they need to attend ESOL classes, and they feel as though they could experience negative consequences if they don't acquire the language.

1.2 Working and studying in the UK

Language barriers can have detrimental effects when looking for work (Kone, Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, 2019) and therefore many participants described their wish to improve their language skills to subsequently find work:

P9: *The best point I think is you get better jobs; the best job is different. My mum said all work is good but always you find the good of good, my mum says, I think always it is good. In my case I have two boys, I don't want to be working all day, I want to be together.*

P15: *English is the first language in the UK, and we can improve ourselves here, when we might improve our English, we can take good jobs and start university and we can take it easy.*

P9's use of the phrase 'better jobs' emphasises the focus on quality of work accessible to participants.

In addition to the comments on accessing good quality work, P13 participant referred to her career and wish to go to university:

P13: *I start English because I want to start my career here, I don't want to be at home on other things, so I want to study in college and start my university after that and get a job. So, you have to learn English and everywhere you go outside and you talk with somebody and you go for shopping. So, for everything […] you need English so it is very important.*

Noteworthy here is the phrase 'I don't want to be at home on other things', this suggests that P13 believes that if she doesn't follow her desired career, she will have to stay at home which is an undesired outcome for her.

Participants referenced choosing ESOL classes rather than other routes of learning English due to the opportunity to learn real-life language and to communicate with native speakers. Another frequent response was the opportunity to obtain a certificate at the end of their learning journey:

P3: *To learn English and to take a certificate… Some jobs need that, or some universities, yes. If I choose to continue with my study at university, I need a certificate. I have a language, I'm good in English. How can I confirm that? I have paper.*

P3 emphasises certificates as evidence of language ability. Without this confirmation, she thinks that she could face challenges when applying for some jobs and universities.

1.3 Self-improvement and confidence

Another motivating factor was that participants saw their ESOL classes as a personal investment, this was demonstrated in P7's contributions:

P7: *Yes, to learn English. Yes, to improve ourselves and to get a job... Even if I go home, I will be a teacher for English. That will be much better. I have more experience if I study here… I get a certificate, and I studied English in England. Yes, everyone wants you. Private schools, public schools. "Wow, you have good English." It's easier to get a job.*

In these statements, it is clear that learning English is seen as an invaluable international skill that will open future opportunities. This is an important motivating factor as asylum seekers are waiting for decisions on their asylum applications; if their asylum is refused, they will not have access to public funds nor the right to work and will be asked to leave the country. P7's comments have demonstrated that asylum seekers and refugees are motivated to attend ESOL classes despite their uncertain status, due to the transferable skills they can gain.

On the theme of self-improvement, participants also discussed their confidence:

P8: *The first time I was afraid to speak with the British people and I needed some confidence in speaking so I decided to learn English, ESOL course. It is my wish and maybe for a future job it will be better.*

Lack of confidence could be a combination of factors including low-level language ability but also societal factors such as self-esteem. Building confidence, and therefore being able to communicate with British people, was a strong motivating factor to the participants.

Chapter 2: How female asylum seekers and refugees experience looking for a suitable ESOL class.

This chapter details female asylum seekers and refugees' routes to accessing ESOL classes including methods of finding an ESOL class; advice, and support; the challenges of ESOL wait times; and ways access to ESOL could be improved. This chapter will also highlight gender differences in accessing ESOL classes.

2.1 Looking for an ESOL class

This section will explore methods used by women to search for classes, any support they have received, and whether this support was effective. Moreover, it will discuss the average amount of time taken for participants to find and attend a class.

2.1.1 Searching for a class

Participants discussed different methods they had used to find local provision. The most common responses included speaking to the Job Centre, receiving advice from friends and family, and searching online:

P11: *First was the Job Centre but then the internet and there are many possibilities there probably to find some classes. It is not easy to find, I think, free classes and you don't have to pay for that. You can ask your friends.*

As mentioned here, the phrase 'it is not easy to find, I think, free classes' could be a reference to the abundance of information that is available online, as well as the common misconceptions between different forms of English language teaching which were discussed in the literature review (Department for Education, 2019; Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2021). The difference between funded and non-funded provision may not be clear to potential learners, as suggested by P11, and therefore could make their online searches more complicated.

Whilst some female asylum seekers and refugees search independently for English classes, participants cited support from professional services such as the Job Centre or Local Authorities as extremely valuable in enabling others to access ESOL classes:

P6: *Yes. Before joining the ESOL classes, I watched videos for English learning. Online learning and some apps. So, basically, I'm living in hostels. So, my support worker said to me that this [training provider] source of learning English, classes start on 1st December. So, I said, "Yes, I'm happy to join this." So, she filled in a form, and I take it.*

P6 had a clear commitment and desire to learn English, as demonstrated by her self-study activities mentioned, yet she did not access any ESOL classes until her support worker was able to suggest a course and help her to complete the forms required to join. The delay in accessing an ESOL class may have been due to a lack of information, but she may have also been influenced by low confidence or other societal factors. This was succinctly communicated by P9's experience:

P9: *When I came here, I think I was lucky because I knew [M]. [M] is the manager in a foundation, it is a foundation in [x location]. The first person I knew in [location] when I was living there was [M]. [M] told me that they have an English class, ESOL class, the grade is at different levels, it depends on your level to the class. They helped me to find a college, find a school for my children, I think the foundation is a good place for people to come here in this country that nobody knows about… Incredibly. They gave me not only a school, they gave me sometimes… The problem is you miss the family or whatever, sometimes I feel sad or frustrated or happy with my boys. They come and help, no worries, everything will be right. This is good for us, you feel that somebody is with you, I think it is very nice.*

P9 describes the benefits of wellbeing support. Noteworthy is the phrase 'you feel that somebody is with you', many female asylum seekers and refugees have arrived in the UK alone after fleeing war or persecution and potentially leaving their families behind. Without any social agency, navigating life in the UK can be extremely complicated, as demonstrated by these women's experiences.

2.1.2 Support

In recent years, the UK government has organised and implemented resettlement schemes for refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine. This section discusses what support was included in these schemes and the impact on the experiences of women involved.

The Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) opened in January 2022 with a commitment to resettle up to 20,000 people. Alongside this scheme, the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy was implemented from the 1st of April 2021. Afghans who fell under the latter policy were fast-tracked and therefore those refugees had a unique experience, some of these Afghan women discussed their experiences of looking for an ESOL class:

P15: *For me it is easy because when I came to hotels and the council introduced this course for us, all of the people, to start this course for us. Easy.*

Highlighted is the use of the word 'easy', which is in contrast to the experiences of female asylum seekers and refugees who did not fall under this policy. However, this support was not maintained over time:

P14: *The worker [job centre advisor] should tell us the system of education and what you should do, but in here no one will tell us, like we search a lot. At some points we waste some of our time as well, like now I get the wrong things. Honestly, I think this is the best thing for every refugee, asylum seeker whoever come to UK there should be a main system, what do you want, for everything, I think it is the best thing.*

As P14 describes, when this population completed their ESOL classes they faced some difficulties navigating where to go next in the wider English education system or in the local job market. When describing information, advice and guidance from local authorities and services, particularly the job centre, the phrase 'here no one will tell us' suggests frustration, challenges, and a feeling that valuable information is being withheld. She also discusses that she had wasted some of her time, suggesting a sense of urgency to progress and this is possibly why she states that this information is important for all refugees.

For Ukrainian refugees, there are three schemes in place; the Ukraine Family Scheme; the Homes for Ukraine scheme where eligible people in the UK act as a sponsor for a Ukrainian refugee for a minimum of six months, after which they can apply for the third scheme - the Ukraine Extension Scheme. Refugees on the Homes for Ukraine scheme described their experiences of looking for an ESOL class:

P8: *I received information about ESOL courses from the council, the city council, the first time I got support from [X] city council, and they sent me information with a big list of courses.*

P8 cited support from the local city council; this support is listed online for all asylum seekers and refugees to access, however only Ukrainian participants referenced it as a resource they had used. This is one consequence of the additional support provided for Ukrainian refugees when arriving in the UK, particularly online via Telegram groups used to share information. These online communities provide connections between Ukrainians living in the UK, meaning that information, advice, and guidance can be easily shared between the community and were mentioned by Ukrainian participants across multiple focus groups in different cities:

P1: *In Telegram group, we have Ukrainian in [X city], Ukrainian in England. And if I ask them, someone to say to me that, "We have an ESOL course, you need to go".*

Ukrainian participants recognised the benefits of this and when asked how we can help other women to access ESOL classes, they suggested replicating this support:

P1: *I think to put information [online] for specialty topic, Ukrainian in [X city] or Arabic lady in [X city]. I think.*

In addition to online groups, P1 highlighted the support provided by her Homes for Ukraine scheme sponsor [member of the British public who has volunteered a room(s) in their house to Ukrainian refugee(s) and supported by the British government] who had found an ESOL class for her to attend when she arrived in the UK:

P1: *When I arrived in the UK, I had an ESOL class in [X] location. My sponsor found this class for me, but this class was a very long time, because they learned English two times per week, and one level, it's nine months. It's very long. When I knew about it, I found this class. I Googled it.*

This demonstrates the benefits of having a UK sponsor who can provide the information, advice and guidance needed to navigate UK life. Overall, participants on government schemes describe more positive experiences and quicker access to ESOL classes.

2.1.3 Waiting times

In England, all asylum seekers must wait 6 months from the date of their asylum application to become eligible for AEB funded provision, this exaggerates waiting times which were up to a further six months for 78% of participants who needed time to locate and register for a course before starting their studies. Participants waiting over six months to find a course may have experienced some additional challenges or barriers to finding information on where they can study ESOL. 21% of females and 24% of males had this experience of waiting longer than six months, demonstrating that in this regard there isn't much disparity between their experiences.

Throughout the focus groups, when asked how long it took for participants to find a suitable ESOL class for them, responses varied from almost instantaneous upon arriving in the UK to waiting almost ten years. P8 described her experience:

P8: *I came to the UK in May, and I got universal credit and all the time I asked the same to my coach about ESOL courses, maybe about two months, and I heard that there were no places, all the classes are full. I waited and one day I received an invitation for this short course, and I was very happy to attend it.*

Participants placed on waiting lists discussed a period of uncertainty which could potentially be demoralising for learners. In addition, participants reported experiencing delays between courses, when moving from one level to the next.

2.2 Influencing factors

As discussed in section 2.1, many female asylum seekers and refugees found it particularly difficult to find a suitable course that they were able to attend. This section will further investigate some of the factors that influence women's experiences of finding an appropriate ESOL class, including the associated timetable, location, cost, and potential impact of childcare responsibilities.

2.2.1 Class timetable

The flexibility of the class timetable was cited as a hugely positive influencing factor for participants in deciding to participate in an ESOL class or not, in particular, the frequency of classes:

P13: *The best thing was the time because it was four days a week and it was very useful. Other classes was just one day in a week, like now we go… just for one and a half hours in a week, so it is nothing, when you count it for one month you go for just five hours. So, it is not useful, even after one week of you going you forget what you studied last week. So, the best thing was the timing that I did like and also the hours so you can learn every day, we can learn our grammar and conversation, it was very useful.*

P5: *Yes. When I go home, I forget everything. But here, no, I am very happy. Yes, it's much better to me. It's for a full week. Yes, it's okay.*

Participants prefer studying English frequently to build knowledge on previous lessons and therefore experienced increased language acquisition.

This positive aspect was in notable contrast to other providers, where participants discussed the amount of time, and the problems experienced on different ESOL courses. As P12 explains:

P12: *I thought the duration of level was very long, maybe abbreviation. When I was with [provider] Level 1 [it's] in four months almost, in college it is one year, one year is very long. Maybe I can study Level 1 and Level 2 in one year.*

P14: *In college in a week, you only have one day, or one half-hour. If they make it two days a week so it becomes six months, if it brings three days a week it becomes three months. The duration is a waste of time.*

For some women, attending classes once per week was not seen as something worthwhile, and this was juxtaposed with their current provision which saw many more benefits for participants:

P5: *No, for me, I waited a long time. Before I came here to [provider], I waited a long time. It was total maybe two years. Because I search up all the places, I can't complete so fast… At another college, it's just one day per week to study. Just one day. But here now it's good for four days.*

P5's experience really highlights the importance of time taken to progress through the course and how this can have a large influence over whether participants decide to attend classes or not.

The class timetable was also referenced when discussing the timings of lessons. Many participants discussed the need for some flexibility in choice:

P3: *Yes, just we need choice of the time. Yes, to be free if you want morning or afternoon, so it'll be better. Yes, I think the time.*

P4: *But morning is our school [children's school hours]. So, you have to be luckier to get the morning hours.*

P4 highlights the popularity of morning classes for participants with children. By offering classes at different times, participants referenced some freedom and choice which positively contrasts with the suggested feeling of obligation and frustration previously indicated by participants.

Contrastingly, the effects of not having any choice over their class times is demonstrated by P4's experience:

P4: *But I was working in a restaurant and the timing of the classes and the timing in the restaurant was the same. My boss, she didn't facilitate me to give me the hours to come to the classes. So, I prefer to leave the job and first of all concentrate on the ESOL classes, finish, and then I'm looking for another job.*

As demonstrated by participants reactions to their current provision, ESOL class timetables need to provide learners with choice to facilitate their attendance alongside their other obligations. Furthermore, the duration of the course was extremely important for learners' motivation to progress along their learning journey.

2.2.2 Class location

On the topic of the location of the class, participants were really positive about the central location offered by their current provider:

P7: *It's easier to get in that place. It's nice place. It's close to the buses. Just only 10 minutes from my home to [train station] and 10 minutes walking to get to that place.*

P8: *This ESOL course was in the city centre, so it was no problem to travel to this place.*

Both women suggested that easy access to public transport made their experiences of travelling to the city centre positive. For other women, the city centre was not the best location:

P1: *For me, it's difficult to spend my time for wait because I need one hour [to travel], and my daughter goes to school until three o'clock. I needed time for me job too because I work online. And when I go to the tram station, when I wait for the tram, I go to the English course. It's my time, and if the ESOL class was near me, it would be more comfortable for me, really.*

P1 suggested that having an ESOL class available in her local community would be more 'comfortable' and would perhaps be easier to access whilst also caring for her daughter and working. Again, when discussing the location of ESOL classes, the theme seems to be the importance of choice.

2.2.3 Costs

ESOL courses are funded by the government through the Adult Education Budget (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2021), nevertheless, P9 discusses how a lack of information may lead women to question whether they will need to pay for their course:

P9: *I think the people who join the class, maybe not but I need pay or not, with my document or not. This is the question in your mind. It is the same when you are in GP in my country, usually you pay and usually not that is dependent on the case. It is the same in English. Maybe explain the information, I am going with her, in the social media or places like community centres, but the people are free. In my opinion when the people are asylum seekers or refugees the first question is, "Is it free or do I have to pay for this?" I think this explains the politics.*

Noteworthy here is P9's perspective that cost is the first concern for asylum seekers and refugees, some may not attend ESOL classes unless it is explicitly stated that they are free.

Participants also discussed associated costs, namely travel:

P4: *I can share that I'm not working now, but I'm still looking for work. This course, they help us to pay the bus ticket, and this helped me a lot. Because my bus ticket to come here and to go home, is £5.00… and they give me the money back. So, this is very, very nice.*

P7: *Because it's too hard when you spend… It's £4.00 a day, four days, sixteen… It's too hard, especially for the people who are not working. Yes, but they make it easier for us. It's great.*

P4 and P7's comments demonstrate that travel costs could become a barrier for participants. Women in this focus group discussed the importance of having their travel paid by their current provider, demonstrating that without this intervention they would have struggled to attend.

2.2.4 Childcare

Finally, a particularly important influencing factor in accessing ESOL was around childcare commitments and the challenges this brought:

P7: *Yes, every year, I'm trying to go, but sometimes the reason- The place is too far. I do not get a place. It's just, I'm seeing the waiting list. Sometimes my kids stay at home, or I've got a little child. But this year, all my kids… in the school, and I get a place in [provider] and I'm really, really happy.*

P7's statement suggests that having children who were not school-aged prevented her from being able to attend ESOL classes, delaying her learning journey. However, for other women, having school-aged children still caused some challenges:

P1: *But, in the UK, [school] holiday very often. Every month and two weeks, holiday, and when my child has holiday, I can't go to ESOL class.*

P1's experience demonstrates that they miss classes during school holidays or when their children need to stay home. When asked whether she knew about anywhere she could take her child to help her in these situations, P1 added:

P1: *I can't take my child here. But, in our life, I take my child anywhere because I can't leave him.*

This statement points to the idea that ESOL learners are not sufficiently informed about their potential childcare options. This was also evidenced by questionnaire data where 58% of respondents who had children stated that they

did not know how they could find childcare. This statistic may indicate a lack of interest, however, the questionnaire also investigated parents' preferences for their children before they start school. It was determined that many parents, 35%, thought that their children should attend nursery, which is formal childcare. Moreover, only 17% of parents preferred their children to stay at home until they started attending school. This data exhibits a clear contrast between parents' wishes and the information that they have available to them.

During the focus groups, only P8 referenced any form of childcare in her response:

P8: *In my college there is a nursery where you can leave your child, but it is full all time. My children, thank God, are adult and go to school so I don't have this problem.*

P8's statement shows that where childcare is provided, it is popular – reinforcing the contrast between parents' wishes and access to childcare. Increased provision and shared information would benefit parents.

2.3 Women's opinions and perspectives on gender equality in access to ESOL provision

When questionnaire participants were asked whether it is easier for men or women to attend ESOL, an overwhelming 83% said that there is equality. This was further stated by some focus group participants:

P1: *I think the same if men and women have the same level.*

P8: *It is the same. Now I learn ESOL course in [X] College and it is only women on it. I think it is not so good because all people must have opportunities to do this. My husband arrived and joined me and wanted an ESOL course but in my college he can't.*

P9: *I think it is the same for everybody but last year I was in with all women because a woman was Muslim, but the teachers say if you want to join with us, it is okay but don't say it is just for women, if you want it is okay, it is with two or three men.*

Despite stating that it is the same for everyone, P8 and P9's experiences highlighted increased opportunities for women due to women-only classes. Both of these participants were from White backgrounds.

In contrast, other participants from Asian and Arab backgrounds highlighted their belief that men have increased exposure to English:

P3: *Yes, all men have contact with other people in the street and job, and anywhere. Internet as well. Not like me or you. Maybe me or you, we clean the house. But my husband is in contact with another person, learning to- Easy to learn and quick.*

P7: *Do you think he's free more than you?*

P3: *Yes.*

P7: *Yes, but they're lazy. (Laughter) We are too busy, mums do everything. Like to work, like to study…*

P3 indicates that it is more difficult for her to learn as she does not have equal opportunities to encounter or speak English. P7 suggests that this is a consequence of women's responsibilities, she goes on to describe her experience:

P7: *Yes. As a mum, we do everything. Look after my kids. Lots of work to do. My husband as well, he is going to his job. But I'm not happy just to stay at home and just do cooking, just do- No. I'm a mum, as my child, as my husband. I have to go to college. I have to get a job. I have to do anything in the community, not just at home and just do the same routine. I have to go, learning, improve myself, see lots of people, to live my life. Yes, that's great. To go home, it's happy. If you just stay at home and do lots of work, you'll be very sad. Yes, if you go to learn, you can go home, do your jobs at home with your kids, with your family, and at the same time, I'm happy, because I did something for me. Not just for us. For me.*

P7 has really highlighted the importance of her ESOL class as something personally rewarding despite all of her responsibilities.

Participants from Afghanistan also recognised that there is equality between men and women in the UK, yet they raised some of the difficulties that women can face despite this equality:

P14: *I think that I didn't see any different things for the women and the men, like those classes which were for the men were also for the women as well. I think everything is equal here. For the understanding of the English [people], for men what they say is that women have the house responsibility, according to us, like every nation is different. According to us we have most of the house responsibilities, children, cleaning, everything, that is why we focus for everything, our 20% focus is only for the learning. For men there is only focusing on jobs and learning… I think this is the problem. Some nations say that women are weak, that is not the point that we are weak, that is the point that we focus on other things.*

As P14 highlights, cultural differences present themselves within the UK and women often have many household responsibilities, making it more difficult to attend ESOL classes. P13 agrees with these comments:

P13: *Also, as [P14] said, I also didn't see any difference in society, it is not about the society. I think in here for studies there is more opportunity for a woman because in one college it is just for women but then in another you have women and men, so it is good. It is about the measure in our country, like here they have every opportunity for women, but they didn't study, like in our hotel I think there is more than 200 people. So, half of them are women but most of them didn't go for the study for the course for English language, they are just in the hotel, and they take care of their children. They also think or their men think too, you don't need to go for study just to stay at home and take care of the children and cook and clean.*

P14 suggests that difficulties arising due to cultural differences could be mitigated through government policy:

P14: *I think there should be a rule because the UK is a multiculture and multinational people, like every people from different [background], there should be a rule for the man when they come to the UK that if you want to work you should make time for your woman to learn as well. I think that is a good commitment.*

P15 agrees and demonstrates how these policies could empower women:

P15: *When we come in the UK my confidence, like as a woman, is more. Like the brothers or husbands say you don't study but because there is a law, you can't dare to say I can't study. The women just lose their confidence and stay at home. Here men and women are equal and all of men and women have talents, all can do it, basic job, study, and university because of this. My people come from Afghanistan in hotels, like the husband says you don't study anything, she is scared and all of her life waste. But one day when she dares to say, your life changes.*

However, P13 recognises that this will not be a straightforward solution:

P13: *I don't think that women who just grow in countries that they are always the man's thought on their head, I don't think so, they can say, "I want to learn," they can say, as [P15] said. I don't think the women have that ability... Every woman is supposed to tell the man, "If you don't let me teach [learn], I will talk with the government that you don't want." In this point there are relations that affect the children, because of this affect, the woman just makes silent herself. Women are so kind, as we are a woman, we know because of their emotional feelings they can't raise their voice, I don't think so.*

Other participants cited online learning as an appropriate solution to widen access to ESOL classes for women:

P7: *Online courses. I think that will give much help for the people who can't attend the classes… Yes, if she has a baby and she can't come, or it's far away, or she can't, it's online. If we came here [to the classroom], it's much better. But some people who can't attend, it's online courses that will help for them.*

P14: *I think nowadays, as we know, the technology every day improves, like as I study my employability through a webinar… If the government made such a thing of the ESOL course, made such a thing, like gave them laptops, the stationery and everything, just for one hour. I think for one hour they can do because men are at work from the morning up until the evening, like they make an evening time as well, the man should be with the children for one hour. I think one hour is a lot for a woman to learn something.*

Noteworthy is P14's recommendation for equipment to be provided to learners to ensure that this doesn't become an additional barrier.

Chapter 3: Attending an ESOL class as a female asylum seeker or refugee.

This chapter will explore ESOL learners' experiences of attending classes, starting with the beginning of their journey where they are assessed for their level. It will then delve into their encounters with people and what is included on the ESOL curriculum. Finally, it will examine their progression routes once they complete their ESOL class.

3.1 Levels

3.1.1 Initial Assessment

In order to register learners for an ESOL course, the provider needs to assess their level and prior learning, providing evidence for the level that the learner is placed on. An industry standard initial assessment is the BKSB assessment which is typically conducted online and provides automated feedback. Though generally participants thought the level they were learning at was suitable, there were also frustrations for some in not feeling they were learning at the optimum level for them:

P14: *For me the ESOL Entry 3 was really easy for me. At that time, I was with my friends, some were a Level 1 [higher level] and I said that I want to do that [level] because it was really easy for me. According to the assessment as I talked with [teacher] they said, "You should be in that Entry 3." So that was also a bad fit for me, why I'm in this [Entry 3]? I should be in that class.*

P14 went on to explain her perspective on what would be better:

P14: *I think about the ESOL process in the community [centre] there is always an [initial level] assessment. I think for an assessment… if you see the paper [assessment]… should have been Level 1 but in reality, she doesn't know anything. Like according to when we talk with someone, like an interview tells you which level they are and based on that they can tell you we should put them on a level.*

Here P14 discusses the perceived disparity between written and verbal assessments, favouring assessments with tutor involvement rather than paper-based or online judgements of a learner's level, as conducted by their current provider. However, P15 has a slightly different perspective:

P15: *Someone is speaking good but when we write it is not, it is difficult.*

P15 believes that assessments should include both elements due to learners potentially having different levels for different skills, for example a Level 1 speaker may be a weaker Entry 2 writer.

Initial assessments are important to ensure that learners improve their language skills and benefit from attending an ESOL course:

P14: *Those who are an ABC [complete beginner], if they come on the ESOL and they start it is also a waste of time for them, they should do a basic [pre-Entry course] from ABC.*

Participants also discussed additional support that is needed for complete beginners or pre-Entry learners:

P13: *Something I want to mention about another pupil was the starting from ABC [complete beginner], they didn't know anything. I think the best thing I can recommend to bring in a class is a translator because they really need that. At [provider] I went for two days, and this course was also ESOL, and some people came from the hotel and their English was very bad, they even don't know how to write and read ABC. Even for this class I think for six or seven months it was*

a shock for me because for six or seven months they don't even know ABC, they can't write their name, because they need a translator.

P13's experience was backed up by P14:

P14: *One thing else, if there is no translator at least the teacher should know their language… I think this is a good option, she can teach in English and also can translate it, that is also a good thing for who is basic [English].*

Overall, participants cited tutor involvement in the initial assessment process as vital to ensuring learners are placed in the appropriate class. Furthermore, they recognised that pre-Entry learners need dedicated complete beginner courses with tutors who understand their mother tongue language, this may not be purely a linguistic need but also a societal need for cultural understanding and confidence building.

3.1.2 Progression onto another ESOL course

Many participants raised difficulties with progression once their ESOL course had finished:

P1: *Ah, we need the next level. I think next level. Yes, more.*

P14: *We were glad that maybe in the next stage we will also start again. When the lady said that it had finished, we were very sad then and we contact a lot from the resources, and we asked a lot.*

P1 and P14 suggest that studying one level of ESOL is not sufficient, they wished to continue their learning journey. However, P14's experience demonstrates that learners can experience difficulties finding a course to continue their learning causing frustration. P13 adds to this:

P13: *I came in here to ask about the Level 1, and they told me they were not to start Level 1 or Level 2, I don't know why… So, I think you need to start and finish; it needs to be continued. We finished in Entry 3 all of us and after that we didn't know how to continue, where we should go.*

These experiences add to evidence that the difficulties faced by participants in Chapter 2, when looking for a class, are replicated when learners attempt to move from one level to another.

3.2 People

Participants were particularly positive about the people connected to their ESOL experience, both staff and their follow participants. This was a hugely motivating factor in their enjoyment and continuation of the course. For example:

P2: *Yeah, for me, ESOL courses are very good, because I had communication with other people who speak English, because for me, speaking is very difficult. Yes, I understand, but I don't speak, and then I hear people and I have new words.*

P4: *It gives us motivation to continue coming to classes, because when you don't meet new people- When we don't feel comfortable in the classes, to participate, to talk with the tutor and each other, you don't have the motivation to come to the classes. So, it's good.*

P1 also described learning from her peers and particularly valued multiculturalism in the classroom, for example:

P1: *For me, this course was very helpful, because the English teacher, with different people, it's very good for me to learn English with other people. We had three, no, two Muslim people, and Brazilian people. Brazilian people and Arabic don't speak Ukrainian, we need to speak in English... It's very good, and we knew interesting information about their country. It was very good.*

Classmates in ESOL classes not only support each other's language learning, they also provide a sense of community:

P12: *I enjoyed ESOL because it is the only way to engage with people when I come to [city].*

P4: *About the classes, I'm liking to meet my colleagues. We interact very good. We can interact with the teachers. We can share our difficulties and we can learn with each other. This is very good.*

P12's statement that ESOL is 'the only way to engage with people' is quite powerful as it suggests that female asylum seekers and refugees who do not have any contacts in the UK may feel lonely or excluded from society. P4's experience also adds to this idea of ESOL as a community as she described being able to 'share our difficulties' which infers a supportive atmosphere where peers lean on each other for advice and guidance.

Not all participants cited having classmates as a benefit, some encountered challenges:

P9: *I think it is not bad but my problem at the moment in this [provider] college is my classmates are mixed ages, it is different when it is all adults trying to help us learn at the same time. I have teen years and young people around 18, 19 and 20, for them [learning] it is easy and quick, they speak and learn, I don't know. It is different for adults because sometimes, as an example, the teacher asks something and I was thinking and when I finished [thinking of the answer] two questions had ended, it is difficult. For the young people it is easy to learn.*

Although participants discussed the impact of studying with classmates, they did state that the teacher was more important for their language learning journey as highlighted by P3:

P3: *The point is not friends the people in that class. The point is a teacher.*

P7: *She's amazing. She makes us happy and comfortable… Because the teacher is the main thing on the course. If you love the teacher, if you like the teacher, you will like the class.*

When discussing their teacher, the factor that most participants discussed was the importance of their teaching skills and clarity of their pronunciation:

P15: *We have more classes in the UK still, but the teacher is so dependent about how to teach, because of this we can't improve fast. Some teachers the accent is so difficult, and the teaching is different.*

P14: *It has become boring that we didn't know what the teacher says.*

P7: *We don't have any problem with her [teacher]. She explains and she is talking slowly, slowly.*

These participants highlighted the importance of clear pronunciation, with P14 suggesting disengagement when faced with difficulty to understand. The negative impact of the teachers' unclear pronunciation is demonstrated by P12:

P12: *I improved vocabulary, reading, writing but it depends on the teacher, if accent is clear I can continue but if accent is not clear I cannot continue.*

Positive interactions with people, especially the tutor, have a positive impact on ESOL learning experiences, increasing motivation, language acquisition and feelings of community in the UK. Multicultural classrooms add richness to these classroom environments.

3.3 Course content/ESOL Curriculum

3.3.1 Topics

When asked what they liked about studying ESOL, many questionnaire participants highlighted the content of the course as something enjoyable, engaging, and valuable for their lives in the UK:

QP68: *Sharped my English language skills, more knowledge about how to live work and how to follow healthy lifestyle. ESOL is perfect course for everyone who arrived recently to UK.*

Focus group participants also referenced the curriculum when sharing how the inclusion of British culture and life in the UK topics in their ESOL courses had impacted their enjoyment. Participants found their current provider's well-rounded

course content interesting and spoke passionately about the opportunities it had afforded them to build an understanding of their classmates and integrate into their local communities:

P4: *I'm learning a lot about the culture too, because English, sometimes they don't like to listen to something that in our culture is normal. So, we are learning a lot about the English culture, about the English food, about the English music and this is very nice. Because we live here, and we have to respect others and respect the culture.*

P14: *Also, life in the UK, that one of our subjects also really helps a lot, like we discovered a lot of information from the UK for the people… especially in ESOL, I really learned a lot how to communicate with the people, what a relationship would be like with them. In Afghanistan and here it is totally different and that is why I learned a lot of things in ESOL about that.*

P8: *On the ESOL course we studied interesting topics, and our text is very interesting about British life, British traditions and values and it is separate and different from other countries. So, it is interesting for me to know better about British people and your culture because sometimes we have more differences and all the time, we speak about it and share all cultures and traditions. It is very useful I think for living here, to understand how people think, how you do something.*

The experiences of P4, P14 and P8 who belong to three different ethnic groups clearly demonstrate that topics on British culture are valuable for all learners.

3.3.2 Variation of English

One of the challenges raised by participants was the differences they had experienced between the English they had learnt in their countries and the English they faced every day in the UK:

P9: *My problem was when we came here my English is American-English, it is very different here.*

P14: *Yes, we studied English but in our country the system is like the US English, there are some differences and also difference accents and slang, so that is where we have most of the problems here.*

P9 and P14 identify an opportunity to convert their American English knowledge to British English. As previously mentioned, ESOL is aimed at supporting integration into local communities and therefore inclusion of local colloquial language in the curriculum is appropriate for learners.

3.3.3 Language Functions

Participants also cited the importance of real-life application of language points or functions that are included in the ESOL curriculum:

P9: *Yes, it is nice the ESOL class because I remember in the school the verbs, the grammar, it is boring and maybe you will never understand. For example, in the college last week, "The class today is for journeys, you learn to buy a ticket for a train, you learn to buy for a bus, and you learn the case," the class is about real life in the moment, in this time, it is good.*

P8: *As [P9] said we receive practical information about real life and some functional skills we improve on this ESOL course.*

P13: *Also write our CV to teachers and also for the communities and societies it was useful.*

Frequent exposure to language that learners encounter outside of the classroom aids acquisition and consolidation through the ability to regularly practice what they have studied in class, rendering the curricula relevant and effective according to P9:

P9: *I think the most important is not ESOL class, it is to try to practise, and you learn. If I don't practise it is never going in, I don't think so.*

Chapter 4: The impact of ESOL on female asylum seekers and refugees' lives.

This chapter explores how attending an ESOL class impacts on participants lives, it will start by examining the personal impact including integration into UK life, work prospects and future aspirations. Additionally, it will examine any impact on family life, languages spoken at home and children's language education.

4.1 Personal Impact

4.1.1 UK Life

Participants discussed the impact of their ESOL classes on their lives in the UK and their everyday tasks:

P7: *You manage to do everything by yourself. With the bank, and shopping… and the phone calls, the appointments.*

P5: *Or if someone calls by phone, it will be easier… When you book an appointment with the GPs, doctors.*

P3: *Yes, and now I speak with the doctor without an interpreter.*

These experiences demonstrate increased independence that learners have gained by improving their language skills.

4.1.2 Work

In Chapter 1, participants cited work as one of their motivations for attending an ESOL class and when thinking about the impact of their classes, participants discussed work again. Only 30% of questionnaire respondents stated that ESOL had helped them to find a job, suggesting that the impact classes have on learners' employability could be improved.

In focus groups, difficulties to access work related to participant's previous experience or qualifications were identified, evidencing experiences of deprofessionalisation:

P2: *In Ukraine, I was head of a recruitment centre, yes. But now, I'm ironing. It's not very bad for me, it's good, because I have two days, and I don't know. Maybe when I will be speaking English better, I will find a job in the hotel, maybe manager of recruitment. I don't know.*

P8: *In my country I was a tax officer, but I understand that here I can't work in the tax office. I have my diploma as a teacher, I am a teacher of economics and mathematics, but I understand that when my children do long maths at school, I see that it is a different way, it is another maths, I don't know why. I don't think that I can work as a teacher, but I am looking for maybe some office work, it will be good for me.*

Language ability was identified by participants as one barrier to accessing work that aligns to their previous experiences or qualifications:

P1: *If we want to find a job, the same with our job in Ukraine, we need specialty language. We need to learn English with a teacher, without class. With class we need to have real knowledge about past simple, present simple, present continuous, and what English people used every day. But, for our job, we need the speciality language... When I need another English with specialty language words, and I will go to a teacher, and I will learn face to face or with online teaching, because my specialty vocabulary, don't need for everyone.*

P4: *My last job was working in a restaurant as a waitress. My English, I was thinking that my English was too basic to talk with the customers. Because I understand them, but sometimes I forget what I have to ask them. Until I go to sleep, I was watching videos about waitresses. I talked with my auntie to get ESOL courses to learn, to improve and to get*

more vocabulary and to get more confidence to talk with the customers. I think it's helping a lot. I'm doing my CV, to get a job like waitering or in a supermarket, because I'm thinking that my English is kind of to working there in those places.

P12: *Maybe I can improve my English language when I engage in work. I hope to enter as pharmacy assistant, not pharmacist.*

P1 and P4 suggest that there are limitations to the ESOL curriculum when considering employability as P1 requires the inclusion of more job-specific language whilst P4 believes that the language she has acquired in ESOL is aligned to work as a waitress or in a supermarket despite being a qualified psychologist. This is also evidenced by P12's wish to work as a pharmacy assistant rather than attempting to find work utilising her pharmacist qualification.

Consequently, some participants requested more support in ESOL classes for work-related language or tasks:

P5: *I just want to share too. I need some help from someone to apply for a job… So, when I apply, I don't know what the problem is with my CV or with my writing. I don't know. Because sometimes, I just share my CV and I cannot write the covering letter. You know every time they need the cover [letter], so it's difficult for me.*

P15: *In ESOL I didn't learn how to write a CV, only [teacher] taught me about the CV but not on the course, only vocabulary, reading, writing, but didn't teach CV regarding a job.*

These experiences demonstrate the importance of integrating employability topics into ESOL curriculum, particularly during writing classes.

Low confidence was cited by participants as another barrier to employment:

P8: *I don't have a job but when I first arrived in the UK, I looked for a job and had some interviews and I feel not so good because I thought my English is good and it was [would be] no problem to find a job. I understood that I don't have enough of a level [of English], so I looked for an ESOL course. At times I feel like a dog, I understand but I can't say or explain what I want to say. It is a joke, but I felt it.*

The comparison that P8 makes between herself and feeling like a dog is very powerful, it infers feelings of dehumanisation, frustration, and social exclusion. This has a detrimental effect on confidence. Fortunately, P8 goes on to describe the positive impact of ESOL:

P8: *Now I feel more confident after the course, I have more practice with speaking and reading, so now I feel better and after finishing college I wanted to find a job and I hope for this.*

Other participants discussed the positive impact of ESOL:

P11: *When I was applying for the last job I had to go to the interview and I was alone, but I felt confident and it was very easy, it was very nice. I talked to two people and one of them spoke scouse, so I didn't understand well but he was very patient, and it was a good experience. I think that was thanks to previous course it helped me a lot.*

P14: *First we had the low confidence for a job, when I come in here [England] I said I didn't want to do a job because I didn't have the confidence. So now when I want to do a job, when I'm ready and I have the experience as well, there is no job.*

Considering the impact of ESOL courses on participants' employability, there is a clear positive correlation between attending classes and increased confidence. To have a further positive influence, the ESOL curriculum could have a greater focus on CVs, cover letter writing and employment related vocabulary.

4.1.3 Future aspirations

Looking ahead to the future, participants discussed their desire to continue their studies beyond ESOL with vocational courses:

P6: *My plan is after I've completed this course, I will start a new course, which is a teaching assistant course.*

P7: *I'd like to improve my English, yes, to get a nice job. Yes, so speak easier, like English people. If I go home, I will be an amazing teacher to teach English. That's why I need my English to be perfect and to work here [in England] as a teaching assistant.*

The teaching assistant course was very popular with participants, as well as courses that are related to health or social care:

P9: *I would like to study care, I don't know the name, care for health and care for old people… I like this, I would like to study this in the future. I try in the college, but the teachers say to practise all day and you choose English or health, but I need English, maybe next time I try again.*

P12: *I hope I pass this year GCSE and Level 2, maybe I can improve my English language when I engage in work. I hope to enter as pharmacy assistant, not pharmacist. Then when I enter college, I will search about work and maybe that will help me improve my skills in English.*

Noteworthy is that completing ESOL classes provided access to vocational courses. Moreover, P12's aspiration to be a pharmacy assistant despite being a qualified pharmacist in her home country aligns with P2 and P8's difficulties in section 4.1.2 to access work that utilises their experience or qualifications, the realignment of participants' aspirations infers a lack of belief that they can access their professions in England.

Some participants aspired to follow academic pursuits rather than attending vocational courses:

P4: *First of all, my plan is to go to university [for a master's degree], get a job, meeting new people, English people.*

P14: *My goals in here as the first step is I want to do my master's degree that I am searching with the refugee action team, now I am just working on it… Nowadays in my country the university just banned the education for the girls, that is why they didn't give the [my] qualification as well. So, I am really in need of my qualification to do my master's here, so I am just searching about that, how to get that and how to find a way for that.*

As P14 describes, participants wishing to take academic courses can experience difficulties obtaining their qualifications from their countries or having them accepted by UK institutions. Nevertheless, ESOL classes had helped to linguistically prepare participants.

Whilst participants cited a range of aspirations for their careers and future studies, P15 made a notable and powerful contribution:

P15: *My dream is just to get a job and I continue my normal life.*

4.2 Impact on family life

4.2.1 Languages at home

Many participants mentioned using their home languages with their families, yet highlighted their children's preference to speak in English:

P7: *Our kids like to talk in English. It's easier for them, because they've spent a long time in the school and back home, just, it's easier. With mum and dad trying to speak in home language, but to each other, just English… But we're trying to make sure our kids talk in home language and the English language. Both of them.*

P9: *Just Spanish. Sometimes to each other they speak English, I say, "I don't understand," "I know, mum, I know."*

P7's statement suggests that speaking English has become natural to their children, however some participants cited the opposite:

P12: *My children refuse to speak English in the home, I hope because it helps me, but they refuse. They speak in the school with their friends and in every place, they told me they need to speak [our language] in the home. I try with them, but they refuse.*

P12 highlights the potential learning benefit of speaking English at home which is demonstrated by P14's experience:

P14: *Because my niece even doesn't know some of our language and she just asks us in English, and we told her in English. I think she teaches some words to her mum as well, like now her mum knows what she is trying to do, she says just one word to her, and she understands. I think it helps her mum a lot.*

ESOL had a positive impact on families' communication for both those who did communicate in English at home and those who didn't. By improving language skills, ESOL enabled parents to better understand their children and participate in home conversations whilst also providing the opportunity to learn and use English that some parents may not have at home.

4.2.2 Feelings about parents' language learning

Some participants referenced their children's frustration with their English level:

P1: *She has frustration, but my English voice, it's not good for her, and she said that I speak incorrectly. The name of her friends in the school, I speak incorrectly. "So, how is your friend, Eden?" "Mum, why Eden? [corrects pronunciation] Eden. E-den." Oh, my God.*

P1's experience is shared by P3 whose children encouraged her English language learning:

P3: *My son is telling me, "Mum, why are you not studying? Why are you not going to school? You should be going. Not just me. It should be you as well. Go."*

Children not only encouraged their parents' learning, but they also provided language support:

P7: *My kids go, "Mummy, do you have some homework… Just tell me, Mum, tell me. I want to hear what you're learning about," and they help us. If we need help, they help us with my homework. Yes, and they're happy. They're all happy. "Oh, wow, Mum, you're learning English as well."*

P5: *"Mum, do you know this word's meaning? Do you know what it means?" Yes, so we share together, to keep it in my head.*

P9: *Yes, with the homework for example, and [E] is my older son, [I ask him] "What do these words mean?" "Mum, when you say blah, blah, blah," and he explains to me.*

These experiences show the positive impact of parents attending ESOL on their family life with children engaged in their language learning and completing homework together. P7's statement also demonstrates the positive feelings from children.

4.2.3 Children's language learning

In the questionnaire, 73% of parents said their children spoke 'good' or 'very good English' demonstrating effective language learning. Participants in focus groups also highlighted the speed with which their children learn languages:

P1: *My daughter is like a sponge. She speaks English very well, I think. She has school, reception, preschool. She started in September, and now she speaks very well. We live with our sponsor family. It's an English family, and we speak with the sponsor family in English of course.*

P5: *For me, I moved to my country and learned then how to write in Arabic, and I read now. They are very fluent in everything [all languages] and then I'm back [not fluent].*

P1 suggests that her daughter has learnt quickly due to her significant exposure to English which was increased by living with a sponsor family, a potential benefit of the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

Despite participants citing that their children learn much faster than they do, parents still support their children's language learning:

P2: *Yes, I help him. I do his homework with him.*

P1: *If I understand what she asks, I help her. When I take my daughter after school and we go to home, she asks me about new words that she listened to. But she is five, and not all words I understand. If I understand her, I translate, yeah.*

P1's statement demonstrates the positive impact of ESOL, by increasing her vocabulary she can understand more of what her daughter says and therefore provide more support.

Children's language learning raised different feelings for participants:

P9: *I don't know, I can't explain, very happy. In my country they never, ever speak English, I said you had to pay [for English classes], that's the problem. I feel very, very happy for them.*

P14: *I feel some jealousy. When I see her talking, I say, "So much in a year I studied a lot, but I couldn't get to be like that."*

Whilst P9 suggested feeling thankful for the opportunity her children had to learn English, P14 suggests feelings of personal frustration about the longer time she needs to learn.

4.2.4 Children's home languages

The importance of their children's home languages was raised alongside their English language learning:

P7: *We're not happy if our kids just delete or forget our home language.*

P4: *My sister has [is] nine-year-old. So, when she wants to talk with me, she talks in English, because of the school. She's forgetting about the Portuguese language. She has helped me a lot, I'm learning too much [English] with her.*

P13: *I always said children need to improve their own language and we need to improve our English because children forget their own language after a long time. One of our family, their one child was very small when they came to this country and their mum doesn't know nothing about the English. The daughter has forgotten their own language, the Persian we talk, so, they can't talk to each other, like they need a translator. I think they need to improve their own language also because in society then at school they forget their own language, so I think it is bad in one point.*

All participants stated that children forget their own language with detrimental effects as demonstrated by P13. The juxtaposition raised by P13 between preserving their cultural and linguistic heritage at home whilst learning English from their children causes more difficulties for parents. ESOL provides an English-only space for learning that participants may not find elsewhere.

Discussion

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. The literature cited English language requirements, knowledge of British society and integration into local communities as motivating factors (Han, Starkley and Gren, 2010; Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2020). The findings of this study concur with those motivating factors but also highlighted the associated lack of choice and negative consequences of not learning English. Moreover, this report identified ESOL as a personal investment for learners who cited increased confidence as a strong motivating factor.

Potential learners need to find a suitable course to attend. In the Department for Education's 2019 report on access to ESOL, they identified that a lack of funding, and therefore provision, led to long waiting lists and insufficient community based ESOL courses, compounded by travel and childcare barriers. This report's findings aligned with the Department for Education's findings, identifying an average waiting time of 6-months in addition to the mandated 6-month waiting time to become eligible for AEB funding. However, this report also identified that participants repeatedly experienced lengthy waiting times when moving from one level to another, building up frustration.

Regarding barriers to accessing ESOL, travel costs were raised by participants as one difficulty (Dimitriadou, 2009; Simpson, 2012), this study stated that this barrier was mitigated by providers who subsidise travel for their ESOL learners, aligning with Refugee Action's 2019 report's recommendation. A noteworthy finding in this report was participants suggesting that cost is asylum seekers and refugees biggest concern and therefore it should be explicitly stated that the course is free.

One deciding factor on whether ESOL learners attend a course is the timetable, with the duration of the course cited as one of the participants' largest frustrations. Shorter and more intense courses were preferred by participants, this was not cited in previous literature and is a significant contribution as it impacts learners' motivation throughout their learning journey and their subsequent future aspirations. 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.

Childcare was recognised as a significant barrier to ESOL for women in the literature (NatCen, 2005; Refugee Council and University of Birmingham, 2007; Stahl, Schober and Spiess, 2017; Webb, 2006), a notion that was reinforced by this study. Childcare prevented women from joining a course and also impacted their attendance due to school holidays, child sickness or other related responsibilities. This report identified that parents were not informed about their childcare options despite a majority of respondents preferring formal childcare.

Considering gender equality within access to ESOL, this study found that 83% of participants believe there is equality in England, 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 women 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, the biggest challenge to gender equality that participants stated was difference in culture, with suggestions for government policy to encourage gender equality in learning for people settling in the UK.

When attending classes, the majority of participants also emphasised the hugely positive impact that connection with other people (classmates and teachers) had on their learning experience and therefore stated that where possible, face-to-face classes are much more beneficial. However, this report has identified online learning as a potential method to increase access to ESOL for women who cannot attend in person.

This report also found that participants particularly valued the inclusion of colloquial language in the ESOL curriculum, citing this as valuable to their integration in local communities. 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, crediting their successful progression and ability to communicate successfully outside of the classroom to these

lessons. To aid language acquisition, this study found that basing the scheme of work on language functions which link to real-life scenarios was most beneficial for learners.

For those attending pre-ESOL classes, the large demand for this provision is well documented in the relevant literature (The Learning and Work Institute, 2017). Tshabangu-Soko and Caron's 2011 paper found that participants who were pre-literate or non-literate prefer to be taught by a teacher who spoke their language, a finding that was shared in this report for pre-ESOL learners. Participants in this study were not pre-ESOL but identified the difficulties that women in their communities experience, attributing their lack of progress in over three months to their teacher's lack of knowledge of their mother tongue.

This study identified progression after ESOL classes as one of the biggest challenges for participants. It found that there was a lack of support to progress 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, this report found that ESOL learners need well-rounded support after their ESOL classes to continue their education or find suitable work.

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

It was identified in the literature that women from Bangladeshi and Pakistani backgrounds are twice as likely as men to have poor English (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2016), this report also adds to the evidence that Asian men have more opportunities than Asian women to learn English as Asian participants cited men's increased contact with the language. This finding demonstrates some of the differences in experiences between women from different ethnicities as participants from White backgrounds stated that there is equal opportunity for all.

In addition to limited opportunities to learn English, Collinson and Collinson's 2007 report states that some female learners may face additional difficulties to find a suitable ESOL course due to their religious preferences for single-sex classes or their need for accessible prayer facilities. Whilst participants did not reference these needs in this report, White participants did state that from their perspective, single-sex classes reduced learning opportunities for men, demonstrating differing needs and opinions between women from different ethnic backgrounds.

As a result of limited English language skills, Choudry (2022) found that women were economically inactive and isolated, this was shared by participant's experiences in this report who cited ESOL classes as a form of self-investment to enable them to engage with their local communities. This report also aligns with literature findings that all ethically or linguistically isolated parents experienced a lack of information regarding their childcare options (Tshabangu-Soko and Caron, 2011) and although it was cited in the literature that formal childcare was preferred by African and Latino communities, this report found equal preference from all ethnic groups (Delgado, 2009; Tshabangu-Soko and Caron, 2011).

For participants on additional government schemes for asylum seekers and refugees, there were differences in the experiences of Ukrainian and Afghan women. Ukrainians recognised the need to learn English to be able to work and live in the UK and cited this as their motivation for joining an ESOL class, mostly from a survival perspective. Afghan participants also cited ESOL as 'compulsory' but raised how they must 'honour' their learning, suggesting gratitude, 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 a difference between perspectives on education with Ukrainians perceiving ESOL as a requirement whilst Afghans view their learning as an opportunity.

Overall, there was participation in this study from 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 and should be explored further.

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

Sidaway (2020) noted pressure from children as one motivating factor for parents to learn English or attend an ESOL class, a finding that was shared by this study. However, this study also found that children were a source of support to their parents' language learning, helping with homework and discussing the content of lessons. A notable finding is that the active participation of children in parents' learning is reciprocated by the parents when they gain language skills, positively impacting ESOL learners' family lives.

When discussing languages used at home, this report found that there are various scenarios, some children preferred to speak English at home whilst others used their first languages. Despite their children's preferences, the majority of women 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, a finding that adds to evidence from Sidaway's 2020 study that found participants were worried that their children would forget their first language and become monolingual. This study provides evidence of children who lost their first languages and therefore needed to use translation to communicate with their parents, having detrimental effects on family life.

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. It identifies how women from different ethnicities have varied experiences and opinions on equal access to ESOL provision. 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 and the impact of ESOL on their personal, professional, and family lives.

The findings of this report broaden the evidence base on effective ESOL provision, contributing to the wider literature. Considering the strong themes around employability needs, deskilled work, and the challenges of re-entering specialised professions due to language barriers, future research might explore migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees' experiences of deprofessionalisation, as well as potential progression routes once ESOL provision is completed.

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 to ESOL classes, and broader opportunities to speak English and integrate into local communities. This is provided mainly through sponsors and local authorities. 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' confidence 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 with the time required to complete an ESOL level. 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, potential learners were not aware of whether they had to pay or not.

Advertising the courses as free to the learners would reduce anxiety around potential costs and increase asylum seekers and refugees' engagement with ESOL providers. Moreover, travel costs should be subsidised by ESOL providers to minimise cost 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 have their contract renewed and therefore loses funding. 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**. Accessible childcare reduces barriers to learning by providing more flexibility for parents. This would be invaluable to learners who either do not attend due to childcare responsibilities, or who miss classes due to school holidays or child sickness. Informing parents of their options allows them to make informed decisions which benefit their families. Moreover, increasing information and access to childcare will increase the demand. Childcare provision in colleges or ESOL providers should be expanded to meet this need.

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Appendix A – Participant Questionnaire

Experiences of ESOL

This questionnaire is about your experience of finding an ESOL class, studying with Seetec and finishing your course. It will be used to inform a report on how learners experience ESOL and how we can improve access to ESOL classes. Participation is voluntary and all answers will be anonymised. Please answer questions honestly, you don't have to answer all questions if you don't want to. If you have any questions or you don't understand please contact Holly Dono at holly.dono@seetecoutsource.co.uk or on 07732691654. You have the right to withdraw from this research at any point, just email/text Holly to say you don't want to do the research project anymore. If you'd like to withdraw consent for sharing your personal information, please contact Holly or DataProtection@Seetec.co.uk. Many thanks.

Consent:

1. Please read and choose 'yes' or 'no' to participate in the research.

I have read the information above; I understand what the research project is about, and why I have been invited to take part.

I understand how the information I give will be used.

I understand that my participation is voluntary.

I am aware that my personal details, name, and contact details will be deleted on completion of the project - June 2023 unless I wish to receive a copy of the report and/or wish to take part in further research and that I can request deletion of my personal details at any time.

I have understood the terms and conditions above and give my consent to participate in this research.

- Yes, I agree.
- No.

Questions about you:

2. What is your email address?

3. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say.
- Other

4. Which ethnicity are you?

- Asian
- Black, Caribbean, or African
- White
- Arab
- Mixed
- Prefer not to say.
- Other

5. What country are you from?

Questions about ESOL:

6. How easy is it to find an ESOL class in England? (1= very difficult, 5=very easy) 1 2 3 4 5

7. Have you been to an ESOL class?

- Yes
- No

8. How long did it take you to find an ESOL class?

- 0-6 months
- 6-12 months
- 1-2 years
- More than 2 years

9. Did you complete your ESOL course?

- Yes
- No

10. Where did you study ESOL?

- Face to face (in classroom)
- Online

11. How was your experience of ESOL (1 star = very bad, 3 stars = ok, 5 stars = great!)

12. Has ESOL helped your life in the UK? How?

13. Did ESOL help you find a job?

- Yes
- No
- I don't want a job.
- I don't know.

14. What did you like about studying ESOL?

15. What are the most difficult things about going to ESOL class? (Choose 2 answers)

- Not understanding
- Not enough time
- Looking after my family
- Making friends Finding a class
- Travelling to the class Studying online
- Too expensive
- Work
- Other

16. Do you think it is easier for men or women to attend ESOL classes?

- Men
- Women
- It is the same.

17. Why do you think that (Q16)?

Questions about children learning English:

18. Do you have children?

- Yes
- No

19. Are your children under 18?

- Yes
- No

20. Did your ESOL class affect your family? How?

21. What language(s) do you speak at home?

22. How is your children's English? (1= no English, 5 = speak very good English)

23. Do you help your children with their English or their homework?

- Yes
- Sometimes
- I want to but I don't understand.
- No

24. What is best for children before they start school?

- Children stay at home with family/friends.
- Children go to nursery or childcare.
- I like both.
- I don't know.

25. Adults looking after my child should speak...

- English
- My language
- Any language(s)
- I don't know.
- Other

26. Do you know how you can find childcare?

- Yes
- No

Feedback

27. How can we make ESOL classes better? (e.g., class times, days, hours in class, homework, location, online or face-to-face, class activities...)

28. Do you want to take part in future research with Seetec?

- Yes
- No

29. Do you want to read the report about Experiences of ESOL?

- Yes
- No

Appendix B – Focus Group Topic Guide

Access to ESOL: Experiences of Female Learners

1.0 Introduction

- Take participant through the project information sheet and answer any questions.
- Explain that this interview is to find out about female learner experiences of finding and taking part in ESOL classes and how learning English has impacted their life in the UK.
- Cover ethics– confidentiality/anonymity, right to withdraw personal information.
- Sign informed consent form.
- Give estimated time of interview, inform participants of their right to leave the room at any time to have a break or to stop participating. Remind participants that whilst they are able to leave the discussion, it will be difficult to remove their contribution as we won't be able to identify who has said what.

Focus Groups:

- Please be respectful to everybody and their opinions.
- Please be patient and allow everyone to speak without interruption, the discussion works best when we take turns.
- Please understand that people are sharing their personal experiences and opinions, do not discuss what people have said outside of the discussion.

2.0 Background information

(This section is to find out some background information on their past learning experiences, their languages, and their time in the UK)

- Tell me about yourself, where are you from, how long have you been living in the UK for?
- How many languages do you speak? Do you use different languages in different situations?
- How does your use of different languages impact your life?
- Can you tell me about your school experience? Have you studied before? What?
- Why do/did you want to study ESOL?

3.0 Your ESOL Class

(This section is to find out about their experiences of attending an ESOL class including how they enrolled, their day-to-day and their achievements).

- Describe your experience of looking for and finding an ESOL class…
- Can you tell me about your experiences of the course – anything that you think is relevant or important. (Assessment, completing the course, classmates, teacher)
- Tell me about any positives (good things) about your ESOL classes.
- Tell me about any challenges with your ESOL classes.
- How did you feel at the end of your course?

4.0 Access to ESOL classes

(This section is to find out more about what provision gives easy access to learning for female learners and what are some of the challenges that they face).

- Is it easy to find an ESOL course in the UK?
    - Where can you find ESOL classes? (Community centre, job centre, mosque, church…)
    - How long? (waitlists)
- Did anything make it easier for you to attend this course?
    - Timetable
    - Location
    - Travel costs
- What are some of the challenges of attending an ESOL course?
    - Costs
    - Location
    - Timetable
    - Childcare - do you know where you can find childcare?
    - Childcare preferences (home/nursery/setting/languages)
    - How do you feel about using childcare in the UK?
    - Work
- In our survey, 85% of people thought that both men and women have the same opportunities to learn English, do you agree? Or do you think it is easier for men/women to attend ESOL classes?
    - Childcare (access and preferences)
    - Work commitments
    - Education background
- What can we do to help more women to attend ESOL classes?

5.0 *The impact/importance of ESOL*

(This section is to find out why it is important for women to study ESOL and what impact it has on their lives).

5.1 Work

- Tell me about your past work experiences and any experiences you've had in the UK?
- What would make it easier for you to work in the UK?
- Have your ESOL classes helped you to work in the UK? If so. how?

5.2 Life in the UK

- How would better English help your life?
    - Work
    - Schools
    - Local people/communities
    - Citizenship/residency

- Children
- Anything else?

5.3 Family/Home life

- Tell me about the impact of ESOL classes on your family life/children…
- How do your children feel about your English classes?
- Do you need English for your family or for at home?
    - Children's languages/language learning
    - Languages spoken at home.
    - Supporting children with their English (homework, teachers)

Anything else?

6.0 *The future*

(This last section is about future ESOL classes and how we can help more people to learn English).

- In your opinion, what can we do to improve ESOL in the UK?
- Is there anything we could do that would support women when they learn English?
- Now that you're learning English, what would you like to do in the future? What are your goals?

7.0 To finish

- Thank the participant(s) for giving up their time.
- Ethical protocol – right to withdraw; right to access of info; debriefing.
- What other data we have collected
- Inform what will be happening with their data (analysis; reports; other research outputs)
- Share contact information again.
- Finally – when and where they can read about their participation.