

Report: The Effectiveness of Current ESOL Courses from the Perspective of Refugee Students

Abstract

The current research looked at the effectiveness of current ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses from the perspective of refugee students and to assess the teaching methods used to teach ESOL courses. The aim of the research was to develop recommendations for improvements to existing ESOL provisions. The current research identifies how useful ESOL courses are and whether they meet the need of refugees who speak limited English. 8 participants were interviewed. The interviews varied between 15 – 28 minutes. All interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis approach was used for data analysis. This study adopted a semi-structured interview.

Results and findings revealed lack of socialisation and interaction with fluent English speakers is an obstacle to learning English for refugees, English learners. More emphasis on writing, grammar and vocabularies is required and follow-up work such as homework. Advanced materials are also required and tailored materials for individual needs as learners are sitting in lower classes which is causing obstacle to learning. Additional teaching hours in the week, more hours and lessons in each day is required to help speed up English learning. It was also reported no one-to-one time with tutor's available, solely group learning although participants were satisfied with this. Findings and outcome of the current research enforce some implications and future work. The education department and government could design courses tailored towards the needs of English learners, refugee students. Furthermore, these findings should enforce the education department to re-structure and re-shape ESOL courses by including materials aimed at learners of different level of English speaking. Policy makers, the educational department in the UK may be required to design integration language programmes specially targeting immigrants and/or newcomers.

Introduction

The current research project aims to explore the effectiveness of current ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses from the perspective of refugee students and to assess the teaching methods used to teach ESOL courses. ESOL classes are run by colleges for Adults, sixth form in schools, Job

Centre Plus, voluntary and charity organisations. The purpose of this research was to develop recommendations for improvements to existing provisions. Additionally, improving education and skills for refugees/newcomers, and other non-English speakers is another aim of this research. ESOL learners vary enormously in terms of their immigration status and educational background due to migration and globalisation (Vertovec, 2006). Therefore, it is crucial ESOL learners are categorised and assessed accurately to ensure they receive effective English learning from ESOL classes. The current research identifies how useful ESOL courses are and whether they meet the need of refugees who speak limited English. Research looking at the depth of effective practice in ESOL classes is timely but crucial as learning English is an urgent matter for refugees/non-English speakers as it is an important part of their journey to integrate, settle in the UK and to secure employment. Ultimately, improving education and skills for refugees/newcomers, and other non-English speakers, is the aim of this research.

Methodology

Participants

8 participants were interviewed. Participants were recruited via telephone communication and through Ashley Community Housing. Participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds were recruited. ESOL Learners/Students were interviewed as well as employed/unemployed refugees/newcomers. Participants fell between age 27- 40 years old and 7 males and 1 female were interviewed. Ethnic origin included Kuwait, Yemen, Iran, Sudan and Syria. They all had a 'Leave to Remain' immigration status and time spent in the UK varied between 7 months – 2.5 years. First languages spoken included: Farsi, Arabic, Russian. Participants were recorded for the purpose of the interviews and research.

Furthermore, there were some difficulties recruiting participants. Participants would initially show keen interest to participate in the research project. However drop out at a later stage e.g. on the day of their interview which could relate to negative conception of interviews based on previous experiences. Others were not interested in interviews and some felt their limited understanding of English would be an obstacle to participation. Generally, participants had a negative conception of interviews or rather felt anxious to participate as they had the perception that their recordings could be used for other purposes that may impose danger to their identity. This could explain why I contacted 60 potential participants during initial process of recruitment. Language was also a barrier to

most participants, as participants were not fluent English speakers. Although the level of English spoken varied between all participants, most found it challenging to answer the interview questions and to elaborate on the open ended questions particularly.

Procedure

Posters containing information about the research were designed for the purpose of recruiting participants. The posters were displayed around the office in Ashley Community Housing (ACH). Participants were also recruited via telephone and word of mouth. On the interview day, participants were interviewed at ACH in a board room apart from two participants who were interviewed in the library and a house. The interviews varied between 15 – 28 minutes. On arrival, participants were given information sheet containing details of the research followed by brief discussion about the content of the research and the procedure of the interview process. Participants were provided informed consent forms at the beginning of the interview session. Additionally, participants were tape recorded and were informed interview recording would be used solely for the purpose of the research. Additionally, participants were debriefed for 5 minutes on completing the interviews where they were given the opportunity to share their experience of the interview itself and discuss any issues and concerns. The debrief session was also to help participants leave the interview room relaxed. A bag of chocolate was provided to participants as a form of incentive for participating in the research. All interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis approach was used for data analysis. This study adopted a semi-structured interview.

Interviewer experience

The actual interviews went well. The use of probing in many occasions was useful as it encouraged interviewees to answer the interview questions thoroughly. However, the interview experience was rather challenging due to language barrier. Due to the limited English the interviewees spoke, exchanging information was challenging. Nevertheless, to overcome this challenge, I found using simple terminologies as opposed to the original terminologies on the interview questions assisted me with conducting the interviews. Additionally, interpreting the interview texts when transcribing was challenging which was again due to English language limitations. This is because in order for me to complete data analysis, I had to make sense of the comments and sentences given by the interviewees. This could also easily have lead to some form of bias, as my interpretation of the comments and sentences by the interviewees may not be accurate. Furthermore, the recruitment process for my interviews took

long as potential participants would fail to contact me or change their mind after initially agreeing to participate in the research. Therefore, I ended up with 8 participants as opposed to the planned 10 participants.

Participant's conception of me as an interviewer was another factor that influenced the interviews. There was an issue of participants making assumptions about interviews if prior experience of interviews e.g. Interviews with the Home Office, Job Centre Plus or UKBA. Participants may have previously experienced critical interviews with these organisations so they may have fear of similar experience. Many participants would ask me prior to the interview, how the information will be used and the reason the interviews needed to be recorded. Moreover, as an interviewer I sensed slight anxiety and unwillingness to answer the interview questions at the beginning of the interviews. Participants would comment that they felt judged because of their poor English and so they felt that their information would not be useful or relevant. However, half way through the interview session, I learnt that participants spoke limited English but they still had some capability to get through the interview questions. As an interviewer, I also felt pressured by the length of time the interviews took. Whenever I felt, participants were not expanding on the questions; I would feel concerned about the time length for the whole interview. To improve my interview experience and outcome, I would ensure I take my focus off the length of time of the interview and to reduce my focus on following the topic guide, interview question order rigidly. I would also choose a room where I would not get distracted. Another improvement I would implement in future is to conduct a trial interview with potential participants to help them familiarise with the interview and to reduce their fear of any previous rigid interviews they have faced.

Results

See Thematic Matrix in the appendix.

Findings/Discussion

It appears that 8 participants have attended more than 1 college despite only staying in the country less than a year due to ESOL course and teaching not satisfying learners. Nevertheless this can also be an opportunity for them as they are receiving experience of varied teaching methods. Furthermore, the results and findings suggest that participants who were confident in English reading and writing previously learnt this in their home country. "In my home

country, I studied and I am was improving myself ", "I study in school when I was in Syria". These findings illustrates that the little English they know may not come from the ESOL classes provided from college. Another remarkable finding was that participants classed themselves as non-English speakers despite speaking English in the interview, which shows lack of confidence in their ability to communicate in English. This could also relate to the frustration participants are expressing in regards to their slow development in English language.

Participants reported lack of interaction with fluent English speakers was an obstacle to their English language development. This point was also mentioned when participants were asked how they could improve their English language. "Feel like not speaking to people who speak English is stopping from improving English", "I think to speak with English people or who speak English". This suggests the importance of socialising and interacting with fluent English speakers in order to improve English language. Participants also reported that they felt intimidated by fluent English speakers and therefore labelled English speakers as 'unfriendly'. However, the fact that participants thought they need to socialise and interact with English speakers more suggest that it may not be a matter of fluent English speakers not being approachable but more so them not feeling confident.

Moreover, participants felt the teaching at College was unsuitable and poor overall. The ESOL material used to teach English were not meeting their individual needs or requirements. It was mentioned ESOL classes were not suitable for adults and were rather boring. "I stopped college because college did not take serious. Just teach me little like clothes, vegetables". This shows that participants can be allocated in classes that are below their level. Participants were therefore enforced to experiment different ESOL providers. One particular participant for example repeatedly compared College to CRISIS, an institution that supports vulnerable people into independent living. "I stopped the college and I do 4 days in Crisis", "The college did not help a lot". "In college you do not take any chance to improve or go high level. In Crisis you have the opportunity to reach high level. You have different chance to improve". Participants were also complaining about the lack of space in classes. "Not enough classes. Not enough room for people". It was expressed that they were sent back home due to lack of room in classes.

Additionally, participants reported ESOL classes did not provide adequate learning days. Most participants attend college 2-3 days per week, averaging between 2-3 hours per day. "Just 2 hours in the day, is not much", "3 hours for adult people is very boring". Participants felt that this was also a major obstacle

for their English language development. "The college is good for long time, not 2 hours but more than 5 hours a day you can learn good". This suggests that additional class days in the week, more hours could potentially assist English language development. It also illustrates that inadequate materials is covered by teachers delivering ESOL courses. Furthermore, participants stated that ESOL course lack in writing materials, "Focus on about the concentration on the grammar; they do not concentrate focus on the grammar, the colleges". Participants reported more emphasis on writing, and grammar would assist them in English language development and access to employment. "But they need to focus on grammar and is very important that is my opinion", "Important thing is the writing". Lack of homework and follow-up work were also a weakness of ESOL courses reported by participants. This highlights the crucial need for ESOL courses to improve, as an important part of English language learning is writing, particularly when students felt writing is the area they need most support with.

In addition to the above, homework and follow up work is vital to individual learning in order for learners to rehearse and retain the material taught in classes. This is particularly essential for individuals learning an entire new language in a foreign country. Furthermore, it was found that learners were not given one-to-one time in ESOL classes, participants reported solely group learning take place. "Not one-to-one" "All Team". This represents a weakness of ESOL courses, as learners are not given individual time to assess and assist their learning progress. Nonetheless, although this point was raised by participants, many reported that they were satisfied with group learning as they felt learners needed to understand information together and to be fair with other learners. "Just talk in group", "Because we need all understand together".

Findings from the interviews also captured participant's experience of employment and English language development. Participants reported learning English is essential in order to secure employment. It was found that one of the key factors preventing participants from securing jobs or work placement was lack of English communication as they felt this was the gateway to securing UK employment. "Because if you do not know English that is not very good because you will do mistakes." .Therefore lack of UK employment experience was an important factor preventing participants from securing UK employment. Additionally, participants who were previously employed found the experience of working was exceptionally beneficial for their English language development as well as social interaction. "Sometimes when you find an opportunity to have a job in the job you practice more than general life". They also found their confidence to interact in English increased as the workplace was their opportunity to socialise and communicate with fluent English speakers -

“Because you need to interact with staff and agree with them about the job and the conditions and terms.”. It was particularly noted by participants that lack of response from job applications made did not help with their English language development. “Yeah maybe 10% or 15%” – Responses from job applications. This was a factor that led participants to lose confidence in their ability to progress and develop their English language.

Furthermore, it was reported that lack of English language and experience of working in an English environment were one of the main factors preventing participants to succeed and pass the interview stages of job applications. These findings show the importance of securing a job in an English environment to develop English language. It also shows that participants are determined to be given the opportunity to work in an English environment despite their limited English language, as the opportunity to work facilitates and allows participants to interact and social with fluent English speakers. Although participants were keen to secure employment to improve English language, participants were demotivated and disappointed by lack of job applications response. Therefore this was a factor in them lacking in confidence and as a result losing the ability to be resilient and persistent in trying different route to employment for example volunteering, seeking work placement and/other unpaid work. Nevertheless, it could rather be the case that participants are unaware of unpaid work that could benefit their experience of working and English language development. This suggests more teaching and awareness need to be raised to English language learners/refugee students and all individuals seeking to develop and improve their English language.

Findings from the interviews show that other factors apart from ESOL course and employment also play a role in English language development. Participants reported independent research to find suitable English courses was crucial for English language development. “I did my own research and also ask my friend”. It was mentioned that since ESOL course were not sufficient to improve English language, researching and finding other ways to improve English language was beneficial. Additionally, findings from the interviews show strict policies in Colleges are important to enhance English language. “The teacher is very good. If I do not go there they will drop me off and this is a good thing because you have to think about to go college everyday to improve you English and if you do not go they will drop you off”.

Participants reported ESOL classes did not meet this requirement, and due to this factor, participants felt they were not performing well in ESOL classes and consequently they were not enthusiastic about the class. This is an interesting

finding that illustrates some of the limitation of ESOL classes as there is no element of encouragement of learning or record of learners' development and/or punctuality and attendance. As learners from the interviews have expressed, learners are motivated by teachers and managers of school/Colleges to implement firm, concrete strict policies to make learning more solid. "If you were absent for 2 or 3 weeks, they ask about you. Calling, trying to find out what happened to you. Other colleges they do not do this, they not very responsible and committed".

Moreover, participants reported that it was important for them to put individual effort into improving and developing their English language and the fact that ESOL courses do not meet their requirements, it is particularly crucial that they put individual effort. "I think the college gives us like 20% and the 80% it is personal effort". It was found that participants use friend's support to search and access suitable English courses. "I asked my friend where there is better college in Birmingham". A high number of participants were enrolled in Colleges suggested by friends. This was important help for learners as participants noted, as being new in the UK and having limited awareness and understanding of the UK system meant they were unaware of the classes available for new English learners and the routes available to learning English language. "My friend did. First time when I come to Birmingham" – Friends support to choose course/class. Furthermore, participants reported watching TV/news and listening to English music supports their English language development. "There is listening to music, English music, movies, news is very important and communicating with people". It enables them to pick up new English words and make comparison with the English learnt at College with the words picked up from social interactions and TV/Music. Participants also found using other online learning tools such as courses offered by BBC website helped with English language development. "Learning English online, there is too many courses" "BBC". Nonetheless, it is still unknown how these online learning courses would be used and how they would meet individual learning requirements. Despite this, it appeared dedicating individual time to learn and develop English language is fundamental in addition to attending ESOL classes. Participants also emphasised this point when asked how they could improve their English language which highlights the importance of not relying solely on English courses such as ESOL to learn English. "I can go to Youtube and go to library. This can improve my English"

Summary

In conclusion, the findings of the current research show the experience of newly arrived English learners in learning the English language and the experience they gained from ESOL courses. Participants highlighted the need for ESOL courses to focus more on grammar, vocabulary development and work related terminologies as well as more homework and follow up exercises as they felt ESOL courses lack in standard syllabus. Participants also reported ESOL classes were too large, age variation in classes and students allocated to classes unsuitable for their individual level/requirement. They also highlighted the need for ESOL classes to provide more teaching hours and the availability of tutoring time. Lack of strict policy in terms of attendance and punctuality was also a limitation of ESOL courses highlighted by participants.

However, the current research has some limitations. The sample was too small, therefore findings of this research may not be generalisable. Additionally, the sample contained 1 female only and the rest were males hence most experience come from male refugee student/English learners. All participants were refugees from Birmingham who spent less than 2.5 years in the UK. Therefore there could be some bias in the findings as the experience of ESOL course is from a group of individuals who spent less time in the UK.

In addition to the above, all participants were refugees with previous experience of English learning in their home countries. Therefore, it could be that they expect similar experience of learning in UK. This possibility of bias comparison could be influencing the current research findings. Nevertheless, it is a possibility that participants held back information as many displayed lack of confidence to express themselves. This could be in relation to language barrier but also challenge to tell a story or feeling their story was not important.

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the findings and outcome of the current research, there are some implications and future work. Participants reported online courses were a major factor in developing the English language. Therefore, this finding requires further examination, for example assessing the type of courses accessed online that are most applicable to learners. From this information, the education department and government could design courses tailored towards the needs of English learners accessed online. Furthermore, participants made comments about face-to-face teaching, for example the materials taught and the delivery of ESOL courses. Such findings should enforce the education department to re-structure and re-shape ESOL courses by including materials aimed at learners of different

level of English speaking. Additionally, findings from the current research suggest ESOL courses are not enabling people e.g. refugees to access the labour market. For those reasons policy makers, the educational department in the UK are required to design integration language programmes specially targeting immigrants and/or newcomers such as the Swedish language for Immigrants (SFI) programme offered in Sweden (UNHCR, Sep 2013). SFI is an educational programme for adult immigrants who want to learn Swedish at elementary level. The programme runs 5 days a week, 40 hours per week, and an intensive, compulsory programme that focus on work related terminologies and employability.

Despite the above findings it is still unknown how learners would utilise new online courses and how learners would benefit from ESOL courses changing and possibly becoming more intensive. Additionally, implementing programmes such as SFI in Sweden may become a challenge for UK learners as they may not have the commitment and/or time to dedicate 40 hours a week of their time to learn English. Furthermore, there has been reluctance in liberal adult education to introduce the idea of compulsion into ESOL, adult education generally. This could relate to compulsory courses putting adults off learning. Therefore, this area reported may require further research and examination. In conclusion, the current research shows lack of socialisation and interaction with fluent English speakers is an obstacle to learning English for refugees, English learners. More emphasis on writing, grammar and vocabularies is required and follow-up work such as homework. Advanced materials are also required and tailored materials for individual needs as learners are sitting in lower classes which is causing obstacle to learning. Additional teaching hours in the week, more hours and lessons in each day is required to help speed up English learning. It was also reported no one-to-one time with tutor's available, solely group learning although participants were satisfied with this. However in relation to earlier discussion, whether smaller classes/less range in ages/regular progression and feedback reports/college being stricter will result in students taking ESOL classes more seriously is still unidentified and therefore require future research.

References

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