

## **Issues in Providing English as a Second Language Training to Refugees: Lessons from Newfoundland and Labrador<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction is a vital part of integrating refugees who do not speak the language into their new home in Newfoundland and Labrador. Given the importance of communicating in an official language in Canada, learning English is integral to finding a job, expanding social networks, and accessing social services. Yet, learning English can be a challenge for this diverse group which includes people from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. The Canadian government supports refugees through the one-year Refugee Assistance Program and within this timeframe, refugees are expected to learn English and be able to support themselves financially.

In 2017, our research team conducted 114 in-depth semi-structured interviews of refugees in a broad-ranging study of refugee integration in St John's, Newfoundland and Labrador (Fang et al. 2018), which found refugees here had significant difficulties in integrating within a year. Barriers to English language acquisition described below for those whose first language is not English contributed to these difficulties.<sup>2</sup> This paper will outline some of the barriers faced by refugees learning English and resolutions to some practical issues found in the classroom.

### **Background**

The federally funded settlement agency offers the Canadian Language Benchmarks ESL classes. These run five hours a day, five days a week and have three child care programs available on site. The agency also offers evening classes, advanced or sector-specific language training, space and preparation for proficiency exams (such as CELPIP, IELTS and TOEFL), tutors for one-on-one language training, and itinerant teachers who visit individuals in their homes who cannot or

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws on the wider report (Fang et al, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Of those, a total of 40 Syrians who had arrived in Newfoundland less than two years ago and 37 non-Syrian refugees who had arrived earlier shared their experience of ESL learning. This was principally provided by the federally funded settlement agency for the province. 16 stakeholders from organizations supporting refugee integration were also interviewed.

do not want to attend the language school. Most of the new arrivals in our study reported attending ESL classes every weekday since they arrived in the province. This broad array of language programs emphasizes the range of language skills and personal circumstances that refugees have, which must be addressed to provide comprehensive language training.

### **Overall Experience**

The majority of both new arrivals and earlier refugees interviewed about ESL said that they were satisfied with the service provided, and that they were eager to master the English language before they stepped out into the labour market. In addition to the benefit of learning the language itself, a number of respondents emphasized the social aspect of the school. “Yeah, there is the benefit of making some friends there. Just for the social stuff and for the fun. Also, if you meet with the people from the school you know more about what you want to know and you get more assistance for you. But it was fun anyway meeting people from other countries and have some activities.” And another remarked, “yes, that time, when you come, just that you don’t have any job, anywhere to go, you have to go and meet people.” The social aspect of the school is especially important for refugees who are new to the community and often socially isolated upon arrival. Having the opportunity to make friends and share experiences was found to be very valuable to their overall experience in the city and suggests that a model of teaching which incorporates group projects and activities could be a practical way to encourage refugees to make those social connections.

At the time of our study, a large cohort of Syrian refugees had arrived and were enrolled in the ESL program. This had a positive effect on building community within this group, but one respondent worried that it hindered their language acquisition, “If the classes were more mixed with other, non-Arabic people, it would help [me] more. It would be better.” While it can be difficult to control conversations within the classroom, this comment points to the importance of encouraging students to have those conversations in English so that they can benefit from both the social and educational aspects of the classroom.

### **Gendered Barriers**

Women as primary caregivers often face unique barriers to education as they are expected to take responsibility for childcare, which can limit their ability to attend classes. This need to care for children was the most significant barrier to access to ESL for the refugees interviewed because the daycare was limited to children above the age of 2 years old. It was common to find parents having to either alternate the attendance of the classes or to send only one parent, which in most cases tended to be the father of the household. The restriction on women can hinder their English learning if they arrive with a newborn or are pregnant, as Federal support for ESL runs out after one year. This in turn would significantly affect their ability to integrate into their community. This issue has been identified in other parts of Atlantic Canada as well, suggesting it is a general issue for refugee women with small children (Tastsoglou, Abidi, Brigham & Lange, 2014). While the federally funded settlement service agency made accommodations for these women with weekly instruction at their home, respondents felt that their home was not an appropriate place to learn English. As one respondent noted, “it’s not like going to school you

know, going to school is better than taking those lessons at home. ... and the babies and the children are around here so it's not that much good when you all are busy with the children.” This is a difficult issue to rectify, as the childcare requirements of newborns can be too great for an educational facility to accommodate. Encouraging parents to take turns attending school can help balance the gender issue, but changing cultural norms can be a challenge and this balance can slow down the learning process for both parents, making the family less likely to master English within the one-year timeframe of support provided by the Federal government. Given these constraints and in the absence of funding to offer expanded childcare, more innovative methods may have to be explored to target this population.

### **Refugee-Specific Barriers to ESL Learning**

Most immigrants to Canada arrive through the economic stream, which requires a certain level of English and/or French and rewards points based on education and work experience. This has resulted in a highly-educated immigrant population in Canada. In Newfoundland and Labrador, immigrants are more likely to have a university degree than the Canadian population (Gien & Law, 2009). The educational backgrounds of recent refugees, however, can vary more widely. For example, 40% of refugees who came to Canada from 2011 to 2016 had less than a high school education (Statistics Canada, 2018). Stakeholders observed this could at times be a barrier to language training progression. As one remarked, “if you have someone who has never sat in a classroom and has never sat in a structured learning environment, to sit in a classroom on a daily basis from nine to two-thirty and be taught... can be very challenging.” This is especially true for older refugees who told us “Learning new language is very slow to master the language. It depends on each person. Like I am an old man so I am slow but I am trying.” Given that adult learners with different backgrounds and experiences will learn English at different paces, this should be reflected in the grading process for ESL. The movement through the program should be focused on progress rather than attendance to ensure that everyone can finish the program with a solid understanding of the English language at their own pace.

Refugees can also be wrestling with physical impairments and emotional scars that other learners may not face to the same degree. While immigrants to Canada as a whole tend to arrive healthier than average, studies have found that new immigrants are twice as likely to have difficulty in accessing health care than other Canadians, and refugees over time have an increased risk of poor health (Gushulak et al. 2011). Among the refugees we studied, hearing loss (possibly due to living through war) seems to have been one of the most prominent physical impediments to learning. One person interviewed could not use the ESL service at all because the school was unable to provide appropriate sign language or other support, though several others were able to use hearing aids to address this problem. This highlights the struggle of working with such a diverse population with specific needs and it is acknowledged that settlement agencies may not have the capacity to deliver specialized services such as English sign language to newcomers. Given the unique circumstances, this may be an opportunity where collaboration with other groups is necessary to deliver this service.

Refugees can be not only physically harmed by war, but emotionally damaged as well. As Fazel, Wheeler and Danesh (2005) found, almost one in ten refugees to western countries suffer from

post-traumatic stress disorder and 5% from major depression. As one interviewee remarked, “sometimes when the teacher explains something I am thinking about my son in Syria. Hopefully they can join me. Everything would be much easier if they could join me here.” With language and cultural barriers, it was difficult to speak to these new arrivals about mental health issues but quotes like the one above highlight the heavy burden that survivors carry. This again highlights the importance of a grading process based on progress rather than attendance because not everyone is able to learn at the same pace and refugees in particular may be slower to learn because of the mental health costs of living through a war and leaving family members behind.

## **Conclusion**

Refugees have diverse needs and arrive with varying levels of prior educational experience. Some come with a certain level of literacy in English language while others have not had any exposure to the Roman alphabet. For instance, those with previous knowledge of English language may need only to acquire the proper pronunciation, while others need to take on a whole new linguistic venture. Acquisition of a second language for refugees is a complex process and with a large influx of refugees, organizations may be strained to meet everyone’s needs.

It is also important to remember that refugees are under emotional distress and many of their family members are still living in war-torn countries or refugee camps. This can limit their concentration and commitment to their education, and emphasizes that participants will not complete their education at the same speed. This will be affected by their age and family responsibilities as well. Creating space for people to pursue their education at their own speed is important for participants struggling with personal difficulties and constraints.

Smaller classroom sizes could ease some of these problems, potentially by helping teachers better restrict the use of Arabic in class, focus more on speaking and terms used in their daily lives, and offer specialized services for those who have hearing problems. Making the ESL program more tailored toward settling refugees into the community by teaching those everyday English was recommended by a stakeholder as well. However, the organization providing ESL may be dealing with structural issues such as space and funding constraining that limit their ability to offer smaller classroom sizes.

The refugees interviewed clearly recognised the value of learning English to their well-being, and were largely satisfied with the learning services available. However, while every refugee’s experience and background can be different, our research suggests that those providing ESL teaching to this group need to be aware of some additional barriers to classroom instruction, and greater efforts may be needed to address gender and disability issues to ensure equity of service.

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