

## ‘You can’t have a good integration when you don’t have a good communication’: English language learning among resettled refugees in the UK

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**‘You can’t have a good integration when you don’t have a good communication’:  
English language learning among resettled refugees in the UK.**

**Abstract**

The research presented here is based on a large scale, multi-methods study of refugees who have been resettled to the UK. We analyse quantitative data on language proficiency four or more years after resettlement to identify the key characteristics of those who are most likely to have low language proficiency and to be at risk of long term dependency and exclusion. Qualitative interviews on experiences of language learning suggest that English language policy and provision serves to exacerbate and compound the risk of social exclusion, rather than ameliorate the risk. Our findings draw attention to the lack of recognition and understanding of the diversity of resettled refugees and their differential capacities, needs and opportunities for learning. They also highlight the conflict between the policy goal of rapid entry into the labour market and the goal of language learning. These findings have clear implications for integration strategies and policy.

**Key words:**

Resettled refugees, ESOL, language learning, gender, integration

**Introduction**

Resettlement provides international protection and a durable solution to some of the most vulnerable refugees. This route is distinct from the asylum system as resettled refugees arrive in their destinations with recognised status, rather than with the uncertain status of asylum seekers, and the host state is responsible for ensuring their successful transition, settlement and ongoing support. Up until 2017 the use of resettlement as a key protection tool for refugees had been expanding significantly. However, in 2017 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) witnessed the first drop in resettlement places after four consecutive years of increase. The main recipient of UNHCR resettled refugees continues to be the USA, which despite recording a 75% drop compared to 2016, received 36% of all UNHCR submissions in 2017 (26, 782); followed by the UK (9,218), Sweden (5,955), France (5,207), Canada (4,118) and Norway (3,806) (UNHCR 2018).

There are currently two main resettlement programmes<sup>1</sup> in the UK. The Gateway Protection Programme (GPP) is the longest standing and resettles an annual quota of up to 750 refugees, and in 2015 the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme (SVPRP) was introduced in response to the crisis in Syria. This latter scheme aims to resettle 20,000 refugees affected by the Syrian conflict by 2020. The UK Government selects refugees for resettlement on the basis of meeting one or more of the UNHCR criteria for vulnerable groups; these include: women and girls at risk, survivors of violence or torture, refugees with medical needs or disabilities, and refugees with legal or protection needs (UNHCR 2011). This paper is based on research with GPP refugees which, at the time of this research, was the largest UK resettlement programme. Resettled refugees enter the UK often having spent many years in refugee camps or as urban refugees in countries of first asylum, they have usually left family and friends behind so they enter with a unique set of challenges, but also an unusual set of opportunities as unlike asylum seekers they have rights broadly similar to citizens on arrival.<sup>2</sup> Responsibility for providing resettlement services, including English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) classes rest with Local Authorities; they may sub-contract parts or all of the implementation to third sector organisations, and models of language provision vary as local agencies decide how best to meet the needs of their new arrivals. For the first year ESOL classes are funded by central Government and are free to all resettled refugees; thereafter Government policy generally seeks to secure welfare, language and other needs within mainstream social policy<sup>3</sup>. At this point, refugees who require English language move into mainstream ESOL provision, which is generally two hours a week, twice a week.

Despite Government commitment to resettlement, there has been no research into the longer-term English language outcomes, or how effective Government priorities and policies are in supporting language learning. This paper addresses this gap in knowledge by examining the following questions: what are the key determinants of English language learning; how do resettled refugees experience English language learning; and how does Government policy impact on language learning? The insights from this study are relevant to refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, and in other

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<sup>1</sup> Other smaller schemes are the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) launched in April 2016, and the Mandate Refugee Scheme (MRS) which resettles refugees from around the world with close family ties in the UK.

<sup>2</sup> Those resettled in the UK as part of the GPP are given indefinite leave to remain on arrival in the UK, whereas those settled under the SVPRS are granted humanitarian protection status and can apply for indefinite leave to remain after 5 years. Some entitlements, such as to full citizenship, are subject to residency requirements.

<sup>3</sup> Under the SVPRS there is greater recognition of the time required for refugees to integrate, and material support continues for a further four years on a tapering basis.

resettlement countries. The increasing numbers of refugees in the global north, and the importance of language acquisition to integration, make this an increasingly urgent issue.

The paper unfolds in the next section with a review of the structural and policy barriers to language learning, before moving on to describe the data collection methods and findings. The findings are presented in four sections and draw on a mixed method approach which weaves together the subjective experiences and narratives of refugees with quantitative findings. The discussion section provides a critique of policy and illuminates the lack of opportunity structures for language learning for resettled refugees.

### **Policy and structural barriers to language learning**

There is a long standing body of literature which points to the importance of language proficiency to refugee integration (e.g. Tollefson 1985; Bach and Carroll-Seguín 1986; Phillimore 2010; Blake, Bennett Kneebone and McLeod 2017). The overwhelming importance of language to speeding up progress towards self-sufficiency and to successful integration in domains such as health, education and employment has been recognised in two UK Government national refugee integration strategies (Home Office 2005 and 2009). Recent research has also shown that higher language proficiency among resettled refugees leads to more contact, and more positive contact, with the majority population, which in turn leads to higher well-being among refugees (ANONYMISED for review). Language proficiency is therefore relevant to a number of Government agendas, including community cohesion. Despite this, there is no national ESOL strategy in England and no joined up, coherent approach to provision. This has contributed to poor understanding of the scale of need, the quality of provision, and the outcomes of policy at both an individual and societal level (NATECLA 2016). ESOL has remained a strikingly evidence-free policy zone, and despite the expansion of resettlement in the UK, there is very limited published research on the longer term impact of policy on language learning.

There is an established literature which highlights the structural barriers which can prevent migrants from accessing ESOL classes in the UK, these include the cost of classes, travel costs, lack of childcare, lack of information about classes, waiting lists and lack of higher level classes (e.g. Brahmhatt et al 2007; DfEE 2000; Paget and Stevenson 2014; Refugee Action 2016). The challenges of accessing ESOL classes have been exacerbated by dramatic reductions in funding for ESOL in

England from £203m in 2009/10 to £104m in 2014/15, which has led to a reduction in participation from 272,700 learners in 2005/6 to just 131,000 in 2014/15 (APPG on Refugees 2017). Eligibility restrictions mean that free and subsidised Government funded ESOL classes are only available for learners who are on 'actively seeking work benefits' (i.e. on Job Seekers Allowance or in the Employment Support Allowance Work Related Activity Group) (Hubbie and Kennedy 2011). Those on non-employment related welfare benefits, for example, those with caring responsibilities and the elderly can apply for free classes, but it is at the discretion of the language class provider.

Quantitative studies with immigrants to the US have identified pre-migration education and age at time of migration as determinants of language proficiency (Espenshade and Fu 1997). Gender is recognised as having a particular impact on language learning, with refugee women generally having lower levels of language proficiency and struggling to access classes (Platts-Fowler and Robinson, 2011; Evans and Murray 2009; Cheung and Phillimore 2017). One of the few quantitative studies to look specifically at refugees found that the linguistic disadvantage of women remained a decade after arrival in Canada, largely because refugee women had fewer opportunities to learn than men (Beiser and Hou 2000). Despite recognition that there is diversity within the general ESOL population, individuals are placed in classes based on their language level, rather than their capacity to learn (e.g. Baynham et al. 2007; Mathews-Aydinli 2008; Rosenberg 2008). Course length and the associated funding assume an 'average learner' who will successfully complete the course within a specified number of hours (Kings and Casey 2013).

Quantitative research which looks at determinants of language acquisition with refugees has been limited, with most studies focusing on labour and family migrants (van Tubergen 2010). Yet refugees form a discrete segment of migrants with distinct life experiences which may affect their language learning. Many refugees spend years in camps prior to resettlement, many have experienced prolonged conflict and traumatic events and yet little is known about the impact of health problems on language acquisition; although there is some evidence that past traumatic experiences influence motivation for language learning (Iversen, Sveaass and Morken 2004), and that refugees have lower motivation for language acquisition than voluntary migrants (Chiswick and Miller 2001). Unlike other migrants, refugees have often experienced interruptions to their education, or lack of access to education. Furthermore, refugees are resettled on grounds of their vulnerability and yet little is understood about how this might affect language acquisition. They are often resettled in family groups and therefore will include a broad range of ages, including the elderly; they are likely to have

experienced forced separation from wider family members and their traditional support structures will have been disrupted, and they will have had no choice about where they are resettled and therefore more limited access to community and other support networks. Taken together, these differences make resettled refugees a distinct and salient focus of study.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants and procedure***

The current research was conducted between 2014 and 2016 with refugees resettled under the GPP programme to four areas: Greater Manchester, Norwich, Sheffield, and Brighton and Hove. The refugees were all originally from Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq and Somalia, and were resettled to the UK between 2006 and 2010. The distribution of participants over the various locations by country of origin and gender is shown in Table 1. To protect anonymity pseudonyms are used throughout and the location of participants is not given.

[Table 1. Distribution of participants by resettlement location, country of origin, and gender]

We used three different methods to generate complementary sources of data. Eight focus groups (2 with young people, 3 with women and 3 mixed) with a total of 33 refugees were conducted at the start of the research. The purpose of the focus groups was to check and refine the questionnaire, and to identify potential topics for interviews. Participants were recruited for the focus groups through the research team's networks in each locality. Two hundred and eighty refugees completed questionnaires (148 male, 132 female). Their mean age was 36.13, ranging from 18 to 80 years old. Following completion of the questionnaire each participant was invited to an interview. We collected data at three time points, and in total ninety in depth interviews were conducted with refugees (30 at each time point). The interviews sought to add depth and complexity to emerging findings from the questionnaires and the themes were identified in response to questionnaire findings and the initial focus groups. Our research methods were therefore integrated and sequential (Creswell and Creswell 2018; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). The focus groups and the interviews were conducted by members of the research team and were audio recorded and fully transcribed. Most interviews were conducted in English, however, we worked with peer researchers in each location and where necessary they acted as interpreters. Qualitative data was first coded and analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006), and then data analysis followed a concurrent design in which focus group, questionnaire and interview data informed each other (Johnson and

Onwuegbuzie 2004; Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

The findings reported here are taken from a much larger longitudinal study which looked at integration outcomes across a number of domains, of which language was one (for details on this study, see ANONYMISED). The thirty interviews (17 men and 13 women) at time point 2 specifically explored participants' perceptions and experiences of learning English. However, English language emerged as a key topic in other interviews and focus groups underlining its importance in refugees' lives and the findings presented here are informed by qualitative data collected across the study. The quantitative data reported here is from time point 1.

### **Materials**

In the questionnaire the 280 resettled refugees were asked to note their gender, age, the year that they arrived in the UK, their country of origin, whether they were originally from an urban ( $N = 133$ ) or rural ( $N = 74$ ) area, and whether they had lived in a refugee camp ( $N = 151$ ) or were urban refugees ( $N = 126$ ) before resettlement. In addition to that, we measured<sup>4</sup>:

**Language proficiency.** Participants were asked to rate their English proficiency across the five domains of speaking, reading, writing and understanding, and the improvement of their language proficiency since arrival on a scale from 1 to 5. The mean score of these ratings was calculated and used as an indicator of "language proficiency" ( $\alpha = .94$ ). In order to investigate language learning further we explored links between people's self-rated English language proficiency and other demographic variables.

**Education prior to arrival.** Participants indicated their highest level of education prior to resettlement using the following options: No education ( $N = 46$ ); Elementary school ( $N = 32$ ); Secondary school/GCSE's ( $N = 103$ ); A-levels/college ( $N = 32$ ); or University ( $N = 56$ ).

**Literacy prior to arrival.** Literacy was measured as "Were you able to read and write in any language before you came to the UK?" (Yes,  $N = 199$ ; No,  $N = 48$ )

**Current employment status.** Participants were asked to record their employment status at that moment. The options were: Employed ( $N = 66$ ); Looking for work ( $N = 51$ ); Looking after children ( $N = 58$ ); Caring for a sick relative ( $N = 10$ ); Studying ( $N = 38$ ); Unable to work due to health problems ( $N = 16$ ); and Retired ( $N = 3$ ). Due to the low number of only three people in the retired category, and because all three of these people had the lowest language score possible (a mean of 1), we removed

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<sup>4</sup> As this is a large multi-disciplinary research project, the questionnaire included a large number of constructs. However, here we only focus on background variables and how these might link to language proficiency. Full details of the instrument are available from the first author.

this category from statistical analysis as it would skew the results.

**Health.** “Overall, how would you rate your health in the past 4 weeks?” was used to measure participants’ overall health, with an answering scale ranging from 1 (Excellent) to 6 (Very poor). In addition, to tap into emotional health specifically, we asked “During the past 4 weeks, how much have you been bothered by emotional problems (such as feeling anxious, depressed or irritable)?”, with answers from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Extremely).

## **Results**

In the following sections we present the quantitative findings which show which refugees are most at risk of having low English language proficiency 4 years post-arrival. This is presented alongside qualitative data which explores the subjective experiences of English language learning, and suggests why some groups may have better outcomes than others. Throughout the results section below, where post-hoc tests were used to describe quantitative results, Tukey’s HSD tests were used.

### **Resettled refugees’ experiences and perceptions of English language learning**

Refugees overwhelmingly expressed the desire to learn English and to improve their language skills. In our first round of interviews participants were asked what they felt the main barriers to integration to be. Most responses highlighted English language as key to their integration: it made communication with other people possible, it was linked to employment and it was a crucial part of being able to live independently. The importance accorded to language by refugees is supported by Cheung and Phillimore’s research which found that refugees scored the importance of learning English highly, and higher than researchers, policy makers and practitioners working with refugees (Cheung and Phillimore 2013). As one of the participants in our research explained:

Communication is the first thing to have a good integration. You can’t have a good integration when you don’t have a good communication.

Matthew, a 43-year old man from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In some locations everyone was initially offered bespoke classes organised specifically for resettled refugees, and were later moved on into mainstream provision. In other locations some refugees joined mainstream ESOL classes immediately while others, particularly those who spoke no English, were offered classes with their co-nationals. The number of hours of tuition during the first year varied quite considerably between locations, with a few participants reporting up to fifteen hours a



week, while others reporting just four hours a week of tuition. For the vast majority this was not considered sufficient for their needs. As one participant put it:

When you learn English once a week, it's not enough. You can learn today, after seven days you forgotten this thing. When you come back you start again...

Lukoki, 43 year old man from Democratic Republic of Congo

The majority of people said that language classes had generally been useful for them; not only because the classes made it easier for them to learn the language, but also because of the important social aspect of attending classes. Those who had experienced ESOL classes with co-nationals had found this helpful in the early days after arrival as it was an opportunity to share experiences and gain support as they adjusted to living in a new context. However, the mixed nationality groups of mainstream provision promoted greater use of English among students and therefore was more conducive to language learning; it was in these classes that people felt they learnt more, and it was here that they made contacts with other communities, making friends and extending their social networks.

Participants identified a number of barriers to learning English which echo findings in previous research; these included: waiting lists for classes, the cost of classes and eligibility for free or subsidised provision, travel costs to college, the lack of childcare, and lack of appropriate provision, particularly at higher levels and the very lowest levels. Overall, the longer refugees had lived in the UK, the better their English ( $r = .14, p < .05$ ). Although people who were originally from urban areas were more proficient in English ( $M = 3.48, SD = 1.00$ ) than those originally from rural areas ( $M = 3.11, SD = 1.25; t(204) = -2.30, p < .03$ ), there were no differences in language levels between those who had lived in refugee camps and those who had been urban refugees, nor did their current location in the UK affect their English language proficiency. However, there were variations depending on the background and demographic characteristics of individuals. In the next section we consider these determinants and the impact they have on English language learning.

## **Demographic determinants of language proficiency and learning**

### ***Pre-migration Education***

The quantitative data illustrates how level of education prior to arrival in the UK affected participants' English language capabilities ( $F(4,261) = 25.43, p < .001$ ). Those who had no education

before arrival in the UK had worse English ( $M = 2.33, SD = 1.02$ ) than those who had *any* level of education (all  $ps < .001$ ): that is, worse than those who had elementary ( $M = 3.29, SD = 1.06$ ), secondary/GCSEs ( $M = 3.56, SD = .98$ ), A-levels/college ( $M = 3.92, SD = .87$ ), or University education ( $M = 4.14, SD = .79$ ). In addition, those who had been to university had significantly better English than any of the other groups (all  $ps < .004$ ) except for those who had A-levels/college before arrival ( $p = ns$ ). That is, the higher the education before arrival, the better their English is currently, see Figure 1.

[Figure 1. Language proficiency and education prior to arrival]

In addition, those who were print literate before arrival had better English levels now ( $M = 3.76, SD = .93$ ) than those who were non-literate ( $M = 2.53, SD = 1.16; t(245) = 7.82, p < .001$ ).

Despite this very wide range of learner starting points the model of ESOL delivery is based on an assumed homogeneity of learners' capacity to learn a new language. As a consequence, resettled refugees who have had limited or no schooling, or are not literate in any language, are in the same class as those who have university degrees and higher levels of education. Those with limited pre-migration education did not have secure and confident learner identities and were reluctant to ask questions or to admit when they didn't understand. Matthew, a maths teacher explained what it was like for those at lower levels:

[T]hey feel ashamed every time to go to school, they feel ashamed. ... They feel 'How can I go there? I don't know how I meant to write my name, even to take a pen, even the finger, how does it take the pen?' It becomes a big problem; they don't know how to take the pen.

Matthew, 43 year old man from Democratic Republic of Congo

The narratives of non-literate refugees identified a range of barriers to their learning. These included: dependence on written materials in teaching, texts not reflecting their cultural experiences and backgrounds, the use of homework and assumptions that learners had the confidence and strategies to learn independently from the internet or from books outside of the classroom, and classes going too fast and leaving them behind. Jira, who had been in the UK for nine years and still required an interpreter explained the problem:

The ESOL education system it is very powerful and not designed for our, like our people ... the teacher is just coming to give us a sheet, a sheet like this, or give us a book, and then they will ask us write the answer ... And then some of them they have high education in the class, they speak and write and understanding English ... they go home happy; we are still there. Nothing change ... even I am sitting in the class, I am waiting the hour to finish and go home straight away. Just waiting to finish my hour and go home.

Jira, 62 year old man from Ethiopia, speaking through interpreter

Although Jira was persevering with his classes research has suggested that non-literate students are less likely to enrol and more likely to drop out of classes than their literate counterparts (e.g. Cox 1983; Tollefson 1985). Working with non-literate learners brings a unique set of challenges which require different pedagogical approaches if the effectiveness of classes is to be improved (Elmeroth 2003; Tshabangu-Soko and Caro 2011). Refugees with low educational backgrounds were critical of the teaching they received and the approaches which were failing to meet their needs.

### **Age**

Older age was also related to lower levels of language: there was a negative correlation between language proficiency and age ( $r = -.33, p < .001$ ): The younger people were, the better their language proficiency. The struggle that older people experienced was widely acknowledged in interviews and a number of reasons were put forward, these included shame and not wishing to be exposed or humiliated by making mistakes, and the perception of being too old to learn:

But if you come here old there is also a shyness ... They think "I'm making mistakes so people they [will] laugh at me" ... Our people say - which is wrong - once you've grown up over thirty they say "I can't learn anything, my head is gone!" This kind of thing they tell you, which is wrong.

Moti a 27 year old Ethiopian man.

It was also noted that there are fewer opportunities for elders to meet people to learn and practice language skills; Emanuel, another young Ethiopian explained the contrast between how he learnt English and the difficulties his parents' experience:

I feel I didn't learn through college English, I feel I learned through friends; meeting friends

and just like that ... when I start socialising, making friends and then after that your English is good, and then after that you can continue.

He played football which had provided a gateway to meeting other young people and practicing English. His parents don't have the same opportunities:

It's hard to go to make, to make friends like British culture. You know they can't go out and have a cup of tea or something like that ... I don't think they've got the time or the friends. It's not their fault; they just sit and help their family really. [My] mum she is hard to find friends, she can't socialise and maybe complete lack of English as well – it's more hard to make a friend. How're you going to speak? How're you going to communicate? It's hard for her to learn English.

Elderly participants identified different motivations for learning English and were more likely to cite practical necessities such as going to the market, talking to their doctor and topping up their mobile phone suggesting that the goal of language learning was orientated towards independence and being competent adults. Learning English for older refugees like Jira and the parents of these young people is quite likely to evoke emotions of deficit, anxiety and frustration, which sits in stark contrast to their identities as respected mature elders in their native culture.

### **Gender**

There were significant gender differences with men ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) rating their language proficiency more highly than women ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ;  $t(275) = 4.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As one participant explained this relates both to gendered opportunities prior to migration and once in the UK.

Sometime the men obviously back home, they study a lot more than the women; they have more opportunity to go to the school, with the women there is less opportunity for them to go to the school and even if they do go to the school they drop off by getting married which is the simple, traditional way ... [For] the men there is more opportunity to go out still .... I mean to having fun and this way they can learn more English. But with the women obviously, if she's married she has to be ... more responsibility inside the house and even going to school is quite difficult, but for the men I think there's a lot more opportunity to learn than the women.

Moti a 27 year old Ethiopian man

His explanation of the gender differences is confirmed by the quantitative data: Women were more likely to have lower levels of pre-migration education (just 9.8% of women had completed university level education compared to 29.1% of men, see Table 2 below.

[Table 2. Gender and education levels on arrival in the UK]

Mona's narrative (a 40 year old woman from Ethiopia) of her struggle to attend classes and to learn English was typical of many of the women we interviewed. She had been in the UK for nine years at the time of our interview and described her experience through an interpreter:

I started, and then I stopped because my husband became sick and then I was looking after my mother, but then I started again... I was really sad, there was no way for me continuing to do English because my daughter was very small so I had to take her to school and back, to look after all the children plus the husband, so there was no way around it.

Mona goes on to draw attention to the complex intersection of social and cultural norms governing gender relations, and personal characteristics, which combined to inhibit her language learning:

Even if I knew what I was about to say I wouldn't because I didn't have the confidence ... I used to cry when I had to talk to someone, or I would look at somebody and just cry... One, it's just the way I was created, and second it's just the way I was brought up: it was just not really respectful to talk to somebody - 'cos I'm also a woman, so it's a bit embarrassing to go out in front of somebody and just ask or talk to them ... I was very scared.

At the time of our interview Mona's children were older, her mother had passed away and she was able to attend classes regularly. She was finally beginning to learn English which she attributed to the skill of her language teacher who believed in her ability to learn and gave her confidence, partly due to additional one-to-one support that she was receiving, and also to her friendship with a non-Ethiopian she had met through the class and who she now regularly met up with outside of classes. Mona talked of her happiness at finally learning English and some of the multiple reasons for learning:

I wanted to read my own letters and understand instead of asking my husband. I didn't want anyone to go to the hospital with me; I wanted to go and have my own privacy and understand what they were saying.

Mona, a 40 year old woman from Ethiopia, speaking through an interpreter.

This wider value of being able to speak English in order to be self-sufficient and independent in daily life was a particularly prominent theme among women and older refugees; these groups were more likely to be some distance from employment and their own immediate goals and visions of successful integration did not necessarily involve the economic objective of employment. A further reason both men and women gave for wanting to learn English was to be able to support their children at school, to provide a role model and to demonstrate that it is possible to 'succeed' in the UK. As one parent explained '... you have to show a good example to your children ...if the parents don't succeed the children don't succeed also' (Matthew, Democratic Republic of Congo). The language needs arising from these daily social interactions and concerns (Appleby and Barton 2008; Sutter 2012) have tended to be overlooked in the narrow framing of English language as a tool for employment, an issue we consider in more detail below.

### **Poor health and caring responsibilities as barriers to learning**

Just over a fifth (22.3% of men and 20.6% of women) reported that they had suffered from emotional problems 'a lot' or 'extremely' in the four weeks preceding the questionnaire. In our interviews some people indicated that they find it difficult to concentrate in class, that their mind is sometimes elsewhere because of the stresses they experience in life, and as a consequence they do not always attend classes. The main sources of stress participants identified were health related, either their own or that of family members', financial pressures and concerns for family they had left behind. We found a positive association between overall health and English language skills; those with better English language skills were less likely to have health problems ( $r = -.22, p < .001$ ).

To further investigate the link between health and language proficiency, we investigated differences in language abilities for each of the "employment" categories, which included a category for those who were unable to work due to health problems. A one-way ANOVA showed significant differences in language proficiency between the six "employment" categories ( $F(5,233) = 9.92, p < .001$ ). That is, those with health problems ( $M = 2.91, SD = .95$ ) had more difficulties with English than people who were employed ( $p < .003$ ) or studying ( $p < .009$ ). Furthermore, English language

proficiency of those looking after children ( $M = 2.90, SD = .98$ ) was worse than that of those who were employed ( $M = 3.95, SD = .95, p < .001$ ), those looking for work ( $M = 3.67, SD = 1.09, p < .002$ ), and those who were studying ( $M = 3.93, SD = .95, p < .001$ ). The English language of those caring for sick relatives ( $M = 3.54, SD = .79$ ) was in-between that of the other categories and did not differ significantly from any of them. These results suggest that poor physical and emotional health of refugees, and caring for other family members are barriers to attending classes and learning English.

### **'Learning the language is not difficult'**

At the other end of the spectrum, those learners with higher levels of education and professional backgrounds would benefit from fast track courses which combine language with vocational or academic practice skills, to support them to gain English qualifications or access employment commensurate with their backgrounds. Abdi, a 27 year old man from Somalia, had been a primary school teacher in Somalia, he came with educational capital in the form of independent study skills and already spoke three languages (Somali, Arabic and Swahili). His experience of learning English had been a straight forward process:

If you want to learn you can still speak to the locals, you can still get the books, can go to the library, can use websites. Um, if you want to study for yourself here you can still look for a lot of research. Learning the language is not difficult; it's about what effort you put in. You know, if you give your time, if you put a lot of effort on learning the language ... I think that's not too hard.

However, despite having learnt English Abdi was still struggling and unable to work as a teacher because he didn't have the necessary English language qualifications to enable him to access Higher Education and to retrain:

I've got skills, but all skills are locked in an area which, which the key word is English ... it seems like I'm struggling with everything to get the best results and to get my dreams on the way I want it to be. I was a primary teacher, a qualified teacher... I cannot teach because for me to be a teacher I have to get GCSE English with grades from like C to A ... I went to [XXX] University and I was told because I did not have British qualifications I could not go there...

So while participants like Abdi had gained a proficient standard of English, they had not managed to acquire the UK qualifications required to access Higher or Further Education opportunities. The reasons cited were the shortage of higher level courses, and the cost of specialist qualifications such

as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which is required for entry to Higher Education.

### **Discussion: Constructing vulnerability through policy**

This research shows that pre-migration level of education, gender and age are significant predictors of lower language proficiency four years after resettlement; it also shows that these characteristics intersect with poor physical and emotional health within communities, and responsibilities such as caring, exacerbating and compounding the risk of exclusion. Rather than ameliorate these disadvantages and risks, English language learning opportunities are structured in such a way as to further disadvantage these groups. At the same time the language learning efforts of those who arrive with higher levels of education are stymied by lack of sufficiently tailored provision and higher level classes.

As set out earlier, language learning is recognised as a key facilitator of social integration, and relevant to a number of Government agendas, and yet there is little evidence of a joined up or coherent approach to policy making. Responsibility for ESOL currently lies with the Department for Education and programmes align with Government's objectives of promoting entry to the workforce, consequently free and subsidised classes are available to those who are 'actively seeking work'. One older refugee in our study said that he had attended two ESOL classes since arriving, but as he was now past retirement age he was told that he would have to pay £1305 for further classes. Women are also least likely to be in employment or seeking work; consequently they are most vulnerable to being excluded from Government funded ESOL classes.

Fineman (2008) argues that vulnerability is not a static concept and it is not necessarily tethered to particular identities, rather it is the institutions, policies and structures of society which create vulnerabilities. In this understanding there is nothing inherently vulnerable about being a woman or having caring responsibilities, being an older learner, having health problems or having missed out on education prior to migration. Rather it is society's response, or lack of response to needs, which is the problem. In this case ESOL policies and institutional practices construct vulnerability by failing to remove financial barriers or to provide support for those with caring responsibilities, by failing to provide classes which meet the needs of older learners and those with limited education. In the resettlement to highly literate contexts those with little or no prior education acquire vulnerability



which, with the removal of structural barriers and policy support, could be mediated or avoided.

Our research also suggests that gaining employment is not a guarantee that language will continue to improve and that integration in other domains will follow. When participants were in employment it was usually low paid, low skilled jobs, and with limited household resources money was not available for ESOL. Furthermore, the employment sectors available to participants with limited language often involved either working on their own or with members of their own community, for example cleaning or night security guards, consequently the opportunity to interact with English speakers and improve their English was not guaranteed. This finding is supported by research in Canada which found that earlier entry into employment at the expense of developing language skills led to lower income and fewer advancement opportunities over time (Hyndman and Hynie 2016). It points to the importance of considering the different dimensions of integration holistically, rather than using single domains, such as employment, as indicators of successful integration.

The Government's rationale for withdrawing eligibility for free ESOL classes for those in employment was set out in its 2010 Skills Strategy:

...we believe that those who come from other countries to work in England, or their employers, should meet the cost of their English language courses. Therefore we will not fund ESOL training in the workplace. (DBIS; 2010: 32).

The rationale represents an example of refugee blindness in policy making in that it fails to consider the specific needs of refugees and the opportunity structures they require to learn the language and to integrate. Instead policy collapses together all ESOL learners, including those who have come to the UK on a voluntary basis to work, and who may have very different needs and long term plans to remain here; it also makes assumptions about learners' ability to pay. A consequence of this blind spot when it comes to recognising refugee's specific needs is that while participants in the research identified poor language skills as the main barrier to employment, gaining employment was, paradoxically, one of the key barriers to continuing to learn and to improve English. This reflects the underlying tension between the policy goal of employment and economic self-sufficiency, and the policy goal and social expectation that refugees will learn English.

## Conclusions

Refugee integration is generally understood as a two-way process requiring adaptation and change on the part of institutions, policies and practices of the receiving society as well as refugees themselves (e.g. Phillimore and Goodson 2008; Strang and Ager 2010 ). Learning the language of the country of resettlement is at the heart of refugee integration strategies, and is an expectation of both refugees and the receiving society. Our research has exposed the mismatch between refugee expectations and desires to learn, and the capabilities of the system to meet those needs. The initial year of additional resources for ESOL, and the opportunities subsequently afforded through mainstream ESOL provision, were not sufficient to equip refugees for long term success, and that four years and more after arrival some refugees were still dependent on interpreters.

This data illustrates the diversity of resettled refugees and how, in resettlement to highly literate and literacy dependent contexts, some groups are likely to require greater support in order to learn English and to integrate, and yet, policies are gender-neutral (Bloch, Galvin and Harrell-Bond 2000; Cheung and Phillimore 2017), and refugee-blind, failing to recognise the specific needs of refugee learners. The findings suggest that resettled refugees constitute a specific sub-population of ESOL learners as they face particular challenges related to their vulnerability; these include high levels of poor health, high care-giving demands, anxiety and stress related to forced displacement, and experiences of prolonged conflict and trauma. They have often spent many years in a state of dependency and interrupted education, and resettled groups are likely to include elder community members. There is little understanding or recognition of these challenges in programme design or delivery, and consequently we found little evidence of strategies to enable vulnerable learners to access classes or of informal and social engagement opportunities to support language learning and integration.

Classes do not meet the diverse needs, aspirations and capacities for learning of resettled refugees, and are not tailored to refugees' own goals and visions of successful integration. Those with the lowest education levels at the point of arrival face particular challenges; thus their disadvantage travels with them and becomes compounded in the resettlement to highly educated and highly literate contexts. Our findings point to pre-migration education, as being a key resource; refugees who do not have this resource are currently constrained and limited in their ability to acquire English language skills. However, refugees with high level pre-migration education and higher language skills do not have the pathways and opportunities to capitalise on their education and qualifications, and

as a consequent the skills and resources of these individuals remain locked in the community. The current restrictive opportunities at both ends of the spectrum do not enable refugees to flourish or thrive. Pre-migration factors such as education status have rarely been empirically examined; the findings suggest the need for more detailed information gathering and information sharing on refugee education and skills prior to resettlement, which could enable the tailoring of ESOL programmes to better meet the individual need, capacities and aspirations of refugees.

Resettled refugees are currently caught between the conflicting policy goals of rapid entry to the labour market and the goal of language learning: employment is considered the primary indication of self-sufficiency and refugee integration, and yet entry into low level employment in the short-term works against refugees developing the language proficiency that would improve their long-term outcomes. A longer term strategy which invests in English language as a priority, might be a more effective strategy for securing integration outcomes across a range of domains, including employment.

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