Lived experiences of ESOL provision: English learning by Syrian refugees in Aberdeenshire

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This article is based on empirical data collected as part of a PhD research study that explores the lived experience of language learning by New Scots Syrian refugees in Aberdeen. The analysed data suggest that ESOL provision is arranged in such a way that the educational background of the language learners will play a decisive role in their learning journey. For example, ESOL provision can make learning less accessible for those learners who lack a formal educational background.

Introduction

Through a set of ethnographical and art-based research methods, my research looks into how adult refugees, as learners, experience language learning in the setting of the publicly-funded provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in Aberdeenshire, Scotland. Informed by Bourdieu's social reproduction theory, the data suggests that educational institutions can actually contribute to reproducing inequality, where learning is organised in a way that privileges a certain type of cultural capital. A closer look at the learning journeys of a number of people with different educational backgrounds, receiving the same provision, indicates important distinctions. According to the data, those learners with a formal educational background were more likely to develop individual learning goals, strategies and techniques, while those with little or no formal education from their home country are less likely to develop learning goals or generate techniques and solutions to overcome learning difficulties.

1

Background: The Importance of language learning for refugees

This article starts with the assumption that language learning is one of the key elements in the destiny of refugees in their new communities. On the role of language in integration, *The European Handbook for Integration* (Niessen 2010) states: 'Basic knowledge of the host society's language, history and institutions is indispensable to integration' and thus concludes that 'enabling immigrants to acquire this basic knowledge is essential to successful integration.' Lack of language skills presents barriers to building networks, seeking jobs, housing, and medical care, thus preventing refugees from being self-reliant and potentially driving them into isolation. In view of the role of language learning for newcomers, including refugees, Scotland has its own ESOL strategy. This means that language learning for refugees in Scotland is part of the publicly-funded ESOL provision. The 2015-2020 strategy (ibid) is a revised version of an older ESOL strategy. This strategy aims to facilitate English learning for 'new migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, along with settled minority ethnic communities' living in Scotland. As a policy document, ESOL provides instructions for ESOL provision across Scotland and all publicly-funded ESOL provisions are required to be in alignment with the latest strategy.

Social reproduction theory

Bourdieu's social reproduction theory describes how social inequality gets reproduced through social institutions. This theory focuses on education and argues that education, as a social institution, reproduces social inequalities such as class distinction, social exclusion, and gender inequality by promoting the cultural capital of the dominant class (Bourdieu, 1986: 242-258). Cultural capital is one of the three types of capital which Bourdieu defines and applies in his work: *economic capital* (understood basically as income, financial abilities and ownership) *social capital*

2

(basically understood as connections, networks and resources people have access to through social connections), and *cultural capital* (mainly manifested in informal education, linguistic abilities, cultural objects, and credentials). In a number of works (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; 1979), Bourdieu describes and presents evidence on how academic success (in the French education system) is represented and evaluated by non-academic measures such as language codes, dress codes or certain types of behaviors. These social norms, language codes and cultural capital, he argues, are those of the dominant classes, and 'privileged' children learn them at home as part of their normal upbringing, while unprivileged children (from lower social classes) have learned different language codes and social behavior at home as part of their normal upbringing. This latter group of children tend to show lower attainment at school, not because they are less able than the children of the dominant classes, but because their social norms and cultural capital are not as compatible with the norms, cultural capital and language codes practised at school. (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). In this way, the structures of education function in accord with the cultural capital and social norms of the dominant groups in society. Conversely, those whose social and cultural capital does not comply with the dominant social norms often become further marginalised through the educational system, potentially leading to socio-economic holdback and social exclusion (Kindler, Ratcheva et al. 2015).

In the case of this study, the ESOL provision is largely based on the social norms of the dominant groups in society (those who have attended school before and come from a formal-schooling background). This provision, however, is less accessible to those who have different educational backgrounds, such as those with no or very little formal schooling. In other words, the current ESOL provision is more accessible to those more privileged learners who already have been to school and are familiar with formal education. This is particularly important because lower achievement in language learning for refugees can result in reinforcing existing social exclusion, if not generating new forms (Kindler, Ratcheva et al. 2015).

As part of my PhD study on language learning by Syrian refugees in Aberdeenshire, I conducted field work over four months (February- May 2018) in a community learning centre in Aberdeenshire. The centre offers different courses for adult learners, including English lessons for speakers of other languages (ESOL). The ethnographical observations were gained when I attended the ESOL lessons over two months, participated in various events at the community centre, and visited the participants in their homes.

The participants and the context

The participants were all Syrian refugees who came to the UK under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme -VPRS- (Home Office, 2017). According to the Home Office, participants (Syrian refugees) are entitled to 8 hours of lessons per week until they 'have reached an ESOL level that enables integration and self-sufficiency' (Home Office et al. Guidance for Commissioning ESOL, 2016:6). The English proficiency level in the community centre was limited, as the more advanced learners would move on to college for further courses. Three female learners (aged 21-56) and two male learners (aged 26-59) were interviewed. In addition, two art-based workshops were held, which were followed by two focus group interviews (Morgan, 1997) attended by 10 participants. In the workshops, the learners created collages and talked about the images they had created. The participants were all Arabic-speaking Syrians and had arrived in the UK somewhere between 18-26 months prior to the study.

It should be emphasised that, in regards to translation and citation, the translation of the texts in the collage images are mine. In direct citations from the particpants, when needed, I added my own words to make the sentence easier to read. I distinguished these words by bracketing them thus {}.

Language and translation and participants' consent

All the interviews (except on two occasions, when the participants' preferred language was English) were conducted entirely in Arabic, and transcribed and translated into English. An experienced interpreter was hired to assist me in conducting the interviews. The research abstract, research proposal, and consent form were all translated into Arabic and presented orally since I am familiar with Modern standard Arabic -اللغة العربية الفصحى- (Gully, Carter et al. 2015). However, before conducting interviews, a more thorough oral presentation of the research abstract and the consent form was provided by the interpreter. The participants were also provided with all the information regarding their right to withdraw from the research process at any stage they may wish. The participants had the assistance offers an interpreter to discuss any concerns about the research and their role in it.

Analysing method: Grounded Theory

The collected data in this paper includes individual interviews, focus groups, and observational notes. Regarding the nature of the data as a qualitative study, its diversity and its depth, the grounded theory method was used for data analysis (Glaser, B. G., Strauss 1967). Corbin and Strauss (1990) recognise three levels of analysis in grounded theory: (a) to present data without interpretation and theorisation; (b) to generate a rich description by using filed notes, interview transcripts and the researcher's own interpretations; and (c) to create a theory through advanced interpretation and theorisation. In this paper, I leaned toward the second level of data analysis, which includes generating a detailed description and interpretation of the data. For this purpose, I have used coding and memo writing techniques.

Coding

The interview transcripts and the field notes were read several times to identify and extract the salient themes, statements, and observations that shape and characterise the

5

data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Glaser (1978) defines memo as 'the theorising write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding'. As Glaser mentions, these codes have struck the *analyst* (the author of this article); in other words, the extracted codes are subject to the researcher's interpretation. I had this point in mind when I was doing memo-writing, both during the data collection and during the data review and analysis.

Suggested codes by the analysed data:

> **Approaches to learning English**:
>
> Clear goals and purposes of learning English
>
> vague goals and purposes of learning English
>
> No goals and purposes of learning English

Examples of goals: learning English for employment, for further education or to survive in the new environment.

> **Approaches to learning**
>
> Teacher oriented learning: relying mainly on teachers and school for learning
>
> Pro-active learning: being actively part of the learning process
>
> Creating their learning process, developing techniques and strategies for identifying and overcoming learning difficulties

Three groups of learners:

Regarding the indicators named above, the data suggests three different groups of learners with different approaches and strategies for language learning. Furthermore, they appear to have various approaches on how, why, when and where they learn the language.

Group one:

This group have clear plans and concise goals for their language learning. They see learning English as part of a bigger plan, such as employment, further education, or assisting other refugees. This group tends to have predicted a time window for

6

completing each stage of their studies, and are in touch with a potential employer or educational institute.

Noor, a 25-year-old woman, says in English:

> *I want to finish my English courses before August {2018}. I want to go to college and study business management. {In} August my management courses start. I want to become a business manager…I also learn English to teach to other refugees.*

Noor has clear goals for learning English and has set deadlines for herself in terms of completing courses to enter college.

This group of learners also don't tend to rely heavily on teachers for their learning. They seek resources outside of the classroom, such as online resources or resources available in the local library. They also develop personal strategies and techniques for overcoming difficulties in learning. Referring to difficulties in learning, fears and her tools to overcome them she explains how she uses spelling to make herself understood and how, through the practice of learning, she overcame the fear of learning a new language.

> *-Noor: I am learning driving now; it is {also an} education {learning}. I was so afraid of learning driving before I started. But it is like learning English. I was scared of learning English. But now I know I should go there and do it. Just do it.*
>
> *-Interviewer: What were you afraid of when you started learning English first?*
>
> *-Noor: I was afraid of not understanding the teacher, or they don't understand me because of my lahja{accent}.*
>
> *-Interviewer: How did you overcome this fear?*
>
> *-Noor: Sometimes I have to say letters {spell the word} to them, so they understand me. And when I don't understand people, I say sorry, can you speak slowly? I don't understand.*

7

Noor correctly spots her own difficulties in learning English (eg her accent) and comes up with some methods to improve her pronunciation. Another learner developed his own techniques for improving pronunciation as he finds it frustrating when people don't understand him. Ali, a 37-year-old male, who has a degree in tourism and worked in the tourist industry for several years in Syria, also can identify what holds him back from speaking English as he wishes:

> *I love the Arabic language, I love it a lot, but this language sometimes stops me from pronouncing the English words {correctly}. I speak English in front of a mirror, and I look at my lips. Do they move correctly?*

As Noor and Ali's examples show, this group of learners appeared to have been familiar with formal learning, and this assists them to be able both to identify and resolve difficulties. In other words, being acquainted with formal schooling, even to high school level, is strongly helpful in developing learning strategies. In other words, this group of learners already know how to learn in a formal setting.

Group two:

Another group of learners would like to learn English for social interaction and personal use. This group values the social impact of language learning, and their main motivation is communicating with the host community and managing daily life. They might lack exact plans and specific goals for their learning but still are motivated for language learning and they do it at their own pace rather than following deadlines.

Saeed, a 59-year-old man, is one of the participants who refers to communication as his main motivation for learning English. He created an image by posting pictures showing people standing next to each other, but isolated, in bubbles. In a short text under the image, he says he hopes by learning English he will be able to communicate with the surrounding people/society.
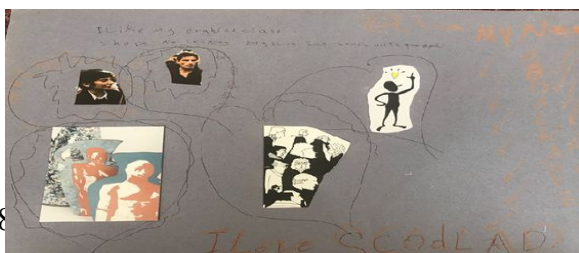
'I like my English class, I hope to learning {learn} English for {to be able to} speaking {speak}with people

Samaa, a 55-year-old woman, chooses a woman reading a book and mentions 'reading English stories and learning about the foods in the market' as her goal of learning English.
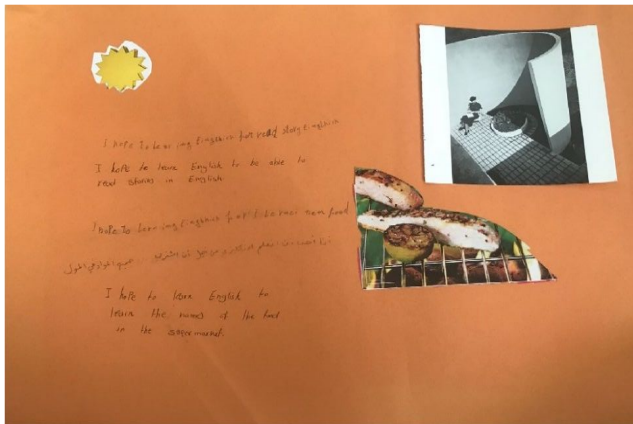
{'*I hope to learning English to be read story English {I hope by learning English I will be able to read English stories '}.*

She adds in Arabic:

I like to learn English to learn the names of the food in the supermarket '

Kulthum, a 56-year-old woman, in an interview taking place in her home, describes her approach to language learning. She told us how she spends regular hours online in search of information she can't find in the classroom:

> *I don't rely only on the teacher {for learning English} when I come home, if I have time, I spend one or two hours in front of the computer. I search on YouTube; I look at the videos and I use Google Translate. The teacher is good, but I don't rely only on my teacher.*

This group of learners appeared to also have a formal education background, but of shorter length than the first group. However, they also have other skills (computer skills, being able to read and write in their mother tongue, and use the internet) which assist them in learning English. As they have been to school, they are not unfamiliar with formal schooling, the role of the teacher, the role of the learners and thus, tend to be more active in creating their learning.

9

Group three:

This group finds learning English too difficult to see it as a realistic goal. They either find themselves too old for learning, or see their limited formal schooling background as a barrier and can therefore feel demoralised by the difficulties of language learning. They attend the classes, do the homework and follow the teacher's instructions, but have little confidence in actual use of language.

Yasin, a 58-year-old man, says:

> *I am {almost} 60 years old. I have never been to school. Learning is difficult for me. I learn something today and forget it tomorrow.*

His wife, Ayesha a 61-year-old, pointing to her head says:

My brain! Nothing stays there. I am not able to learn.

In answer to the question of what she finds difficult, she refers to her age as a barrier and responds:

I forget everything. I can't remember things. I am too old.

But finding language learning difficult does not only concern the older learners. Younger people who lack formal schooling also find language learning difficult. Hadad, a 26 -year- old man, who had received very little formal schooling prior to his arrival in the UK, created the collage below to express how he sees his own language learning. In his interview, explaining the collage, he refers to the image on the top left, in which a man holds a clock on another's man head and says:

'This is the teacher trying to push something into my head, but it does not work'

Finding the efforts of himself and the teacher insufficient left him feeling frustrated and demoralised. In the course of the fieldwork, he left the language lessons as he managed to find a job in a mechanical workshop.

It is not uncommon to find language learning an arduous task, but a group of learners who don't have the resources to, first, spot their own obstacles to learning, and second, to come up with techniques and solutions to resolve these difficulties, usually end up feeling demoralised. Not being familiar with formal settings and not being able to use resources (even in their mother tongue) leaves this group in a position of finding language learning an unrealistic and a too difficult goal to achieve. It is not surprising, then, that this group quit their lessons as they don't see a result coming out of their efforts.

Conclusion

The field work was carried out among two groups of learners in one language centre in Aberdeenshire, and all the participants had received the same ESOL provision from two tutors, regardless of their background. Learners with no schooling were receiving the same lessons as those who have finished high school or even hold a university degree.

The data suggests the learners with little or no previous formal education demonstrated a heavier reliance on the teacher and took a less active role in creating their learning journey -compared to those who came from a formal schooling background. This group had less resources in developing techniques and strategies to overcome obstacles, while learners who had spent longer years in formal schooling showed a more active learning process. They could talk about their goals in education (for example completing the pre-college courses) and had a personal strategy such as seeking help outside the classroom, using online resources and reaching out to volunteers. In respect to age, the lack of confidence in learning was not only observed with the older learners; in fact, feeling demoralised and losing motivation was more common among those who lacked formal schooling. Since the provision of lessons

11

took place in a conventional classroom environment, the learners who were not familiar with such an environment demonstrated more complexities in adjusting to the environment and benefiting from the lessons.

To conclude, overlooking the diversity in learners' background, particularly their educational background, results in poorer outcomes for those with more limited formal schooling. The ESOL provision, therefore, appears to be organised in a way that privileges the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973) of those learners who already know how to learn in a formal setting. Consequently, those who lack what is called 'compatible' cultural capital - lack formal schooling - (Kindler, Ratcheva et al., 2015) invariably end up with a poorer achievement

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