

# The role of ESOL classes and a conversation club in supporting integration for refugees and asylum seekers in two southwest communities in the UK

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This was a very insightful project and I want to thank the organisations and participants who allowed me to work with them. I could not have conducted this study without their cooperation.

## **Executive Summary**

I conducted a study to examine the role of ESOL classes and a conversation club in supporting refugees and asylum seekers in two southwest communities in the UK. The idea for this research arose from my own personal interest in how these classes can help this group integrate into a new community. I wanted to find out the effectiveness of informal and formal classes to see how the skills learnt in these settings can help someone feel part of a new community. This was based on a theoretical framework used to measure refugee integration in the UK. The research was carried out at three organisations in two southwest communities in the UK with a total of twenty-one participants in 2018. First, I will present the main research question and answers to this will be offered. There will also be a review of the integration framework as well as recommendations for ESOL teachers, refugees and asylum seekers.

### **1. Main research question:**

In what way do English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes and a conversation club help refugees and asylum seekers feel integrated into their new community?

### **Learning about UK customs and practical knowledge**

Cultural knowledge was addressed, which included students and teachers indicating not only learning about UK culture and traditions but also learning about cultural norms, such as queuing in line. A few teachers said discussing culture can also help students realise that they may have similar traditions in another country. This can be another way for students to connect with each other. Another way formal and informal lessons are helping is by learning the skills to call an ambulance or talking to the police. One student also said that feeling safe means he feels integrated.

### **Access to healthcare**

These formal and informal classes can help someone learn functional skills for daily communication, such as going to the doctor. Seeking medical care was an important aspect because privacy was a sub-theme that emerged. Several teachers and refugees indicated if one needs to seek medical care and they do not have the English skills needed to speak to the doctor, then a translator or husband may know everything. It was further suggested that this can cause embarrassment and a loss of confidentiality. One teacher also suggested that it is important to help students, especially women, understand that they can request a female doctor.

### **Forming social networks**

These classes can also help refugee participants to meet new people. A few refugees and asylum seekers stated that they come to the centre to get out of the house to socialise and meet new people. These bonds can be very important because the classes are a way for someone to learn a new language or even meet people from their own country. There is a chance to socialise during lunch or before the classes which can help individuals form bonds.

### **Helping others**

Volunteering to show new arrivals around the city and encouraging them were two suggestions. During the experimental class lesson, some students said that other refugees who had been here had taken them to the supermarket and showed them around the city when they first arrived. A few students also said that refugees had taken them to their first English lesson, where they would not have known where to go. Another student said it is a good idea to help someone new to the city and get them out of the house, so they can interact and meet other people.

### **Roles of ESOL teachers**

ESOL teachers can encourage refugees and offer help in any way possible. This could be something as simple as offering a safe space if they need to talk or encouraging them in supporting their aspirations. They can also encourage them to do charity work.

### **Role of the host community**

Members of the host community can also offer encouragement and help in any way possible. One teacher stated that when it comes to charity shops, they do not care about this demographic

group, so it can be hard to get them to let a refugee volunteer at their shop. Another teacher stated that it is very important for community members and leaders to try to work together to gain a better understanding of different cultures living in the community.

## **2. Indicators of integration framework**

This research was conducted using an indicators of integration framework which has been used to measure refugee integration in the UK. There are ten indicators, and all the participants commented on four of the indicators. Because only four of the indicators were discussed, this suggests that this framework should not be the only platform used to measure inclusion. Students were encouraged to make a list of what integration meant to them and they defined integration as ‘no racism,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘hospitality,’ and ‘humanity’ among others. It is important to also look at the perspective of integration from refugees’ and asylum seekers’ points of view. The indicators also demonstrate that not everyone defines integration in the same way.

## **3. Recommendations for ESOL teachers, asylum seekers, and refugees**

While these formal and informal classes are providing an opportunity for refugees and asylum seekers to acquire language skills, there were some challenges that arose. During the experimental class lesson, students were asked what helped them upon arrival. From the nine students, only three could write this answer and the rest of the students did not seem to understand. This was also surprising for the teacher, who did not think this would have been a problem. It could be helpful to take time in the lesson to discuss these kinds of ideas and issues that have occurred since one arrived in the city. A teacher also indicated at one organisation that there seems to be no systematic way of keeping records and that this could be helpful in the future so teachers know what has or has not been covered in class.

While the objective was not to compare conversation clubs and ESOL classes, it was suggested by a few teachers that conversation clubs provide more chances for speaking practice, such as role play, in a more relaxed environment. Students may be willing to come more frequently if they know there is a chance to have a general conversation about anything they choose to talk about. For refugees and asylum seekers, it is also important to help each other who are in the same situation and to encourage each other to attend classes and conversation clubs. This is also

a chance to teach the host community about experiences and expectations to create more community cohesion among cultures.

This study has been conducted as part of the MEd TESOL programme at the University of Exeter. I am happy to provide more information if you would like more details.

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