

Chapter 5

An investigation of ESOL provision for adult Syrian refugees in Ireland: Voices of support providers

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Abstract

This chapter describes a research project entitled *An investigation of language and intercultural support for Syrian refugees in Ireland* which explored the language and intercultural needs and supports provided to Syrian refugees who are resettling in towns across Ireland under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP). This chapter focuses on the findings in relation to the provision of ESOL courses for adult refugees in the programme delivered by the local Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Through consultation with support providers from educational, community and NGO sectors across a number of resettlement towns in Ireland, the researchers seek to evaluate existing services, identify needs, and inform the development of additional supports in relation to English language supports for Syrian refugees in Ireland. Findings suggest that there are important lessons to be learnt in relation to the duration, intensity, content and format of the ESOL provision provided to these students and highlight an urgent need for the development of clear guidelines and appropriate training for the support providers involved.

ESOL provision for adult refugees in Ireland: background and key issues in the literature

The war in Syria, which began in 2011, has led to the displacement of over eleven million people, at least 5.6 million of whom have sought refuge beyond Syria's borders, mostly in surrounding countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan (UNCHR 2018). However, with an increasing number of Syrians making their way to Europe in recent years, European states including Ireland have also had to accept Syrian refugees.

The Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) was established by the Irish government in 2015 and pledges to admit up to 4,000 people from Syria and other places of conflict (Department of Justice and Equality 2015). It is coordinated by the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration (OPMI), part of the Department of Justice and Equality, along with a

‘Taskforce’ comprising relevant government departments and state agencies, the Irish Red Cross and UNHCR (Arnold and Quinn 2016).

Refugees arriving under the IRPP are initially accommodated in Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres (EROCs) where they get some orientation and English language support (OPMI 2017). They are subsequently resettled in local authority areas around Ireland, generally outside the capital, Dublin, due to the availability of suitable housing and the belief that ‘smaller communities can offer a better welcome and support’ (Arnold and Quinn 2016: 41).

During the first year after resettlement in each host community, ESOL classes are organised for adult refugees by the local Education and Training Board (ETB). (See Case Study 1 for a description of ETB provision in Ireland). Up to twenty hours of ESOL support per week are provided, with childcare offered to parents who attend (OPMI 2017). While some ETBs have considerable experience of ESOL provision to refugees, ‘the availability and level of English language classes varies by region’ and adult ESOL services have been reduced in recent years (Guscuite *et al.* 2016: 48). Other supports for refugees admitted under the IRPP include information services and intercultural activities in the host community.

The importance of acquiring the language of the host community in the successful integration of adult refugees is well attested in the literature (Akresh *et al.* 2014; Choi and Ziegler 2015) and has been identified as an important predictor of settlement satisfaction (Kim *et al.* 2012) and future employment prospects (Riggs *et al.* 2012). In many cases, ESOL programmes can lead to very positive outcomes for refugees, particularly for young, well-educated male refugees (Beiser 2009). However, for others, the outcomes are often far less successful, particularly for women (Riggs *et al.* 2012), the elderly (Beiser 2009), and those with low levels of education prior to arrival (Ros i Solé 2014). In a longitudinal study of refugees in Canada, Beiser (2009: 567) reported that a decade after arrival, 8 per cent of participants had virtually no English at all and 30 per cent had only ‘moderate skills’ in English. The need to enhance professional teacher development in this area has been highlighted, particularly in relation to teaching students with low mother-tongue literacy (Benseman 2014; Choi and Ziegler 2015) and pedagogic issues relating to trauma survival (Finn 2010; Nelson and Appleby 2015). Increasingly, the involvement of previously settled refugees (Tshabangu-Soko and Caron 2011; Duran 2016) and the use of bilingual teaching supports (Sbertoli and Arnesen 2014; Madziva and Thondhlana 2017) in ESOL programmes for adult refugees have been recommended.

The need to go beyond mere survival English and to involve the adult refugees themselves as drivers in the choice of content and delivery of the programme has been identified (Roberts and Cooke 2009; Simpson 2011; Johnson and Berry 2014). A number of studies have explored a range of promising approaches to catering for the educational needs of these students. These include student-agency (Baynham 2006) and other participatory approaches (Bryers *et al.* 2014), socio-cultural (Riggs *et al.* 2012) and socio-pragmatic (Yates and Major 2015) approaches, and Content-Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approaches to teaching vocational skills (van Rensburg and Son 2010). However, the need to be flexible and guard against a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model is important (Beacco *et al.* 2014). The need to adapt to and accommodate the learning preferences and previous learning experiences of the students has also been emphasised as important in this regard (Baynham 2006; Nelson and Appleby 2015). There is strong consensus on the need for rigorous and robust monitoring and evaluation of ESOL provision in order to identify successful pedagogic practices and interventions so that the needs of all refugee students, particularly the most vulnerable, are addressed (Phillimore 2010; Riggs *et al.* 2012; Beacco *et al.* 2014).

The study

This chapter describes a research project entitled: *An investigation of language and intercultural support for Syrian refugees in Ireland* which explores the provision of language and intercultural support to Syrian refugees who are resettling in towns across Ireland under the IRPP. The overall aims of the project are to investigate current language and intercultural support for refugees arriving in Ireland under the programme, through dialogue with Syrian refugees and people who are engaged in supporting their resettlement, and to determine what further language and intercultural support may be necessary.

The project commenced in February 2017. Ethical approval was obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. Twenty-six Syrian refugees and fourteen support workers from a variety of resettlement locations were interviewed. This chapter focuses on the views of the fourteen support providers in relation to their views on the ESOL provision for the Syrian refugees. (See Chapter 10 for further perspectives from the respondents to this study, regarding intercultural aspects of ESOL support). These participants were recruited through purposive sampling by contacting educational institutions (for example, local Education and

Training Boards), NGOs and other community groups which are involved with Syrian refugees in the resettlement towns. Eleven of the participants were directly involved in the resettlement programmes in these towns and engaged with the Syrian refugees on a day-to-day basis. Four of these were ESOL support providers and the others were resettlement officers, community workers, health professionals, and volunteers in five resettlement locations. The other three support providers were representatives from a number of national organisations with a strong interest in issues relating to refugees and the resettlement process in Ireland. To protect the anonymity of the respondents, the precise role of the respondents and the location where they worked have not been identified. Each ESOL provider is identified as ESOL1, ESOL2 etc.; other support providers are identified as SP1, SP2 etc.; resettlement locations are labelled as Town A, Town B etc.

Data collection involved individual semi-structured interviews with the support providers, who were asked about their involvement with the Syrian refugees in relation to their language and intercultural needs and for suggestions regarding further supports. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data was then qualitatively coded and analysed, using NVivo software, in order to identify key issues and themes. Themes relating to English language development and the provision of English language support for the Syrian refugees are presented below.

ESOL provision in ETB centres

The importance of acquiring English was agreed on by all the participants in the study. All respondents identified this as a key factor in the integration and successful settlement of the Syrian refugees in Ireland. Without adequate English, job and educational/training prospects, friendships, access to accurate and reliable information and the establishment of trust and 'real' communication were severely limited.

Funding was provided to ETB centres in or near each resettlement town to provide twenty hours per week of ESOL and intercultural training to all adult refugees in the resettlement programme for one year. Following this year, refugees would be entitled to participate in the usual mainstream ETB offering of ESOL classes, approximately two to four hours per week in mixed nationality classes. The ETB centres we visited each took an approach of four to five hours per day with Friday free. Students were divided into groups according to level, usually CEFR levels A1 and A2. Students who were perceived to have higher levels of English were accommodated

in other classes or training courses. Some of the centres appeared to have a greater degree of autonomy than others and there did not appear to be a standard approach to the provision of English language support across the various centres.

Training and evaluation

Teachers were recruited locally. In some ESOL centres, experience in English language teaching was not the norm. However, all of the teachers interviewed in the study were experienced and qualified ESOL tutors and this was felt to be of the utmost importance. In addition, many also identified the need for training in adult literacy support as an important requirement for teaching refugees. Ideally, it was felt that tutors would be both qualified ESOL and literacy development tutors. A number of centres had taken steps to upskill their staff in these areas so that these skills could be developed. Despite being experienced ESOL tutors, all of the ESOL teachers commented on how different this particular teaching context was from any other teaching they had done in their careers and how unprepared they were for this type of teaching. However, there was little to no formal training in the specific context of teaching refugees and the particular issues involved in this type of teaching:

ESOL3: We had like a day where people came in and talked about them [...] but just generally [...] about trauma [...] but teaching strategies and dealing with people who have been through trauma [...] not really.

There were no official guidelines available:

SP10: The Department [of Justice and Equality] doesn't publish anything or hasn't done a lot of research, or hasn't made anything available, so we were a bit surprised that there wasn't more [...] People are thrown in at the deep end.

For some of the tutors, the only training they had received involved attending an information evening on Syria which they had happened to see advertised in the local newspaper. Overall, help and support for the educators seems to have been provided in a rather random and ad hoc fashion, often through various informal networks and through informal feedback at local level:

ESOL4: I was actually quite down I suppose is the word about the attendance [...] just to try figure out what is going on, what am I doing wrong that's - and I rang a colleague in another place who I

knew would give me it straight, and her experience was very similar, and I went ‘ok, this is just what it is, just accept it and do the best you can’.

Nor were support providers aware of any externally-coordinated evaluation of ESOL provision in Ireland, which would inform policy and lead to the design of templates and guidelines for future programmes and the training and support of teachers. The need to do this and to build on experience was articulated by many:

Interviewer: Does the Department [of Justice] look for an evaluation or anything like that?

ESOL4: Nothing yet, and that’s why my line manager is saying about trying to get all this experience on paper.

ESOL1: And we gave a talk in [...] about our experiences and we tried to speak you know openly, and some of the tutors came up afterwards and they said ‘oh we’re having exactly the same problems’ [...] I think to be honest we were preaching to the wrong people [...] they were all tutors on the ground, and they all said the same thing, the people who should have been at that were the ALOs [Adult Literacy Organizers] the CEOs [Chief Executive Officers], the government ministers etc., you know the people sitting up in [the Department of] Justice who are making all these plans.

A common theme raised by the respondents was that an appropriate model with clear guidelines for ETB centres needed to be developed at national level:

SP2: And we don’t have really a national strategy on how to deal with the language, so it depends really from place to place [...] it’s not really the same from county to county.

SP10: Like if there was some kind of a model or a national model for this or, you know, and maybe this is where the ETBs could come together [...] there’s very little guidance I think [...] most people are a bit lost [...] I think it’s just about looking at different models and getting feedback from people.

Duration and intensity of the course

Interviewees identified a number of factors relating to the ESOL programme itself which affected the success or otherwise of these classes in terms of the acquisition of English. Firstly, many wondered about the value of starting the intensive ESOL classes so early in the programme. Although all the support providers identified English as a key element in the resettlement programme, they acknowledged that the acquisition of English was not always the

main priority for the Syrians themselves, especially when they first arrived. For the Syrians, they were worried about their families back in Syria or in camps, about their health and the health of their families, about how their children were settling into school and crèches, about transport issues and other practical matters. English, while important, was not seen as equally important to these immediate and pressing concerns:

ESOL1: They're terrified, they come in to a new community [...] and you're told 'off you go and be in the class on a Monday' [...] most of them felt that they would like to have settled into the community first [...] just to actually let their feet touch the ground [...] we felt that on reflection it was not a good idea to have them in classes straight away.

Secondly, almost all the support workers felt that the intensive nature of the language classes might be counterproductive. Five hours constitutes almost a full working day and the Syrians had to also attend to childcare and school collections, medical and other appointments, shopping and housework each day. Many refugees simply did not have the time to devote five hours each day to ESOL lessons:

ESOL1: Cos you're just throwing hours at people [...] Think of yourself if you were landed out in the middle of China, would you like to be in class for four hours a day? [...] and you've still got to worry about getting home and putting on dinners, and shopping and picking up children, like the language would be such a small part of your life.

ESOL4: Our teachers are there from nine to two [...] but people are not coming in till half nine, quarter to ten [...]. They have to walk the kids and all that, they're leaving at half one to collect the child from school, so there's no space in their day for [...] the women in particular are exhausted [...] so they're going home, they're doing everything that people do, their homework, dinners, everything, and yeah [...] I think they just need a little time.

Many of the Syrian refugees had not completed formal education in Syria or were out of the habit of attending class for long periods each day. In such circumstances, concentration on language learning for five hours each day was felt to be an unrealistic expectation. In addition, it was felt that the ongoing levels of trauma and distress suffered by the Syrians meant that they were unable to concentrate and fully participate in such an intensive course:

SP10: And it's four mornings a week, five hours a day, which is a *lot* [...] it's a long time for concentration for anyone isn't it?

ESOL4: The Syrians, they're settling alongside of all the language and learning, like I honestly think their brains are only 50 per cent present in the place when they're in the classroom.

Most interviewees accepted that language learning is a slow process and does not happen quickly, even in cases of full immersion in the community where that language is spoken. Many of the teachers and other support workers felt that a single year was not enough time to develop the English required for successful integration into the social, educational and employment fields of Irish life and that just when the students were beginning to settle into their lives in Ireland, the English classes were abruptly withdrawn from them. Most of the people we interviewed felt that the provision of ESOL teaching should be broken up more effectively so that the students would have shorter classes each day, or perhaps modules of varying intensity, but within a programme which would continue beyond the first year of resettlement:

ESOL4: I would be suggesting a longer programme and shorter hours.

ESOL1: A year programme where you're put together for twenty hours a week is not a good idea.

Format and content of the course

Other issues in relation to the programme itself concerned the format and content of the ESOL course as well as the management of realistic expectations in relation to it. It was felt that there was an urgent need to develop resources which would be relevant and appropriate for the needs of the Syrians. The ESOL teachers identified the lack of materials and resources for teaching refugees and Arabic speakers as a challenge. Teachers described adapting the materials they had as effectively as they could, and they tried to identify topics of interest to the Syrians. In particular, several teachers mentioned topics and units in the standard QQ1 (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) Level 2 English module (CEFR level A1) used in many ETB centres, which they considered very unsuitable to the context of teaching refugees (for instance, topics such as writing postcards home, menus, comparing your country to Ireland).

More vocational content which might be aligned to the work experience and goals of the refugees themselves was identified by all the ESOL teachers we spoke to:

ESOL3: So let's say the welder [...] is there some way that the official job agency [...] can take him for two days a week to do some welding so that he hears English and that he knows what he needs to get in his English class.

ESOL1: We've two gentlemen in particular and we got them onto an electrical skills course [...] that was really successful, they struggled with the language but they were electricians in Syria anyway, so they really liked that.

A flexible approach to the format, content and delivery of the programme was recommended by all involved:

SP3: Coming from a community development model you don't just do it one way only, you [...] trial and error, you do everything different, it mightn't work, you do it different again and you try something else.

This was particularly the case given that most of the Syrian adults had been away from formal educational contexts for many years. A mixture of formal and informal learning situations was felt to offer most opportunities for learning. Therefore, the centres we visited had begun to incorporate extra-curricular activities, events and visits (such as visits to women's or men's sheds,¹ gardening classes, cookery demonstrations) into the delivery of the formal ESOL classes. These were felt to be highly successful for some Syrians (although not all) and a desire to cater for a wide range of interests was identified:

ESOL4: So we're doing a block of IT skills, we'll do a block of cooking and a block of gardening, just something that's physical, different, not sitting in the classroom.

The need to involve the Syrians themselves in the choice of these activities and topics was highlighted:

SP10: But to do it in consultation with the group as well [...] yeah, cause I know they did try [...] like an art class [...] but it never picked up or they didn't want it you know [...] it just didn't work [...] it's [not] what they want.

ESOL1: The other thing is we didn't work with the Syrians themselves, we started working with them and things improved.

Classroom factors

There were also classroom factors which had an impact on the success or otherwise of the ESOL programme and supports. All of the centres identified the range of educational levels among the

¹ The men's and women's 'shed network' refers to community-based associations which promote social interaction, health and wellbeing – see Chapter 10.

Syrian refugees themselves as a key factor in the progress of the students. Some already had some English before they arrived; others were well educated but disliked language learning; others had left school early; still others were identified as pre-literate in their own first language, Arabic. The level of English among the group varied. However, it was noted that no division according to language or educational level had been made in a number of ETB centres:

SP5: We know that they're all lumped into one class very often [...] in one instance only one level of English class was provided for a group despite people having huge varieties.

However, the centres we visited had divided students into two or three groups of beginner and post-beginner students. Beginner groups posed particular problems in the delivery of the ESOL programme. Teaching students who did not speak English at all but who are literate in their first language is completely different to teaching students who are pre-literate in their first language. The needs of each are very different and having both groups in the same class posed particular problems for the teachers.

Some centres had introduced a third group of high-support beginner learners who were pre-literate in their first language as a separate group to other beginners and this was felt to be successful:

ESOL4: I had two groups, and it quickly emerged that we needed three groups, that you needed a high support group [...] I have three groups now, I have what I call a high support group who are generally illiterate in their own language and need additional, they're at the ABC stage, I have a beginners group and I have a pre-intermediate group.

Another solution was to recruit English language specialists as volunteers who would be matched with particular students who had been identified as particularly in need of additional language support on a one-to-one basis at home. The need for literacy training for the ESOL tutors and volunteers was identified as important, as was having Arabic speakers to assist with this teaching.

It was felt that it was important to have realistic expectations in terms of the outcomes at the end of a year for these students:

ESOL4: I feel for the teachers in that high support, because I was only reading one of the reports this morning 'I did the letter M this week', like this is fourteen weeks into it now and I'm doing the

letter M, do you know, so that's a challenge, but at the end of the report she said 'I really feel like progress is starting to be made'.

Some teachers also highlighted the need to be alive to 'face' issues for pre-literate and less well-educated students:

ESOL1: Some of them were just like coasting along but it was to save face, cos we actually took one man out and offered him literacy support one-to-one, and it didn't work out because he felt that the others knew he was being taken out.

Having family members and neighbours together in the same class also posed difficulties. Several teachers mentioned tensions and frictions among the students which they tried to accommodate but were only partially aware of at times:

ESOL1: I think if you bunch people together it's a mistake, I think there were a lot of divisions [...] that was a massive problem [...] you're forcing people to be friends and people who are very different, in their culture, their education, everything, you know.

Classroom management issues particular to refugees were also identified, for example noise levels, attendance and classroom etiquette issues:

ESOL1: There was a huge problem in the classes, the non-stop chatter of Arabic [...] they weren't really prepared for classes [...] you know, turn-taking, not using your phone, not shouting over each other.

Impatience and unrealistic expectations in terms of how quickly and successfully a new language is acquired, even where there is full immersion in the host community, was also identified as a problem. There was a sense that because of the lack of control over their lives for so long, the Syrians were impatient to get jobs and to start their new lives now that they had arrived in Ireland. Slow progress in learning English had sometimes resulted in feelings of frustration and anger and sometimes outbursts in the classroom and school:

SP10: It's frustrating [...] and I think, like I'm not an expert, but just from like insights myself and what I've seen, when they've come from so much trauma, and they've been out of control, they've had no control of their lives for so long, and now they have so they have a bit of control, they want it to happen *now*, or this way, and it's a bit of a panic.

Some support providers wondered if some of these classroom management issues were the result of trauma, which they felt ill-prepared to deal with:

SP5: We found there was sometimes very specific reasons why language acquisition is particularly slow or difficult, so it could be health problems, people separated from their family abroad often, this is a significant psychological barrier to them adjusting in Ireland [...] there's probably just real guilt.

Introducing classroom etiquette procedures early in the programme to establish ground rules in relation to classroom-based learning, behaviour and expectations was identified as a useful strategy. The need for frequent breaks and a flexible approach to arriving late, leaving early and other classroom management issues particular to this cohort were highlighted by all the teachers:

ESOL3: Go with the flow, I'd go with the flow [...] there could be a kind of at ten o'clock 'we're hungry', and I have no problem with that you know, so we just do that and we just go with it [...] this is what you have to do, because otherwise they won't come.

Almost all of the interviewees commented on the value of having mixed nationalities in the classes for at least some of the hours provided. Where mixed nationality groups had happened, either because of other refugees in the area or when the Syrians had joined the regular ESOL classes in the ETB centres, a definite difference in terms of class dynamics and learning rates was noted:

ESOL1: One hundred percent improvement in attendance, one hundred per cent improvement in engagement, in their happiness level much much better [...] because they were mixed, they were doing group work with people, it was much much better, I can't stress how much better it was.

ESOL2: And it worked much better yeah [...] putting the different nationalities in as well, it just creates a certain, a different dynamic really yeah yeah.

Culture of learning

The culture of learning associated with language learning in an Irish context was completely unfamiliar to most of the Syrian refugees. Classroom techniques associated with learner-centred teaching such as discovery learning of grammar, pair and group speaking activities, and language learning roleplays and games were a culture shock for most of the students, who seemed to prefer more traditional teaching formats and styles:

ESOL4: Our teaching approaches and methodologies would be very much like work in pairs, role play [...] so that's how we teach, and these are the approaches in adult education that we've been advocating for years, and they- it appears to me that they like the desks, sitting in front of the desk and like [...] I just think it's you know it's what they view as a professional quality service [...] and that we're a bit kind of ... we're all too 'happy clappy'.

SP10: But the feedback from Syrians is they, you know with like TEFL teaching it's all communicative and like and conversation and games and that kind of thing, they're not used to that, and they go in and say 'they're not teaching us grammar' they come in to me, and they kind of they want to be taught *at*, which is [...] totally opposite to what you know we do in Ireland now.

The teachers we spoke to had begun to adopt a more traditional, grammar-focussed, teaching style in their lessons to cater for the learning styles and preferences of these students. A more gradual approach to the introduction of certain activity types was felt to be more appropriate along with clear explanations of the rationale behind the approach:

ESOL4: Cos what a person might think is 'I'm sitting there and I'm playing games', why?, but that they're very clear that there's a learning outcome.

SP10: Like you might think if you're matching up cards to vocabulary, to pictures, you're not learning, but you *are* learning [...] but it's just it might take a while to realise that.

Age

Age was a particular factor for many of the students and had an impact on attendance. Several of the interviewees mentioned how some of the older Syrians disliked being back in the classroom at their stage of life and felt that they were too old to learn a new language, in some cases leading to very low attendance rates and increased isolation. The teachers themselves did not usually consider the age of the Syrians to be a barrier to learning a language or indeed to be particularly old, but were alive to these feelings of frustration and helplessness among many of the students:

SP10: Like we've older people, I've heard from a few 'I'm too old to learn English', 'I'll just stay at home, I'm too old', you know, and you can only encourage them and hope they'll come in, but they've kind of given up on themselves before they start [...] like our oldest person is in their sixties.

Several interviewees commented on the effective use of Arabic-speaking teachers and resources for the Syrian refugees, particularly with older learners:

SP3: One of the Syrians, after the project finished, felt that some of the people didn't progress in the learning, so he initiated English classes himself [...] done in the ETB [...] teaching English to the Syrians who didn't really learn, because there were literacy issues and they were a lot older and they just couldn't pick it up [...] I think they're doing well, I met a couple of them in the shopping centre and they were able to speak to me and they didn't you know six months ago.

Outcomes

Overall, the feeling is that for the higher level group, progress was reasonable and in some cases very good. However, many felt that lower level groups made very little progress over the course of the year:

ESOL1: As I said the better group, no it worked very well, but the beginners' class, if I were doing it I'd do it very differently.

SP5: We would meet someone who's been in the country for two years, and just trying to interact with them you can tell that it's quite basic, so there's definitely issues [...] around the effectiveness of [...] there's a lot of resources going into it, and I think definitely question marks should be asked about how effective these are [...] the low levels of English.

Some felt that it was perhaps inevitable that some learners would not progress and pick up English as well as others and seemed to suggest that the outcomes, while imperfect, were acceptable:

SP9: Like some of them have *really* progressed [...] some people just aren't, the school setting isn't the one, isn't right for them, but no, in terms of education the ETB have I'd say come through, yeah.

SP3: The English language support they got was very good, very good yeah, they had great teachers [...] the English was great [...] I think there'll always be people who'll find it difficult to [...] and there'll be people who are just either too shy or too [...] just not connecting too much, or those who don't have good English.

However, many felt, particularly those directly involved in the delivery of the ESOL programmes, that such progression issues were not inevitable and that changes needed to be made in how the programme was delivered, particularly for the lower level students:

ESOL4: It was going nowhere, for a cohort of people.

ESOL2: Like we kind of get told you're delivering a level 2 and sometimes you know damn well there's people in it that they won't be able for it and so you're kind of beating your head off a brick wall before you even start.

ESOL1: It didn't work, it didn't work, it didn't work for the tutors, I don't think it worked for them, and it was the way in which the programme [...] the better group was more manageable, the weak group never really were successful [...] so the bottom group was a kind of failure group [...] I think the model is wrong [...] it's all about looking for outcomes and showing that a percentage of people have done QQI certification.

A suspicion was raised that the 'official' goals in terms of the development of English centred on the second generation and that the needs and prospects of the first generation parents were secondary to that:

SP5: I guess we're talking about whether the parents have any prospect of picking up the language [...] of either going back to further education, or into the employment market, and generally speaking I think, there's often an expectation that that *won't* happen in any significant way, but that the kids will go to school and they'll become fluent [...] and their prospects will be much better [...] I think there's possibly a danger that that's the presumption.

Different modules with varying degrees of intensity were also suggested, including some targeted one-to-one support to cater for differing needs and levels. Most of the ESOL providers identified a need for specialised literacy and mother-tongue supports for some of the students:

ESOL1: So if somebody sat you down for an hour and did something that was actually of benefit to *you*, much better, much much better.

Summary of findings

Overall, the findings of the study illustrate the complex and varied language needs of the Syrian refugees in the IRPP in Ireland and the uneven approach to dealing with these at national level. The following issues were highlighted by the interviewees as particular points to consider in any evaluation of the current programme:

- The intensive nature of the lessons, particularly so soon after arrival in Ireland
- Realistic expectations in relation to outcomes
- Catering for pre-literate and older students in a sensitive manner

- Flexibility of class types to incorporate a mixture of one-to-one, Syrian only, and mixed nationality groups
- Use of Arabic-speaking teachers
- The design of materials and resources suited to the refugee context
- Blending traditional classroom teaching with extra-curricular and vocational content – in consultation with Syrians themselves
- Catering for specific needs and interests of individual Syrians themselves – not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach
- Catering for the learning styles and preferences of the Syrians themselves
- Appropriate training and guidelines for ESOL providers for the particular context of teaching refugee students
- Co-ordinated feedback and evaluation of existing practices and outcomes at national level
- Development of clear national guidelines and templates to support local ESOL providers.

Discussion

A number of key conclusions were drawn from these findings. The discussion of these is framed within the limitations of this small-scale study involving fourteen support providers involved in the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Ireland and should be interpreted in that context.

Firstly, feedback from the support providers on the ground point to a need to revisit the timing, intensity, duration and format of the ESOL programme in order to meet the needs of the students more effectively. In particular, the provision of such an intensive twenty-hour a week programme so soon after arrival in Ireland is perhaps counter-productive and may not take sufficient account of the practical needs and immediate concerns of the Syrians themselves. Fewer hours a week over a longer period of time might be a more appropriate model for these students. It is also important to consider how these hours might be divided up in order to incorporate a mixture of traditional classroom-based, vocational and extra-curricular activities.

Secondly, the needs, preferences and interests of the Syrian students themselves should dictate the content and approach to the ESOL programme. There is a need to identify and develop materials, resources and classroom procedures which are more appropriate to this cohort of students and which take account of their previous learning experiences and preferences as well as their particular circumstances and individual goals.

Finally, the findings indicate an urgent need for coordinated evaluation and feedback in relation to the current ESOL provisions at national level which would build on the invaluable experience of people already on the ground and on models in other jurisdictions, leading to the development of appropriate and clear guidelines and templates for the ETB centres to use in the design, delivery and tutor training for ESOL courses in the future.

It is hoped that the project findings outlined above contribute to our understanding of the language and intercultural needs of the Syrian refugees and might inform policy-makers in Irish, British and other international contexts regarding new strategies which may be required to address these.

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