Title: **Syrian voices: an exploration of the language learning needs and integration supports for adult Syrian refugees in Ireland**

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Abstract:

This paper describes a research project investigating language and intercultural support for adult Syrian refugees in Ireland under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP). Learning the language of the host community has been identified as a crucial factor in resettlement satisfaction for adult refugees, with particular difficulties reported in relation to older refugees, women, and those with low levels of literacy. This paper focuses on the voices of twenty-six adult Syrian refugees concerning their ongoing acquisition of English and interactions with members of the local community in the one to two years since their arrival, exploring their views regarding the importance of learning English and their perceptions of what constitutes both useful language learning supports and particular challenges for them. Findings point to the importance of language acquisition for adult refugees not only in relation to their prospects for employment, social interaction, and access to accurate information but also in relation to their sense of personal well-being, dignity and autonomy. The research highlights the need for a flexible approach to language learning and teaching in this context, utilizing a range of technological and bilingual supports, which respond to the particular circumstances, complex needs and previous learning experiences of the learners.

Key words:

refugees; language learning; integration; intercultural support; ESOL; resettlement

Introduction

The Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) was established by the Irish government in 2015 in response to the rising number of refugees entering Europe. Under the IRPP, coordinated by the Department of Justice and Equality (DJE), Ireland pledged to admit up to 4,000 people (DJE 2015). By the end of 2018, approximately half that number (2,159 people) had arrived (DJE, 2018). Thus far, most of those admitted under the IRPP have fled the war in Syria. Since 2011, this war has led to the displacement of over eleven million people, at least 5.6 million of whom have sought refuge outside Syria (UNCHR 2019). Initially, people arriving under the IRPP are accommodated on a temporary basis (intended to be eight to ten weeks, but often longer) in Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres (EROCs). These refugees are then resettled in towns around Ireland, generally outside the larger urban areas such as Dublin, due to the wider availability of suitable housing there and the belief that 'smaller communities can offer a better welcome and support' (Arnold and Quinn 2016: 41).

The Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration (OPMI), part of the Department of Justice and Equality, provides some support for the resettlement of refugees in these local host communities during the first year after arrival. This local-level resettlement is managed by inter-agency working groups chaired by local authorities and involving mainstream service providers (with responsibility for health, education etc.) along with NGOs and existing community development programmes (OPMI 2017). Adult refugees admitted under the IRPP are entitled to ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes which are provided by

local Education and Training Boards (ETBs) for up to 20 hours per week for a one-year period after arrival in the resettlement areas (OPMI 2017). Other supports include the provision of information services and intercultural activities in the host community. At the time of this study, interpreting and translating services for the refugees were generally outsourced to the private sector.

In contrast to asylum seekers who receive little state support in Ireland's 'Direct Provision' system (Kinlen 2013; Lentin 2016; Ní Chiosáin 2018), refugees arriving under the IRPP have considerably more access to integration supports. Nevertheless, research into previous refugee resettlement programmes in Ireland since the 1990s – for example, for Bosnians (Sultan 1999; Halilovic-Pastuovic 2010), Chechens (Rose 2016), Kurds (Kinlen 2008), and Rohingya (Titley 2010) – has shown that, even when some English language training is provided, refugees face significant language-related challenges.

Learning the language of the host community has been found to facilitate integration (Strang and Ager 2010) and to enhance migrants' access to employment (Cheung and Phillimore 2014; Irwin et al. 2014, Barrett, McGinnity, and Quinn 2017). It has also been identified as a significant factor in the well-being and settlement satisfaction of adult refugees (Kim, Ehrich, and Ficorilli 2012; Akresh, Massey, and Frank 2014). In the Irish context, research has shown that acquiring English language proficiency is a key challenge in relation to accessing work and further or higher education (Gusciute, Arnold and Quinn 2016; UNHCR 2013). English language skills have also been found to enable refugees in Ireland to engage more effectively with services and develop social connections within their local communities (Carson 2008). Investigating the language support currently available to Syrian refugees is therefore important, particularly as the IRPP is the largest refugee resettlement programme ever undertaken by the Irish state.

ESOL for Adult Refugees

For many adult refugees in English-speaking communities, ESOL provision can produce very successful results, particularly in the case of young, well-educated males (Beiser 2009); however, several studies have found that outcomes are often far less positive for other groups of refugees, particularly women (Riggs et al. 2012), the elderly (Beiser 2009), and those with low levels of education prior to arrival (Ros i Solé 2014).

Pedagogic approaches which focus on the distinct profiles of adult refugee learners, for example by involving previously settled refugees (Tshabangu-Soko and Caron 2011; Duran 2016) and using bilingual teaching supports (Sbertoli and Arnesen 2014; Madziva and Thondhlana 2017) in ESOL programmes, and which explore a range of techniques and procedures which address their particular needs and interests have been highlighted. These include student-agency (Baynham 2006) and other participatory approaches (Bryers, Winstanley, and Cooke 2014), home tutoring to enhance social inclusion identities (Barkhuizen 2017) and Content-Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approaches (van Rensburg and Son 2010). Involving the adult refugees themselves in the choice of content and mode of delivery of the programme (Roberts and Cooke 2009; Simpson 2011; Johnson and Berry 2014) and adapting to the learning preferences and previous learning experiences of these learners (Baynham 2006; Nelson and Appleby 2015) have also been emphasised as important.

There is an urgent requirement to develop pedagogies and professional training programmes for ESOL practitioners working in this context which take account of the particular educational needs of many refugees such as low levels of mother-tongue literacy (Benseman 2014; Choi and Ziegler 2015), fear and anxiety around speaking in English (Court 2017) and the classroom implications of trauma survival (Finn 2010; Nelson and Appleby 2015; Sellars

and Murphy 2018). There is strong consensus on the need to identify appropriate pedagogic practices and interventions so that the varied and complex needs of all refugee students, particularly the most vulnerable, are addressed (Phillimore 2010; Riggs et al. 2012; Beacco, Little, and Hedges 2014).

The Study

This paper describes part of a larger 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 were 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 adult Syrian refugees and fourteen support workers from a variety of resettlement locations were interviewed.

This paper focuses on the voices of Syrian refugees, fourteen men and twelve women, who had arrived in Ireland between one and two years previously. The participants had been resettled in four towns (population range approximately 8,000 to 27,000) with varying levels of local services and connectivity to major urban centres. The participants ranged in age from early 20s to mid-60s, all were married and most had children. This reflects Ireland's resettlement policy which prioritises the admission of family groups (Arnold and Quinn 2016).

This paper is based on the thematic analysis of individual semi-structured interviews with these Syrian participants, exploring their views regarding their acquisition of English and the

English language supports provided for them as part of the resettlement programme. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and involved asking pre-set, mostly open ended questions which were designed to explore the views of the participants with regard to the following constructs relative to English language learning and use: Section A: Background – previous education, work and language learning experiences prior to coming to Ireland; Section B: English language use and supports in Ireland, both in the ESOL classes and in daily life; Section C: Formal and informal interpreting and translation supports and services; Section D: Intercultural issues, social contact and integration in the local community and wider society; Section E: Access to employment and further education; Section F: experiences of parents who had children at school in Ireland; Section G: other comments or points to raise (if any).

Analysis for this part of the project was based on the following research questions:

1. To what extent and in what ways do Syrian refugees perceive the importance of learning English as part of their process of resettling in Ireland?

2. What do the Syrian refugees consider to be particularly challenging and difficult for them in terms of their use and acquisition of English in this context?

3. What do the Syrian refugees consider to be useful strategies and interventions in terms of their use and acquisition of English?

The interviews were conducted through Arabic. A male investigator, who is an active member of the Syrian community in Ireland and a native speaker of Arabic, interviewed the male participants. In the interviews with the Syrian women, a female Arabic speaker, who was also an active member of the Syrian community in Ireland and who has provided support

including interpreting and translation services to Syrian refugees, was present along with a female investigator. For these interviews, the interview questions (in English) and answers (in Arabic) were translated into Arabic and English by the interpreter. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in Arabic and then translated into English. Close reading of the English transcriptions followed, focusing on the precise meanings and interpretations of the translated data. The data was then qualitatively coded and analysed, using NVivo software, in order to identify key issues and themes. Figure 1 shows a thematic map of the codes and sub-codes which had been identified at this stage. The data within each code was then reviewed and analysed in order to identify overarching themes in the data in relation to the research questions. Finally, representative samples from the data were selected to illustrate the themes.

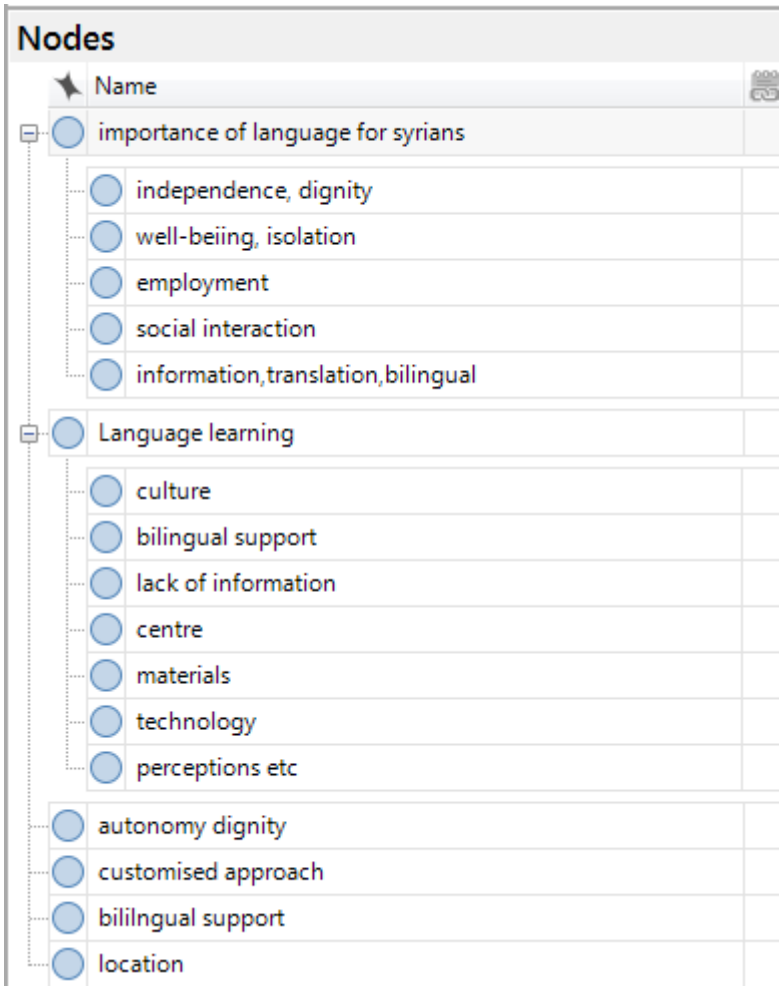

Figure 1: QSR NVivo, 2018, map of nodes.

Themes relating to English language development and supports for the Syrian refugees are presented below. To protect the anonymity of the respondents, their names and the names of the resettlement towns have not been identified. Each male participant is identified as M1, M2 etc.; Female participants are identified as F1, F2 etc.

Results

The Syrian refugees are very clear about their language needs and the importance of acquiring English. Learning English, the main language of the host community, is seen as inextricably linked to their sense of well-being and autonomy as they settle in Ireland. The participants identified areas which they found particularly important to them in terms of their ability to communicate in English which are outlined below. These are: everyday interactions with others in the community; aspirations for and relationships with their children; work and employment; and accessing services and information. They also described their perceptions of what constitutes useful language learning supports and effective language learning strategies.

Language needs: Areas of particular importance to the Syrians

Interaction and Making Friends

In general, the Syrian participants expressed satisfaction with Ireland and Irish life. They felt that people in all the resettlement towns were friendly and tolerant towards different religions, and that they were well accepted locally. However, despite these positive attitudes, there seemed to be very little social mixing among Syrians and local people. Most

participants had very few friends and did not have regular contact with Irish people, often resulting in feelings of loneliness and isolation:

> M3: you don't see any people […] you feel lonely

> F12: we would like to have some friends to talk with as we don't like to stay alone, we like to mix with Irish society.

Many participants expressed surprise at the lack of impromptu visits and interaction between neighbours in Ireland, which they found very different to Syria. They found Irish people were very friendly on the street but tended to keep themselves to themselves at home:

> M3: I find differences between how people treat each other, for example in our country we have many friends, we invite each other and we go and visit them. These things don't happen here, it's just "good morning" and "good evening", this is something new for me, I mean, for example, if your neighbour comes and visits your house here it's like a formal appointment, so they come and visit me at a specific time, from such a time to such a time

They described their neighbours as very busy and having no time for social life. There were one or two exceptions to this, where neighbours appear to have made efforts to visit the Syrians more often. However, overall participants had not made friends with their neighbours easily. Language was seen as the main barrier to integration. Interaction which did happen was perceived as often limited to superficial engagement and conversations:

> M13: we invited them once, but because of the language barrier, my neighbour talks to me but I don't fully understand what he says.

They mentioned their lack of confidence in using English outside class:

> F10: I don't know why I couldn't speak […] maybe I feel shy or I don't know how to speak […] for example, when my neighbour comes and visits me I feel embarrassed to speak with her although I understand her.

One woman, who seemed to have integrated better than other female refugees, attributed this inability to speak to what had happened to her in Syria. She described how one of her teachers had helped her to be brave and initiate conversations with neighbours:

> F8: I found classes are useful because our teacher […] helped me to be brave […] when I went to the classes I knew a lot of vocabulary, but I was not able to speak because of what we went through before we came to Ireland, the teacher said "you can speak and understand"

Lack of confidence and fear of speaking affected even those who spoke English well:

> M2: for a short time, nearly four or five months or more, I had a fear of speaking English, but now thank God I start speaking

All of the participants felt that they would like more interaction with Irish people. A communal space where Irish and Syrian people could interact and learn about and from each other was suggested by several participants; Syrians could learn more about Irish life, culture and society and Irish people could learn more about Syrian civilization and Islamic culture. Some saw it as a way to reduce unease and misunderstandings around each other:

> F7: when we walk in the street, some people are afraid of us because of our scarves, they are astonished and one lady ran away from me when she saw me walking down the street […] I want them to know that we are good people just like Irish people, we are not different, we aren't ISIS, we didn't come to kill them, we are here because we want a safe place to live

Many participants also identified this space as one where they could interact socially and make friends, practise their English and improve their well-being:

> F10: for example, doing cooking, Irish and Syrian cooking, everyone could bring their own food in a specific space […] I mean Irish women could teach us things that they know, these things help us to get rid of depression, we are very frustrated from being at home.

In general, the participants welcomed the valuable input of volunteers and stressed their non-official role:

> M4: this is different from the school, we go there to talk with other people so we go to have face-to-face conversations […] it's done by people, it's not done by the government […] it's useful because we are learning conversation

The participants wanted more emphasis on conversation practice with Irish people as part of the ESOL programme; many felt that this was more useful than a focus on grammar or certain functional vocabulary.

Children

A second reason for learning English identified by the Syrians related to the future prospects of their children and their ongoing relationships with them. Most of the participants were parents and had children with them of various ages. Their children's welfare and education was identified as a major concern of their parents.

> F8: I came to Ireland for the education of my children

Parents were generally happy with their children's experiences in Ireland. They reported that their children enjoyed school and engaged in regular extracurricular activities; they felt that in general their children were integrating well and making friends. The most positive comments made by participants related to how well their children were doing in Ireland:

> F8: I like everything, the teachers, the manager of the school, and my children make a lot of friends […] they treat them the same way as the other students

Wanting to help their children was a primary driver in their desire to improve their English:

> M8: I want to know English to help my children in school if they face any kind of problems

They understood that helping their children had an impact on their own well-being:

> F8: actually it's helpful for me also when I help my children

Parents wanted to be able to help their children more with their schoolwork but were often constrained by the language barrier. Parents also felt that sometimes they could not fully understand or explain any concerns they might have to the teachers in their children's schools due to the language barrier:

> M1: Speaking in the school about my children, sometimes if I want to ask the teacher about a specific question, she explains but I couldn't follow her or understand her

Many parents were using the materials, books, TV shows and other technology used by their children as a way to improve their own English. However, as the children improved at English, they began to use Arabic less. Parents expressed concerns that their children would lose their Arabic language. The implications for communication within the family were left unsaid.

F7: I want to prevent them from watching English programs, because they start asking about Arabic words if they watch Arabic programs, and also my second daughter her English has improved a lot, she speaks to the youngest sister in English, she knows words in English more than Arabic

M7: I want her to learn Arabic, I don't want her to forget Arabic […] at three years of age, the Arabic language is not developed, so the English will improve but the Arabic will not improve

The men in particular worried that they were no longer effective role models for their children as they could not fulfil their traditional breadwinner roles. This has had an impact on their sense of self-dignity and respect:

M6: if anyone is just sitting around and getting his money on social welfare for a long time, I mean I and my children will be spoilt, this issue is very difficult, it's like dying slowly, my son is seeing me sleeping all morning and being awake all night and getting money without making much effort

Employment

All the participants said it was difficult to find any work in the resettlement towns. In Syria, most of the women had never worked outside the home, or had worked for a short time before they had married. In general, most of the women saw their main role as being in the home and were more concerned about the problems accessing work experienced by the men. Overall, the men were very keen to find work. Only one of the men we spoke to had found work, in a warehouse in the nearest city. They identified language as the primary barrier in finding work:

> M7: I applied for a job […] and I faced many challenges, all of them relate to language, so if you know the language you could find a job […] our language is not good enough

In addition, they felt that it was very difficult to have their Syrian qualifications, skills and experience recognised in Ireland. One or two of the men were doing vocational courses in electronics and mechanics and although they struggled with the language, they felt this was very useful.

> M4: I am studying an electronic course […] it's related to my previous work as an electrician […] there is no difference but here in this course there are many English terms because it's technical language, I found difficulties in this situation […] the only way is to study, you couldn't find a job without a diploma

Many wanted a stronger vocational focus to the language lessons, which could be tailored to their individual skills and experience. One man suggested organising customised 'language-cum-training' programmes for refugees which would entail built-in experience on the job:

> M3: for example, a carpenter could do a course in carpentry and the smith could do a course in blacksmithing and they could encourage companies and push them to accept two people to work in their company […] if they could make a place for us, so people could work without experience, at least for one year or six months, just to let people know how to deal with other people, it's just an idea

They wanted more help in finding jobs. Some of the difficulties relate to lack of information and cultural differences. Many were frustrated by what they perceived as unnecessary bureaucratic red tape and regulations preventing them from setting up their own business

enterprises. They felt they needed support in acquiring the necessary knowledge of the Irish system and were aware of the importance of English in this:

> M9: the thing is that people don't know where they should go to register [for a job] and who is responsible for this kind of thing […] I don't know where I should go if I want to ask for a job […] the government should […] provide us with a list of jobs to do and we could pick one of them […] they know more about the rules

The men expressed their boredom and their desire to contribute to society and not be a burden:

> M9: I want now to work or do something useful for the country, so I don't want other people to be responsible for me, I want to depend on myself

> M10: we are bored, I really need to work

Several of the women also expressed boredom from being at home all day and a desire to be productive members of society:

> F7: Being at home is like a killing disease […] we are very bored and want to do something, but I don't know what I should do

> F10: I hope in the future to do volunteer work and help others […] we are very frustrated from being at home

A recurring theme with all participants was the desire to be independent and depend on themselves:

> F1: I like to depend on myself but my language level is not helping

> M12: I want them to know that we are good people and we don't like to be depending on anyone, we are smart and we know how to manage and we want to live our lives

simply.

Access to Services: Interpreting and Translation

This desire for autonomy and to be self-sufficient was apparent in the approach of most of the participants towards translation and interpreting services. Despite the albeit limited interpreting and translation services available to them, many participants explained that although others might need this help, they themselves did not want it. Many expressed the desire for independence and to speak for themselves, without always needing to be supported.

However, they were acutely aware that there were times when interpreters and accurate translation was crucial. Participants found making appointments or other transactions over the phone and the language required for medical interactions particularly difficult. There were many areas which were mentioned where lack of accurate translation and information contributed to the concerns and worries of the participants: health concerns, when services and supports would cease, information about jobs and job seeking, about transport, about educational courses and supports for their children in the future. Several participants mentioned the issue of language in terms of their ongoing needs in relation to information:

> M9: I write and then [the App] translates it, sometimes it gives me the general meaning to let me understand but sometimes there are many things I couldn't understand, for example the last day the hospital sent me an appointment for gastroscopy, they wrote in the letter that I should fast […] I actually didn't understand that, but if they sent me a translator things would be more accurate

> M1: I don't know about all my rights, I have a disabled child, after two years someone told me I could apply to get a reduction for electricity or fuel, so it's a pity I didn't know about it

In general, participants tended to rely on family and friends for interpreting and translation. Several mentioned that they did not like to overuse this help, that people were busy. They worried that after two years, they could not keep relying on friends to help:

> M1: it's available but hard to get it […] now it's really embarrassing for me […] the friends who used to help us, they start to get bored, it's difficult for them because they are busy now and the other thing is that there are a lot of people here […] after two years I imagine we'll find no one

One man mentioned that his children helped with his translation needs but that this was not appropriate when he was explaining his problems during his psychotherapy sessions.

Others mentioned the need for privacy and trust in the translation process:

> M12: sometimes you need to talk about something privately, where you don't want anyone to translate for you.

Another man whose English was better than many others mentioned that he felt uncomfortable translating for his friends because of his own limited English, but that at times it was required for life or death medical situations:

> M3: it's very upsetting for people because they have to find someone to translate, I have a friend who took me to the hospital with him, I had to do it because he didn't find anyone else […] they took all the words that I said into consideration and it might then endanger his life, but I had to...

Language Learning Supports and Strategies

ESOL Classes

All of the participants had been offered English language lessons of approximately twenty hours per week in the first year of resettlement, reduced to two to four hours per week in the second year. There was no consensus on the number of hours provided for English language lessons. Some felt that there were too many hours; others felt that more lessons needed to be provided. These views did not appear to correlate to language level or motivation to learn.

Most of the participants were in their second year of ESOL support. Overall, the level of English of the participants was quite low. In general, the women had acquired only a very basic level of English, with most attending classes at level 1 or level 2 (equivalent to Beginner and Post-beginner levels). The level of English of the men varied more, ranging from Level 1 to Level 5 (equivalent to Beginner and Intermediate levels); however, most of the men also attended classes at the lower levels. Many participants felt that they had made little progress since arriving in Ireland two years earlier:

> M9: I don't make any kind of progress in lessons

> F7: I know some English words […] but I couldn't say a full sentence or pronounce it.

Several mentioned literacy problems:

> F13: The writing, the vowel and alphabet, it's hard with reading or writing, I find it hard, it's been two years now and I still can't tell the difference between vowels

> M8: I don't know how to read, proper reading. I usually keep words in my mind and then translate it.

Attendance at formal classes was mixed. Factors affecting attendance mentioned by the participants related to the location of the ETB centre, ongoing health problems and childcare. Others mentioned lack of progress and motivation as a reason for not attending.

Not being able to understand the teacher was a recurring theme and all of the participants felt that Arabic-speaking teachers would be extremely beneficial; this was especially true of the older Syrians:

> M9: I don't understand […] my age now is 63, for example if we have an Arabic and an English teacher it would be easier for us, so we could write Arabic in our notebooks and then we could review the words at home, we can't understand the teaching in English

> M10: we need an English teacher who knows Arabic, so we could understand more, all the people in my group are old, my age is 56 and my friend […] is 54, his wife is 63, all of us are old and all of us are Syrian, we need an Arabic and English teacher

This had happened in the second year in Town A and the participants found this extremely useful:

> F1: when I go to my Arabic teacher and he explains why we put the clause here or why we put it in another position using Arabic, I understand more than I did with my normal teacher

Previous learning experiences and cultures of learning were also an issue in terms of their perception of the usefulness of the teaching and classes. They were used to learning in a different way:

> M8: I didn't like the school because their way is not as we want

Some participants said that they would have liked more structure to the formal lessons; one man explained how he preferred the way the Arabic-speaking teacher taught grammar:

> M1: he gave us the grammar rule, after that he gave us twenty English words to translate into Arabic and then ten sentences as an exercise

Several did not like the less structured interactive approach employed by the [Irish] teachers, whereby all students were encouraged to participate and speak:

> M5: We couldn't get the benefits from the lessons, there are twelve or thirteen people in one class, women and men, so if everyone speaks one word or two words …, we couldn't understand anything

The format of the classes was also mentioned. During the first year of resettlement, these classes tended to be for Syrian refugees only, but mixed nationality groups were more common in the second year. Participants felt that having all Syrians together was not a good idea.

Some men also said that having men and women in the same class was not a good idea and that it inhibited people from speaking freely:

> M5: the difficulty that we found is men and women together and this is a big mistake […] I mean from an educational point it's wrong, for example I and my wife and my friend and his wife and a foreign woman, I mean from a religion point it's wrong, so if I want to speak they start to laugh, and this is embarrassing, or for example if the woman wants to speak in front of the men, also it's embarrassing so she couldn't speak naturally

Almost all the participants wanted more conversation and pronunciation practice, but did not feel there was much value in speaking in English with each other:

M5: they shouldn't put all Syrian people in one class […] because if we are all from the same nationality […] we will speak Arabic in the class all the time

Many students considered face-to-face interaction with Irish people as the best way to learn:

Interviewer: Why do you think being with people who speak English is better than the classes?

F8: I think when I make a mistake in conversation they will say that it's not good, then the next time I will say the right word. I found speaking with [Irish] people is better for me

M11: I did a lot of courses and I studied with Chinese, Indian, Romanian and Italian people but they themselves are not good at English

Language Learning Strategies

Almost all the participants said that they used technology on a daily basis to help them learn English. They found Google Translate and other translation apps particularly helpful and found them a useful way to translate official letters, or to prepare in advance for important appointments such as doctor's visits. Some recorded difficult words or text on their phone to translate later. Many participants used them to review their language lessons later in the day and help them understand what they hadn't understood in class. They were alive to the limitations of these apps:

M1: [the App] couldn't respond to the voice exactly […] it doesn't work like the human brain […] it doesn't give you the exact translation […] not exactly 100%

correct

Some used online English language lessons or Arabic-English learning websites. They found these useful for learning grammar, functional language, pronunciation and also because technology could provide them with the bilingual supports which many participants wanted and found particularly useful:

> M6: on YouTube there are a lot of Arabic teachers who teach grammar and educational programs, so I try a lot to memorize English words that I need

In using these apps, participants could work at their own pace and practise what they enjoy and find useful; and also because they could employ a range of strategies which they found useful such as repeating, memorising and translating the texts and words.

Summary of results

The Syrian refugees clearly see the acquisition of English as fundamentally linked to their welfare and well-being. Lack of English has a deep effect on their ability to interact and forge meaningful relationships with Irish people; with their future hopes for and relationships with their children; with their ability to find work and a productive role in society; and with their ability to access accurate and appropriate information and services. The Syrian men and women are acutely aware that the development of their English language skills enhances their capacity for independence and autonomy and their sense of self-worth and dignity as well as helping to combat feelings of isolation, boredom and depression.

The ESOL classes which are provided do not seem to cater fully for the needs of all Syrians, particularly older Syrians and those with low literacy skills on arrival. Many Syrians are used to and prefer a more traditional, less interactive learning environment. They also prefer a

teaching context where men and women are not taught together. They commented on the usefulness of more structured grammar lessons, Arabic-speaking teachers and other bilingual supports, more conversation practice with Irish people, and mixed-nationality classes.

Syrians identified telephone exchanges, medical terminology and work-related technical language as particularly difficult for them. They found learning strategies such as memorisation, translation and repetition very helpful and all, even the older learners, used apps and other technology extensively as a way of learning English. This allowed them to work at their own pace, focus on their own needs and interests, and find bilingual supports online.

Syrians spoke of their lack of confidence and fear when speaking in English and some hinted at how trauma survival may contribute to this inability to engage with Irish people easily. For some, teacher encouragement and support played a role in the development of their self-confidence in using English. It is also clear that some of the difficulties in establishing relationships with neighbours and with finding work are related not only to language issues but to cultural differences and lack of information. Many Syrians spoke positively about creating a communal space or centre, where cultural exchanges and informal social interactions and learning between Irish and Syrian people could take place.

Discussion and Recommendations

The focus of this study was to explore the views of Syrian refugees regarding the importance of learning English and to examine their perceptions of what constitutes both useful language learning supports and particular challenges for them in English language interactions and learning contexts in Ireland. There are several important conclusions which can be drawn from these findings. The discussion of these is framed within the limitations of this small-

scale study involving twenty-six Syrian refugees in Ireland and should be interpreted in that context.

There are a number of implications for the design and delivery of ESOL programmes for adult Syrian refugees. Firstly, the previous learning experiences and preferences of Syrians can have an enormous effect on attendance and on motivation. This corresponds to previous findings in studies on adult refugees (Baynham 2006; Nelson and Appleby 2015; Jones 2016). More flexible pedagogical approaches which cater for pre-literacy and the preferred learning styles and strategies of the students are needed. In addition, the importance of bilingual supports and Arabic-speaking tutors, in particular for older refugees, is an important factor in this regard. Again, this reflects findings from other studies (Sbertoli and Arnesen 2014; Madziva and Thondhlana 2017). The Multilingual Turn has been an interesting development in recent years in the field of Applied Linguistics (May 2014) and may point to practical ways to incorporate bi/multilingual approaches such as Translanguaging (García, Johnson, and Seltzer, 2017) into adult ESOL contexts, even in situations where the teacher him/herself is monolingual (Woodley and Brown, 2016). Another area to consider is the real potential of CLIL (Content-Language-Integrated-Learning) and Blended learning approaches in language teaching in this context, given the particular interests of the refugees and their familiarity with using apps and technology for language learning purposes. This approach would: cater for the individual vocational needs and skills of the Syrians; develop their knowledge in relation to topics of particular interest to them such as the rights and services available to them, heritage language maintenance, the Irish educational system and how it relates to their children, intercultural interactions with neighbours, etc.; and provide a degree of autonomy, allowing students to work at their own pace and according to their own preferences. Van Rensburg and Son (2010) provide examples of how CLIL and computer-assisted-teaching techniques can be used successfully with adult refugees. However, much

more classroom-based research on CLIL and on the role of technology to support language development among adult refugees is needed.

Anxiety and fear have been identified as key factors for adult refugees, both in this study and elsewhere in the literature (Baynham 2006, Finn 2010, Court 2017). Measures to cultivate self-confidence and reduce anxiety during interactions in English need to be developed for the Syrian refugees. More opportunities for informal conversational practice and cultural exchanges with local people and volunteers are also required and could perhaps take place in communal learning spaces and community centres as suggested by many respondents, which would be a safe learning space for the Syrians and over which they could exert some control and autonomy. Finally, it seems clear that further training and pedagogic support for ESOL teachers is needed to help address the complex and multifaceted needs of adult refugees, particularly in relation to trauma survival and pre-literacy. More research is needed on the pedagogic impact of trauma survival in particular (Finn 2010; Nelson and Appleby 2015).

This study confirms what many earlier studies have found in relation to language learning outcomes for refugees, particularly in terms of the less positive outcomes for many older refugees and those with low levels of education prior to arrival, for example in Canada (Beiser 2009), the UK (Phillimore 2011), Luxembourg (Choi and Ziegler 2015) and Australia (Sellars and Murphy 2018). In the Irish context, Guscuite, Arnold and Quinn. (2016) found regional variation in the availability of ESOL support, with a lack of courses tailored to refugees' specific needs and appropriate to their differing levels of English language proficiency. It is interesting that so many of the issues raised in this study have been identified in earlier studies. The failure to respond to earlier findings at local and policy levels indicates perhaps the ad hoc nature of ESOL provision for adult refugees arriving under the IRPP in Ireland, which has been described as lacking in clear guidelines, rigorous evaluation

and specialised training by ESOL providers working with them (Ćatibušić, Gallagher, and Karazi. forthcoming, 2019)). Other studies have commented on a similar lack of robust monitoring and evaluation of ESOL programmes for adult refugees at policy level in other jurisdictions (Phillimore 2011; Tshabangu-Soko and Caron. 2011; Sellars and Murphy 2018).

There is strong consensus in the literature on the need to identify successful pedagogic practices and interventions in ESOL provision so that the needs of all refugee students, particularly the most vulnerable, are addressed (Phillimore 2011; Riggs et al. 2012; Beacco, Little and Hedges 2014). Taking a bottom-up approach which centres on the experiences and perceptions of the refugees themselves has the potential to identify such constructive approaches. It is hoped that the findings in this study might usefully inform the design and delivery of ESOL classes and programmes so that they can become more attuned to the complex needs and learning preferences of adult refugee students.

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