



# Report 2016



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**To wash away a footprint: exploring the real impact of  
English on refugee ESOL learners**

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## To Wash Away a Footprint: Exploring the Real Impact of English on Refugee ESOL Learners

### Methodology

It was important for this investigation to take place in the realm of qualitative research in order to explore individual first-hand accounts of refugee interaction with the English language when learning it as a second or other tongue. The purpose of this type of investigation is to attempt to expose new avenues for further exploration and to uncover the realities of the effect that language resources and their implementation have on the lives of the people for whom they are intended. For this reason semi structured interviews were selected as the method for collecting our data. The interviews ranged from between 14 to 40 minutes long, dependent on the interviewee. Once we had introduced ourselves and the purpose for meeting with them, and after a short period of non-specific phatic interaction the following eleven questions were placed in front of the interviewees as prompts to use during the interview if needed:

- Is learning English more or less helpful than you thought it would be?
- How does it compare to before you moved to the UK?
- Does language affect your relationships/ friendships? Does it affect the amount of relationships you can maintain
- How do you feel people's general attitudes towards you are as a non-native speaker of English?
- How do you feel about the help you have received, do you think it could be improved? What do you like about it?
- What have you found has benefited you most in learning English?
- If you could change anything about how you learnt English, what would it be?
- Do you feel confident in your ability to continue learning English?

- What positive improvements, if any, have you noticed in your life since you started to learn English?
- Do you feel more at home living in England given that you can speak the language?
- How does English culture differ from the other cultures you have experienced?

The interviews were held in Alexandria Library in Rusholme, Greater Manchester, an accessible charity based organisation providing free ESOL lessons for people with a range of English language ability, including available facilities for specific minority groups. Once interview material was gathered, the data from a total of three individuals were used. The data collected by some of the participants had to be omitted because they left the library before we could get confirmation that they were happy for us to include them in our exhibition piece.

We thought it essential to maintain an amicable rapport with the interviewees so as to enable us to extract the most natural and personal information as we reasonably could. Because of this, the permission was gained through verbal explanation and agreement, included with the condition that they could leave the interview or refuse to have themselves represented in any way at any time throughout the process. We also agreed to make what we created available to them for their review if they so wished. The interview began with unrecorded general questions about the interviewee to the result in order to establish a unimposing atmosphere, before beginning with the more probing questions. The interview took place in the library, which provided a known, comfortable environment for the interviewees, and an environment in which they were comfortable speaking English. The presence of the library managers (men who were refugees themselves, and whom the interviewees seemed to like and respect) further enhanced the sense of comfort for the interviewees and also provided us with a potential translator. Conducive to not overwhelming our interviewees the decision was made that two people would conduct each interview, and to interview the refugees in small groups, which would increase the likelihood of acquiring more

natural language and encourage the refugees to speak more openly, as well as react to one another. An audio recording was taken from the interview and used later for recapitulation and analysis.

We decided to present our findings in the format of a graphic zine for to be shown in an exhibition during Refugee Week in Manchester. The concept of a zine is appropriate to the essence of the results of our investigation, being physically small and seemingly minute in comparison to the (probable) scale of most other exhibition pieces, reflecting the few participants. This small piece of information is intended to be seen as enticing, the words on the cover an imperative: “listen to my voice”, encouraging the audience to choose to pick up with and interact with our piece. The concept behind this is that although the scale of those represented is modest, what they have to say is important, and it is an active choice to engage with those voices in those communities around you. Once the zine is picked up, it must be read through to be understood in its entirety, inviting the interpretation of a narrative and of a journey which is not necessarily entire or complete.

#### Discussion:

Learning English was described by all of the interview participants as a massively important thing in their life here in Manchester, one response given by the interviewees was that to manage your life here and sort out everyday tasks, competence in English was key. The participants said that English helped them achieve a high standard of living, giving them a chance to further their education and giving them the ability to find a job. Out of the refugees that we talked to, all of them responded in a positive manner when we asked them how helpful learning English had been whilst trying to settle, with none of them giving us any negatives about their experience so far. Many of them gave us the response that when asked about if learning English had negatively affected their use of their own language, that their mother tongue was still a big part of their life and identity. Jamil, who was one of the first interviewees explained that he still spoke his first language when calling his friends and family, who also had the same first language and that he also listened to

music, read and watched television in this language as well as English. He had identified that this helped him preserve his fluency, something which he valued as an individual. Although he described his native language as a big part of his identity, he also communicated that being accepted into society here in Manchester was of great importance to him. He found that language helped him do this - mostly through making social connections and having the necessary communication ability to have and maintain a job, not only this, but also to understand the culture and learn about his new environment.

Some of the interviewees had started learning English before moving to Manchester, which they described as helpful, however they said that the learning process differed massively and there were some issues with learning English in a non-English speaking country. For example, one of the participants told us how accents and speed of conversation made it difficult for him whilst engaging in both informal and formal exchanges, as Received Pronunciation was not always used. They explained that this was because they had started to be taught English using Received Pronunciation before they came to Manchester and that limited opportunities had arisen to engage with native speakers of English. In comparison, when taught English surrounded by native speakers of English, they found it much easier to use the language in a way which was understandable and familiar to those with whom they were trying to communicate. Overall, the overwhelming opinion from the interviewees was that to learn English in a way in which it was useful in England, especially Manchester, was to learn here - but also to engage with the native speakers and practice.

We asked our interviewees about how learning English affected their relationships with other people. We also asked how language helps maintain friendships. It was found that learning English had not only helped the participants maintain relationships but the process of learning English had also helped form relationships too. Interviewees reported on a large sense of community amongst ESOL students. Jamil said that "The most important thing is how to react with people" when asked about his main reason for learning English. Omar also discussed the importance of

relationships, saying that it teaches him “how to talk to neighbours”. Salim said that he has a number of friends that are also learning English who he interacts with, as well as people who offer to help him. Salim talked about how at Cornerstone, the local community centre he attends, he cooks for people in exchange for help with his English. He goes on to talk about how the friends he has also aid him with learning English. Salim highlighted how ESOL speakers constantly drive to improve not only their own English, but of others around them. The interviewees emphasised how the process of learning English has brought people together. The interviewees all agreed that communicating with people is crucial for not only maintaining relationships, but also for employment and health. Access to basic financial and social services and the need for social interaction are the main reasons why the refugees interviewed were learning English.

We also asked the interviewees about the reaction they, as non-native speakers of English, have received from other speakers of English as they go about their daily life. This is based around research that highlighted how refugees that lacked social interaction and failed to properly assimilate was linked with feelings of alienation (Tran et. al 1987). Omar discussed this, using the example of calling the electrical company and feeling embarrassed when he has to ask the person on the phone to repeat what they are saying. Jamil expressed initial fear around interacting with speakers of English speakers and that their confidence is holding them back. However, he goes on to say how on the whole people are friendly towards him. All participants talked about how they found the variety of accents around Manchester one of the most difficult parts of learning English. They believed that to truly assimilate into their environment they had to try to embrace all parts of the language, taking into account accent. However, as ESOL students they were fully aware of the need to interact with English speakers around them.

*“We need English club, for people to come together and to speak together.*

*Because most of the people have no confidence, we have to encourage them to*

*Speak and interact with other people. Sometimes people get shy, they think their English is not good, they can't socialise easily."*

Participants were also asked about the help they've received learning English, as well as how it could be improved. All interviewees were unanimous in believing that they were getting a vast amount of help learning English, however this help came more from charity led companies, community centres and general interaction with other ESOL speakers, than it did from institutions put in place by the government. Salim discussed how he has been sent to Manchester College for English lessons, where he learned to speak English in around 4 months. However, he believes that the interactions he has had at Cornerstone Community Centre, as well as Alexandria Library, is what made him learn so quickly.

*"First we went to the job centre and they sent all the refugees to Manchester College. Now I've studied at Manchester College for four months. Before four months my English was not good."*

Salim expressed great gratitude for the measures put in place by the government that allowed him to go to college to learn English, however it could be said that the refugees getting involved with the Alexandria Library, a charity based organisation which runs English classes also, has been just as helpful. Although English classes only run twice a week, all interviewees said how they spend a lot of time at the library outside of these classes, simply talking to each other and improving their language skills. The interviewees relying so much on the smaller charity led organisations in Manchester could suggest that government led efforts are not as useful.

For the sixth question, we asked our interviewees what they found that has benefited them most in learning English. Salim responded by telling us that he learns best by observing and participating in everyday English discourse. This process was achieved visually, by watching British

television programmes such as BBC news and movies that included a translation from their mother language into English via subtitles, audibly, by listening to clear English music that can be easily inferred and deciphered, and verbally, by participating in conversation with both native and non-native speakers of English when attending his English classes at the Manchester College and the Alexandria Library as well as whilst volunteering at the local Cornerstone Community Centre. Omar also mentioned that whilst he volunteers he has the opportunity to teach his fellow native Arabic speakers small amounts of English which helps both himself and his peers in learning the language.

As ESOL speakers, refugees come to the UK with no extensive awareness of English customs and traditions. One of the many advantages of this practice is that this enriches their knowledge of both English domestic and everyday culture as well as regular, domestic communication with other speakers of English. Salim also commented on the difficulty of comprehending local Mancunian accents as well as other blended accents of English such as Scottish English or Irish English. Mancunian English incorporates a variety of slang which Salim had further difficulty comprehending as he had never heard nor spoke a variety of the local terms before. Again, through investing in conversation and observing spoken discourse with native speakers of English, especially more localised forms, the refugees will come to better understand both the cultural and linguistic traditions of English.

The seventh question that we asked our respondents was if they would be willing to change any aspect about their experience in learning English. Salim and Omar praised their lifestyle due to their access to learning resources but mentioned that it was more difficult for some of their peers who migrated to other European countries such as Germany as it was profoundly more challenging for them to communicate with non-Arabic speakers about topics such as applying for jobs or domestic issues such as paying for bills.

We extended this question and asked them whether or not they felt any form of pressure to learn the language in order to integrate within their new communities more efficiently as well as

their confidence in their ability to learn English. Salim responded by stating that when he made telephone calls to establishments such as the water or electricity company about issues with payments and confessed that he felt self-conscious for asking the person on the opposite end of the receiver to repeat what they have said so that he could mentally translate the dialogue sufficiently enough to respond. By continuing to attend the variety of ESOL classes set up by both the Manchester College and The Alexandria Library and using the resources at their disposal, both Salim and Omar will no doubt have the self-assurance they need to continue to speaking English fluently and effectively in order to ease the integration process between their own sub-community and the communities of Greater Manchester.

For our ninth question, we asked our interviewees what positive improvements, if any, they had noticed in their lives since they started learning English. The general consensus was that the acquisition of English was imperative in pursuing improvements in your education, employment and a healthy social life in England, one of our interviewees had this to say: “For me, language has a big impact on my relationships, because when I try to improve my English, many of my friends help me. When your English is improved, you can acquire many friends. You have confidence, you can speak to them and hang out with them. Language is a very important part in acquiring new friends, getting to know new people.” Furthermore, the idea of improved societal integration and cultural enrichment seemed to resonate with Jamil, who stated:

*“Learning language, for me is very important to know new people and to have new friends, this is a very important thing in my life. This is a motivation for me, I want to socialise with other people, I want to know about the culture, about the society, about the people here, because now I have become a part of the society here. I want to integrate to this society.”*

Our tenth question asked our interviewees whether they feel more at home living in England, now they are able to speak the language. This question produced similar responses, mainly

based around social improvement and a sense of societal belonging, one interviewee stated “Since I learn English, I know many thing about English culture, English society, I know many thing about the life in this country. I acquired many friends now, I sometimes go to their home and have meal with them or cup of tea with them. Now I can apply for work because I think my English enabled me to work. Not sophisticated work, normal work. I think my life getting better now.” This response clearly shows that the acquisition of the language helps refugees to feel more at home in our country.

As well as this, interviewees testified the helpfulness of English people in making them feel welcome and helping them to learn our language, noting “I think I have more problem in my country than here. People here are friendly and helpful and also even if your English not good, people sometimes help you and people also care and can understand what you want.” Our first interviewee also stated that Manchester in particular was ‘the best’ of the cities he has been to, adding that ‘people (there) are friendly, and open.

Our eleventh and final question asked interviewees ‘how does English culture differ from other cultures you have experienced?’ one interviewee stated “There is big cultural difference (between Sudan and England). I think people in my country are more open, people like to talk a lot, not like here. Here, people are sometimes not talkative, people in my country are talkative. People in my country speak loudly, not like here.” further adding that “English people like coconut, hard on outside, soft on inside. If you crack the outside you will find them to be very soft. People here are friendly and helpful. For me no problem.” these quotes clearly highlight the attitudes of people in the two different cultures, Jamil did not state which he preferred, it seemed that both were appealing for different reasons. The issues of women’s rights (or lack thereof) in Middle Eastern countries and the prevalence of Islam as opposed to England’s more relaxed views on religion were also cited as fundamental cultural differences.

The information gathered from these interviews make several things clear in terms of how refugees tackle the difficult task of learning English. All participants highlighted the significance of

community among ESOL speakers, in terms of helping each other learn English. Although we expected to find refugees attending English classes, the amount of extra time that the participants put into learning the language through things such as community centres and the Alexandria library was not expected. Overall, the participants were generally pleased with the measures put in place for them around Manchester for learning English. However, most of these organisations are charity run, as opposed to government led. We initially wished to find out whether the lack of administration and co-ordination amongst the governments ESOL provisions had an effect on how refugees in Manchester were approaching learning English. The refugees we interviewed had taken it upon themselves and the smaller organisations around Manchester to help them, something they seemed more than happy with. This could imply that the government's ESOL provisions are inferior to the community led provisions in place around Manchester.

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