ESOL for UK Asylum Seekers

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Abstract

What are the educational needs of those who flee abroad as a result of civil strife in their home countries and how can these needs best be met? This paper discusses the role of ESOL in assisting asylum seekers and their families in the UK. The theme is developed using specific examples from one college in inner London, based on interviews with an experienced ESOL lecturer.

Asylum seekers are people who for reasons of personal safety choose to live in a country other than their own. They have entered another country, often known as the host country, and are in the process of applying for the right to live there legally.

Refugees or asylum seekers decide to leave their native country for one or more of a number of reasons. The most common reason is armed conflict. The conflict may be between different communities—ethnic, religious or political—within one country. Alternatively it may take the form of an invasion by an outside power. In either case many people find themselves destitute, physically or economically. Armed conflict often results in the destruction of buildings. In many cases houses are destroyed, leaving families homeless. Again factories and shops can be destroyed, leading to the loss of employment and thus of livelihood. In some cases physical destruction in one part of a country has serious economic consequences in other regions. For example, damage to the road or railroad system hampers the movement of raw materials to a factory or the flow of finished goods to their market.

Armed conflict may have dire economic consequences throughout a country and not just in the scene of the fighting. If the market for a particular product collapses because the customers are impoverished or have fled, then the producers will lose their livelihood. Again, the financial system may collapse through
the devaluation of a currency, or the cessation of vital banking services such as credit and foreign currency transfers.

What are asylum seekers’ countries of origin? In the last twenty years the majority of the world’s refugees and asylum seekers have come from the developing world. There have been many regional conflicts especially in two specific areas: Africa and the Middle East. A few examples from Africa are Liberia, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Sudan and Kenya and from the Middle East, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan.

When we analyse the destination countries, it is clear that the vast majority of refugees move to neighboring countries within the affected regions. Accordingly the UN estimates that there are 9.2 million refugees of whom the majority are not in Europe or the US, but in developing countries of which numerically speaking Iran, Pakistan and Tanzania are the top three. (Times online March 17th 2006).

In the western media, refugees seeking asylum in G8 countries receive the most coverage. Here we give a numerical summary of the last 20 years. In the 1990s, with the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the conflict in Bosnia–Herzegovina there was a flood of refugees, reaching a peak of 655,500 in 2001. However, this number fell by nearly half, to only 336,000 in 2005. There are two reasons for this decline since 2001. Firstly it reflects a calming of the situation in countries bordering the G8 countries such as ex-Yugoslavia. Then, many potential destination countries have tightened their immigration laws, as in the EU.

For several reasons many refugees apply for asylum in European Union countries. It may be that the EC is closer than other prospective destinations. Alternatively, there may be greater chance of employment there. In addition, the existence of communities of fellow-countrymen encourages refugees to hope for a welcome. In some cases these communities include relatives.

Let us consider the situation in different EU countries. Broadly speaking, North and West Europe are more popular than the center or south. Thus the UK, France, Germany and Sweden all received between 20 and 30,000 asylum applications in 2006. However, some northern areas are not popular. In fact the least popular states of the entire EU were the Baltic republics, which received very few applications, for example only 5 in Estonia.

As far as the UK is concerned, asylum requests reached a peak in 2001, with over 100,000. This number reflected the continuing strife in the Balkans, an area fairly close to the UK. Then as peace returned to this area, the total number of applicants fell, reaching 30,000 in 2005. This prompted the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Gutteres to issue a statement “These figures show that talk in the industrialized countries of a growing asylum problem does not reflect the reality”. (Times online March 17th 2006).
The countries of origin of asylum seekers in Britain reflect the changing geography of conflict around the world. There follows an outline of the situation in the middle year of the first decade of the 21st century. For Europe as a whole the main groups are Iraqis 20,000 and Russians (remembering the simmering conflict in Chechnya) 13,000. For Britain, on the other hand, taking the 2006 figures, the three largest groups, approximately 2,700 each, are from Eritrea, Iran and Afghanistan. However the total number of asylum seekers was nearly 28,000, so the remaining 20,000 consisted of 2,000 or less people from many different countries. (Charter, 2007)

What is Britain’s attitude to these applications? Acceptance is far from automatic. Each applicant is interviewed and a judgment is made about whether they have grounds to be “given leave to remain.” There is no unified EU policy on this; each country is free to establish its own rules. Thus in the case of Iraq, for example, only one in six applicants is accepted in the UK, while nine out of ten get through in Sweden.

The question of asylum seekers has been a political topic of debate. It overlaps with public opinion on the question of immigration in general. One body of opinion views asylum seekers as undeserving beggars who are exploiting the West’s tradition of generosity. On the other hand, many see it as a humanitarian duty to help those who find themselves destitute for no fault of their own. In addition, the British public remembers the successful absorption into British society of several waves of refugees, such as Hungarians after the anti-Soviet protests in 1956 and the ethnic Indians expelled from Uganda in 1972. Moreover, many migrants, both temporary and permanent, have come from Commonwealth countries such as India, Pakistan and Jamaica, and EU countries like Poland and Slovakia. These economic migrants have gained a reputation for hard work and reliability in several fields, of which the most obvious are the Poles in the building industry and the south Asians in small retail businesses.

**Asylum Seekers’ Language needs**

Asylum seekers and their families arriving in Britain normally have very low level English skills. In some cases the breadwinner may have worked in a business in which English was needed, but usually the dependents are starting from a low level of knowledge. Thus all the members of asylum seekers’ families are in need of some kind of language training.

Considering the specific language needs of asylum seekers, they are twofold. Firstly there is the language of everyday life. This a broad category including the English needed for interaction required to feed and clothe a family. Shopping for food, clothing and other daily necessities is the most common situation. In addition, our society has many support systems for its citizens, such as the publicly funded
health service. Other everyday situations in which quite difficult language is required are finding accommodation and arranging utilities and bank facilities.

The second main area of linguistic need is that of employment. Even for jobs which require little English, such as manual jobs, for example carrying goods in a warehouse, considerable English is required to successfully find a vacancy, make an application and attend an interview. When an asylum seeker has a skill which he or she would like to use, a low language level is more often than not a barrier to finding a job of the required level. The simplest example would be a truck driver who must pass a local driving test, or a more advanced example would be a nurse who needs retraining and re-accreditation to qualify to seek work in the field.

**ESOL teaching methods for asylum seekers**

In order to investigate the question of teaching ESOL to asylum seekers the author sought out a person in the UK with firsthand experience. The person in question was Jane Smith, a teacher of English at Lewisham College in the London borough of Lewisham. Lewisham is an area stretching southwards from the bank of the river Thames at Southwark. For many years it has been an area with all the classic inner-city problems: poor housing, high crime rates, high youth unemployment, and inter-racial tension. Indeed, the college pamphlet frankly describes the catchment area as “among the most economically and socially deprived in London.” Many immigrants, both economic migrants and asylum seekers, move to the area in spite of its problems, attracted by several factors. The principal one is the presence of communities of their fellow country people, which offer them considerable practical help in their own language. Secondly in a large city like London there are many employment opportunities; London especially has a varied service economy which seems to be resistant to the cycle of prosperity and recession known by smaller provincial cities in the UK.

What practical differences are there between teaching a normal ESOL class and teaching asylum seekers? Let us examine four features: culture, educational style, multilingualism and part-time work.

ESOL teachers for asylum seekers must bear in mind the culture of their students. For example, many students are from Muslim countries and so certain Muslim traditions must be respected. For example festivals such as *Id al Fitr*, the feast of breaking fast at the end of Ramadan, must be treated with due respect. Again it is culturally inappropriate for a woman to sit next to a man, and so the teacher must resist the urge to bring the students into contact with each other in the course of classroom activities. There are also times when contemporary cultural or ethnic conflicts create tensions in the classroom. My informant
described an incident in the 1990s in which there was a serious disturbance in a lesson when a group of Bosnian students had a noisy conflict with a group of Serbs, involving shouting and some physical violence. This illustrates the need for teachers to keep in mind the cultural background of the students when planning the content and conduct of lessons.

Educational culture is a second respect in which asylum seekers’ ESOL is special. Most language learners from the developing world are not familiar with the traditions of the communicative approach. Rather, they are used to a controlled, teacher-defined classroom atmosphere. Current ESOL teacher training stresses language practice through a variety of activities in which the students have a degree of autonomy and control. For many students from developing countries this runs counter to their view of the teacher’s role; their learning style is closely linked to the ideal of a teacher as a director of writing, reading and memory learning. Indeed, a classroom atmosphere of fear and tension rather than encouragement is not uncommon in some parts of the world. My informant cited students from West Africa who drew back in fear when the teacher approached, so used were they to physical punishment. Thus educational culture is an important consideration in planning ESOL lessons for asylum seekers.

Multilingualism is the third respect which ESOL for asylum seekers is special. Although one language may predominate at any one time depending on the current theaters of conflict, there is normally a number of different languages present in the class. So for example in the recent past the speakers of a number of African languages such as Swahili may find themselves in the same class as Afghans speaking Pashtun. This situation presents the teacher with special challenges. My informant explained “I asked the students if they understood, and they said yes, but later it was clear from their written work that they were in a semi-fog.” To deal with this situation the teacher needs to very carefully adapt to the level of knowledge of the students, and may have to rely on an “anchor student” in each language group to explain difficult points to his or her fellows.

Finally, with regard to work, asylum seekers’ precarious economic situation makes it necessary for them to do paid work outside class. Although officially asylum seekers are not allowed to seek work before their application has been considered, economic necessity drives many to look for part-time work. My informant gave some examples from among her students: girls work in nail parlours and as waitresses in restaurants. One Iraqi man with a family to support worked as a night watchman, sometimes traveling from London to Brighton, a full hour’s train journey to get to his place of work.

This need to do paid work naturally results in many students attending class in a tired state, obviously unable to study effectively. On the other hand, there are benefits: employment gives the students a chance to use some of the English they have learned in class. Of equal importance is the fact that employment
gives them work experience in the host country. Especially if this results in a good employer’s reference, vouching for integrity and reliability at work as well as for the person’s competence in English, even a relatively low-status job is a vital factor in improving one’s employment prospects on completing the language course. Finally, work is a morale booster, giving the person an important sense of usefulness, after a period of being economically dependent on others or relying on rapidly depleting savings.

**Work and the future**

What happens to asylum seekers after their language courses? For many of the students their time in college is very happy for several reasons. In college they can meet their fellow countrymen and support each other. For a time they can forget the stresses of living in an alien and often inhospitable culture. They can spend their days preparing for a brighter future rather than worrying about their past and present problems.

Though their college time is largely a period of comradeship and hope, asylum seekers need special guidance to avoid nursing unrealistic ambitions. For example one Serbian teenager announced to my informant that he wanted to be a doctor in England. While this is within the bounds of possibility, the person in question was not aware of the complexity and length of the path to medical qualifications even for a native speaker of English. On the other hand, with talent, perseverance and motivation, teenagers can go to UK universities.

There is reason for optimism in some cases. My informant quoted several examples of her students who had gone on to study law, education and engineering. One case of a great triumph over adversity which appeared in the national press is that of Sam Wachira. Sam Wachira is a Kenyan teenager who was brought with his two brothers to Scotland by his grandmother Precile Muge in 2003, after the boys’ father, a member of a party in opposition to president Moi had been killed in political clashes. At one point the family slept underneath the arches in a railway station to avoid forced repatriation, and the grandmother needed hospital treatment for pneumonia.

Finally Sam’s luck turned. He benefited from a Scottish Education Department measure to help asylum seekers. He was one of 30 students who received free university education. In October 2007 he started a course in Computer Networking at Paisley University. Strangely, this opening would not have been available to the boy in England. He said “It’s a miracle. It’s just a matter of chance that I should arrive in Scotland and not England.” (The Guardian Sept 18th 2007)

While there are many examples of success among asylum seekers, with them settling in the UK or
returning to their home country after peace has returned, life in the UK can be harsh in the extreme. Many teenagers are not allowed to go to university unless they pay for themselves, and they pay much higher fees than home students. Even worse, some fall victim to many of the social problems endemic in inner cities. The best known example of recent years was of a family from Nigeria. While the father Richard stayed in his civil service job in Nigeria, the mother Glen Taylor brought her son Bem to the UK to seek treatment for epilepsy, along with their other son Damilola, aged 10. For financial reasons the family made a home in a small flat in a run-down estate in Peckham, one of South London’s poorest areas, in the borough of Lewisham. It was there in November 2000 that Damilola was found bleeding to death in a stair well, stabbed by a teenage gang. It took five year and three trials to secure a conviction of the culprits. The few cases of asylum seekers abusing British hospitality which are trumpeted by some notorious popular newspapers (notably the Daily Express and Daily Mail), must be balanced against many heroic stories of triumph over various forms of adversity.

**Public policy on asylum seekers**

Although each EU country is free to set its own rules on the residence of foreigners, both from the EU and the rest of the world, the principle of free movement of labor is a pillar of EU policy. There have however been many protests from host populations. One example is Italy, where 50,000 Romanian gypsies, who came to Italy legally after Romania joined the EU in 2007, are blamed for rising crime. At the same time immigrants are supported by Italian Catholic leaders as contributing to family life by providing 1.7 m domestic workers.

In the UK the government attitude to asylum seekers has changed over the years. In the 1990s there was considerable sympathy for immigrants from Bosnia, but the years 2000 to 2003 saw the arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers and a concomitant rise in public spending on them. The figure of 3.5 billion pounds was widely quoted in 2003. The result was that support for free ESOL teaching was limited from 2007. Whereas employees could have free English classes before, from 2007 only the unemployed and those under 18 were eligible. This was very controversial. The Refugee Council, through its chief executive Anna Reisenberger, criticized the measure as contradictory, saying : “How is it going to be possible to promote social inclusion… when people are unable to talk to each other..” (Kingston 2006). On the other hand the colleges concerned supported the measure as a just allocation of public resources: “We agree it is right that those who can pay should pay for training.” Said Joh Berea the chairman of the association of colleges. The problem is that by offering ESOL courses to all asylum seekers free of charge,
too little money was left to pay for other programmes for UK citizens. The government has ambitiously promised to help to lower youth unemployment by offering free training to 16 to 18 year olds. The highest priority is to educate “those most at risk of disadvantage” according to the Learning and Skills Council (quoted in Kingston 2006). This is a polite way of saying that money should be spent on getting into jobs those teenagers who, because of their lack of marketable skills, are in danger of becoming dependent on welfare or even of turning to crime.

It seems that the easiest days are over for asylum seekers in the UK. Already the laws have changed. The new Immigration Nationality and Asylum Act 2002 set a minimum level English language skill for those seeking entry. This was defined as “entry level 3”. More recently an Australian style points system has been established. This only allows immigrants entry if they possess specific skills, measured by tests and experience.

In summary, we have seen that there are few conflicts around the world, either civil strife or international disputes, which do not prompt at least some part of the population to seek refuge beyond their borders. While their first concern is physical safety, very soon the economic need to work forces asylum seekers to acquire new skills, especially language skills with great urgency. Thus the host countries have to supply, whether on a fee-paying or a free-of-charge basis, instruction in the native language of the country. It is in responding to this challenge that native language teachers around the world have drawn on their imagination and experience to develop methods and materials to provide successful courses. As an example, we noted the measures being taken in one part of London. The effectiveness of these courses bears witness both to the professionalism of the teachers and administrators, and also to the determination and perseverance of the asylum seekers. It is to be hoped that when most of the asylum seekers return to their home countries they will take with them not only new skills acquired during their period of refuge, but also some of the attitudes which they observed at work in their language classrooms.

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