SAFE BUT ALONE

The role of English language in allowing refugees to overcome loneliness

SAFE BUT ALONE

The role of English language in allowing refugees to overcome loneliness

SAFE BUT ALONE

The role of English language in allowing refugees to overcome loneliness

SAFE BUT ALONE

The role of English language in allowing refugees to overcome loneliness
Refugees arrive in the UK having fled the horrors of war, terror and persecution. They want to rebuild their lives and become a part of their new community, but this can be extremely challenging. Many arrive alone, unable to speak the language and without any of the social networks we often take for granted. This can lead many to feel isolated and lonely; indeed, recent research carried out with refugees and asylum seekers found that most of them saw loneliness and isolation as their biggest challenge in everyday life.1

Refugees and asylum seekers can experience loneliness for many reasons, including exclusion from education and a lack of employment opportunities – or, in the case of most asylum seekers, not having permission to work at all. However, we know that the inability to speak English is one of the single most important causes of such feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Every day Refugee Action works with refugees who are determined to learn English. They know that learning English, more than any other factor, is the key to them being able to build successful, independent lives in the UK. Without it, they are unable to find work, study, volunteer and become part of their local community. In fact, there is strong and growing evidence that English language teaching is the greatest contribution to refugees’ ability to integrate; and that society as a whole benefits. We also know that the public are strongly in favour of refugees being able to learn English; 73% believe that Britain and local communities benefit from refugees speaking English and almost two thirds (60%) say that the Government should fund English language provision for refugees.2

However, Government funding for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in England fell from £203m in 2010 to £90m in 2016 – a real terms cut of 60%.3 Our research shows that such a drastic reduction in funding is having a profoundly negative impact, with refugees across England routinely waiting months, and in some cases years, to access ESOL classes. As a result, their lives remain on hold.

In order to ensure that all refugees and asylum seekers have access to the English language lessons they require, the Government should increase ESOL funding to ensure that all refugees have access to a minimum of 8 hours of ESOL classes per week in their first two years in England. An ESOL strategy should be published to ensure that provision – both formal and informal – is fit for purpose across the whole of England. Provision must account for the specific needs of groups who might find accessing ESOL lessons particularly difficult, including those who require childcare, and should also be extended to asylum seekers so that they are better able to navigate the asylum process.

---

Overcoming loneliness: what refugees and asylum seekers told us

Refugee Action held six focus groups with a total of 41 refugees and asylum seekers across England in August 2017 to discuss their experiences of loneliness since arriving in the UK. We found that the experience of being forced to flee their countries and moving to a new and unfamiliar place is often a very lonely experience in itself; having to leave family behind in fragile and uncertain settings also added to people’s feelings of isolation and helplessness.

You make friends through work, hobbies, sports, and in your own community. It depends on what you do, different jobs will give you different kinds of friends. If you are alone and don’t go anywhere, then it is more difficult. (Firuz)

It is lonely because you feel isolated and you feel there is no one to [help]. You feel like a bouncing ball. It can cause depression; it can cause all sorts [of mental health problems]. Thinking that nobody wants to help. And having no money. You can’t just pack your bag and go back home. You have no money, you have no nothing. (Maria)

When we asked what made them feel less lonely, many said they attended community groups with other refugees, asylum seekers, or migrants. One woman described the group she attends as a “medicine”. Another woman told us that volunteering had helped her keep busy and forget the stigma that she often feels as an asylum seeker. Time and again people said that keeping active, and participating in different activities, was the best thing that they could do to combat their feelings of loneliness. Those who were unable to work or study pointed out that when they had nothing to do their feelings of isolation and hopelessness increased.

Here I can’t do anything. I eat and sleep, eat and sleep. When I came here I was relieved, but now I am not. In my country, I worked 7 days a week, but here I have too much free time. I have free time until I am tired... It is like I am in prison. (Benedito)

“I feel all alone. Sometimes I think to myself ‘what am I doing here?’ Being single and on my own makes me feel very alone here.” (Tariq)

---

4 We undertook focus group discussions in Birmingham, Leeds, London and Manchester. A total of 44 people participated in the focus groups; 41 of them were either refugees or asylum seekers. The remaining three participants were migrants.

5 All names used in this briefing have been changed in order to protect the identities of the individuals.
Barriers to accessing ESOL classes came up consistently when we asked participants how they went about meeting people, engaging with their new communities, and combating loneliness. It was clear that everyone felt language was either their biggest obstacle to integrating with their community, or had been the most important enabling factor in allowing them to rebuild their lives in their new home.

Life is up and down. Sometimes lonely. Life isn’t easy... Sometimes I have bad depression. I come here and talk to people and have less depression. I go to English class and feel strong. (Maryam)

What is most important is language. If you speak the language you can make friends with your neighbour. (Klaudi)

If you can’t speak or understand you can’t communicate with other people... Language is important to find friends, to find community. (Aarif)

I don’t know how to go anywhere or do anything on my own here. If my sons don’t pick me up then I don’t leave the house because I would get lost. It is very difficult for me to do things on my own. (Warda)

I still did not get any English lessons, even though it is very important to learn the language. My daughter speaks English but I don’t want to wait for her to come with me if I want to buy something or do something. I want to be independent. (Manal)

We don’t speak English. So, we spend a lot of time at home. We don’t mix with people from the outside. Because we can’t speak to them. We would love to have English friends but it is not easy without speaking the language... If I spoke the language, I would have the courage to meet people and communicate better. Now I feel very reluctant. (Issam)
If we spoke the language, then adapting to our new life here would be much easier. It is a barrier and it should be removed. (Alaa)

It was clear that speaking the language opened the door not only to being able to find a job but also to such simple, everyday things as going to the doctor, accessing local services, learning to drive and being able to help their children with their homework. People told us that they felt isolated and powerless, and that until they learnt English they were living in a kind of limbo.

Not speaking the language made me feel really alone. (Ayman)

There were mixed experiences of finding ESOL classes, however, and many people had waited for a long time before they were able to start lessons. Others pointed out that the number of hours of English lessons that they had access to was not enough.

For everything in life you need to speak English – life, housing, hospital. I need to read properly and speak properly. I’ve not found it easy to get on ESOL. Some places it’s very hard, you have waiting lists. I started to wait one year ago… I’m still waiting. (Maryam)

The Government has cut classes every year… [You] used to get free classes all over London. They gave you the name for the school and told you where to go. Last year the ESOL class paid for childcare. But this year they aren’t going to pay for that. It’s too difficult to get English. It’s very difficult [without childcare]. (Isabelle)

I attend classes two days a week, for six hours, so it will take me ten years to learn English properly. I will eventually be able to get by with small things, like buying groceries. But to learn the language to the extent where I could communicate with people, will be extremely difficult. I think having English language lessons daily, even if just for a few hours, would be much more effective. (Issam)

Several parents said that their lack of English meant that they had to rely on their children to help them. This can be a particular problem in the case of asylum seekers, where the letters and documents that children are asked to translate are sometimes extremely distressing. Others pointed to their frustration that they had not been able to help their children at school.

My children grew up very hard, because I [didn’t] speak English… I couldn’t help my children with homework. This used to upset me. My grandson’s experience is different because his mum speaks English. Ten years later, I learnt English but that is too late. (Ayla)

“When we talk about the experience of loneliness in the UK, then we are talking about the lack of ability to speak the language.” (Issam)
Many of the women we spoke to, in particular, pointed to the problems they face in accessing ESOL classes. Often this was due to lack of childcare. Rula, who is pregnant, told us that she is particularly keen to learn English so that she will be able to take her child to medical appointments by herself, without having to rely on others. However, her motivations are also based on a more worrying realisation: “Once I give birth I will not be able to attend classes.”

*I really struggled to get access to English lessons. Every time I went to the job centre they told me that I have to wait longer. A few months ago, they offered me a place at the same time as my husband. I could not attend because of my young son. I was then told that either I or my husband can attend so that one of us could stay home with the boy, so I ended up staying home. So, I missed three months.* (Manal)

Those with a positive experience of learning English and accessing ESOL emphasised what a difference it had made to their ability to integrate, beyond simply learning the language. Mehdi, for instance, explained that through his lessons he had also learnt how to interact with people from different backgrounds, and about British culture:

*College was so helpful for me. Our teacher taught us the ways you can make a relationship with other people in this country. They taught me what I have to do to make good relationships with people.*

*(When I arrived), communicating with people was very hard. Even [when] you need something you can’t explain yourself so it affected me very very much for a long time. [After starting to learn English] it has changed – I can express myself a bit. I have more friends. I belong to more organisations now. With school we don’t feel that alone at all again.* (Claude)

*“Ten years (after arriving in the UK), I learnt English... Now I don’t feel lonely at all.”* (Ayla)
Farid spent his first night in Britain on the outside of closed doors. At just 13-years-old and alone in a cold, foreign country, Farid says “there was a lot of growing up in that first night.”

“There was a lot of rejection – that is how I felt,” Farid explains. “I went to a number of police stations and I was rejected. I went to a mosque and I was rejected. They didn’t trust me.”

Farid, now 22 and living in London, fled the Taliban in Afghanistan at 13 after his father was killed for his political beliefs. He left his mother, brother and sister and spent months travelling through Pakistan and Iran, to Turkey, Greece, Italy, France and then Britain.

Despite the hardships of the journey, during which Farid almost drowned at sea between Turkey and Greece, he says he at least had the company of a group of others also in search of safety.

But when the group reached the UK it had to split.

“One thing that got me more scared was that I was alone now - there was no one with me,” Farid explains. “Throughout the journey we made decisions as a group. But now I had to make my own decisions. It was up to me to make it right or wrong.”

After a night searching for help Farid found a Home Office building where he met a social worker and was placed with a foster family. “That gave me some hope. That’s when I knew there was a way.”

Farid had English lessons, but even with his foster family’s support life in Britain was a “lone journey” for the three years it took him to learn the language.

“At the time, the language barrier caused my isolation because I could not communicate with people.”

Other children at school bullied Farid. He couldn’t join group activities and stayed in the ICT room instead of going outside at lunch.

“Some people would say go back to your country or, when I spoke, they would say ‘you don’t know what you’re talking about’,” he says.

Farid had some friends with similar experiences to him, including one whose family had moved to the UK from Turkey in the 1970s and who took him swimming and to football. Along with help from his foster family, Farid gradually learned more English – and made more friends, too.

“Learning the language opened doors for me. It helped me communicate, it helped me express my feelings. Then I realised that I have more in common with these people than I originally thought – I shared things with them. Then I could see myself within that.”

Now Farid is studying social work at Goldsmiths University and working with his local council to support other young refugees.
ESOL provision: “not fit for purpose”

Refugee Action surveyed 71 ESOL providers across England in July 2017, representing a total of 35,563 ESOL learners. Our survey found that supply continues to fall significantly short of need. Despite the attempts of providers to keep up with demand, in the context of continued cuts to funding over recent years, 63% of those providers surveyed said that they do not feel that the quantity of ESOL provision they offer is sufficient for most people’s needs. Over half (52%) said that the overall situation regarding their ability to provide high quality ESOL classes has worsened over the past 5 years.

According to our survey, learners are receiving an average of 5 hours of ESOL classes per week. This is less than the amount we have previously calculated that the ‘average’ learner would need, and it is likely that those with basic or no English would require much more. It is also almost half the amount of minimum weekly provision that the Government has agreed that a refugee arriving through the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) would need.

Current provision is not fit for purpose...most of our learners require more than 2.5 hours but we do not have the capacity to provide this. Learners are allocated places if they meet funding criteria, not according to their need.

(provider in the North West)

Of providers that had waiting lists, 45% said that learners can wait an average of six months or more for classes. One provider had 800 people on their waiting list, saying that many of these people could typically expect to wait up to two years before they started classes. Another told us that learners can wait for three years to be assigned to a course, whilst another said that the wait can be “indefinite”. 80% of those that had waiting lists said insufficient government funding was a main reason for long delays. For those providers that do not have waiting lists,

63% do not feel that the quantity of ESOL provision they offer is sufficient for most people’s needs.

52% said that their ability to provide high quality ESOL classes has worsened over the past five years.

45% of providers with waiting lists said that learners can wait an average of six months or more for classes.

One provider had 800 people on their waiting list, saying that many could expect to wait up to two years before they started classes.

---

6 On average, amongst the providers that were able to specify, an estimated 40% of all these ESOL learners are refugees or asylum seekers.
7 Refugee Action, ‘Let Refugees Learn’.
the situation is not necessarily any better. One provider explained: “The only reason why we do not have waiting lists is that I won’t keep people waiting, if we cannot place them then we have to signpost them to other providers or turn them away.” This reflected the experiences of several providers; others capped their waiting lists in order to keep numbers manageable.

Two thirds of providers (66%) told us that an increase in government funding would be the one thing that would most improve their ability to provide adequate quantities of high quality ESOL lessons.

Those who require childcare – often, though of course not only, women – continue to experience particular difficulties in accessing ESOL classes. One provider told us that their waiting lists depend on whether the learner needed childcare, saying that if they did the wait would be longer due to limited ability to provide childcare. Indeed, 77% of providers either had no facilities for childcare provision or said that what they provide is not enough for the needs of most learners. In addition, those with the lowest levels of English seem to be disproportionately negatively affected by the long wait for lessons. When asked which groups waited longest for classes, two thirds (66%) of the providers that responded told us that it was learners going into pre-entry or entry 1 level classes (i.e. those with the lowest levels of English).

In addition, those with the lowest levels of English seem to be disproportionately negatively affected by the long wait for lessons. When asked which groups waited longest for classes, two thirds (66%) of the providers that responded told us that it was learners going into pre-entry or entry 1 level classes (i.e. those with the lowest levels of English).

It’s a catch 22 situation – the Government complains that people who have come to live in this country aren’t making enough effort to learn English, but there aren’t sufficient classes for them to progress, nor sufficient funding for training for the volunteers who are coming forward to teach them.

(provider in the South East)

"The waiting list never ends."

(provider in the North West)
Giving refugees the opportunity to learn English is vital to ensuring their successful integration into British society, and to helping them to overcome the feelings of loneliness and isolation that they may experience when arriving in the UK. The Government-commissioned Casey Review on integration clearly highlighted the link between English language skills and integration, identifying English as “a common denominator and a strong enabler of integration.”

It also makes good economic sense: our research has found that the cost of two years of ESOL classes for each refugee is effectively fully reimbursed to the taxpayer following an individual’s first eight months of employment at the national average wage.

The Government has recognised the importance of supporting resettled Syrian refugees to learn English by committing £10 million over a five-year period to ensure ESOL provision, supported by a new role in every region to help local authorities commission additional ESOL services; and £2.3m funding over the next four years to help overcome childcare barriers to ESOL. All of this is a very welcome start but, crucially, it does not provide support to the vast majority of refugees, whose need and wish to learn English is equally great.


11 Refugee Action, ‘Let Refugees Learn.’
Our recommendations

The Government should:

1. Create a fund to specifically support refugees learning English.
This should enable all refugees that require English lessons to have at least 8 hours per week of free, accessible ESOL for their first two years in England. Our analysis shows that ensuring refugees are given a minimum of eight hours of ESOL per week for two years would require the Government to invest £42 million per year to achieve this goal. Such a fund should be available for all refugees, and not just those arriving through the VPRS.

This should set clear national targets for ESOL provision and attainment. It should also enshrine refugees’ access to ESOL as an entitlement and ensure that refugees do not have to wait to enrol in ESOL and access the provision they require.

3. Ensure full and equal access to ESOL, particularly for women.
Some refugees’ ability, especially women’s, to attend English language classes can be improved by ensuring they have access to childcare facilities. In addition, in all cases where ESOL providers are located far from the homes of refugees and public transport is required to participate, funding should be made available to cover travel costs.

4. Provide asylum seekers with the right to access free English language learning.
This would support their integration from the point they initially make their asylum claim, and allow them to navigate the asylum process with more ease – something that could impact significantly upon their wellbeing and mental health.

5. Facilitate a national framework for community-based language support.
Community support for refugees wishing to learn English can be a vital complement to (but not a replacement for) formal, accredited ESOL learning for refugees. Government should bring together civil society, the private sector, local government and other key stakeholders, to develop a framework which enables all interested parties to pool resources and good practice to increase the provision and quality of community-based language support.

“When you start to speak English fluently it means you can get a good job and make your dreams come true.”

(Nour)
The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness is starting a national conversation about the scale and impact of loneliness in the UK. As a member of the Commission, Refugee Action is shining a spotlight on how loneliness can affect refugees and asylum seekers. Find out more at www.jocoxloneliness.org.

Refugee Action would like to express our gratitude to the refugees and asylum seekers who spoke with us about their experiences of loneliness. Thanks go to Leeds Survivor Led Crisis Service, Migrants Resource Centre, and Xenia for their assistance in organising and facilitating focus groups. We would also like to thank Refugee Action staff and volunteers in Birmingham and Manchester for arranging focus group sessions.

We are grateful to all those who took the time to respond to our survey and share their experiences of ESOL provision, and to the Association of Colleges, HOLEX, and the Learning and Work Institute for their assistance in distributing the survey to ESOL providers. Particular thanks go to the National Association for Teaching English and other Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA) for helping to draft the survey and disseminate it amongst their members.

For further information about the Let Refugees Learn campaign, please contact campaign@refugee-action.org.uk

Refugee Action
Victoria Charity Centre
11 Belgrave Road
London SW1V 1RB

@RefugeeAction
www.refugee-action.org.uk