Volunteer teachers working together: A Refugee Support Group Case Study
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This case study describes an English Language conversation class taking place at a refugee support group based in a large town in the north west of England. The refugee group is well–established, running for over 15 years, having been set up to provide practical support and friendship to refugees within the borough in the early 2000's. The group is run by volunteers, with some financial support from local authorities and churches. They provide a weekly drop-in for refugees, which includes, among other services, an ESOL conversation class. The conversation class is led by university student volunteers in academic term-time, and by local volunteer teachers in vacation periods.

The case study aims to provide a general description of the conversation class, bringing together perspectives from different participants involved: student volunteer teachers, other community-based volunteer teachers, and the refugee learners. These viewpoints were collected through conversations and written submissions from participants in each group. In presenting their views, the case study attempts to explore some of the tensions and opportunities within the situation and to move towards a fuller and deeper understanding of how the teaching and learning of ESOL emerges within this context. Some implications and wider lessons from the case will be discussed in the final sections.

Background
Refugee Support Group and Conversation Class
The Refugee Support group runs sessions each Saturday lunchtime for refugees in the local area. The group meets in a local church which has space for a children's play area, kitchen and dining room, and a separate room which is used for the conversation club. There is a playgroup for children staffed by qualified play workers from the council, a free lunch and ESOL conversation club. The group also supplies second-hand clothes for refugees. The sessions as a whole run from 12 to 2pm. The conversation class runs from approximately 12.15 to 1.00 pm and meets in a separate room within the church. The room is a little shabby, dark, since it is at the side of the building without much natural light, and cold in the winter. There is a sense of a well-used community room. This space has room for two or three tables, each sitting six or so learners with a teacher for each group. When there is high attendance the room feels full and noisy. There are posters and pictures on the wall from other groups who use the room such as Brownies, Guides and worship groups. The group has a set of boxes which store resources including printed worksheets, files of work under different topics and for different levels, pens and paper, and a clock for teaching the time. A small photocopier is available on request, but needs to be set up by a member of the refugee group.

The learners
The learners are from several different national backgrounds, with varying levels of English and first language education. The greatest numbers are from Syria, Iran, Somalia and Sudan. There are also some from sub-Saharan Africa. There have been some Ukrainian learners and currently there are a group of learners from Tibet. Several learners share Arabic as a first language, although with dialectical variations. Many learners are separated from their families; clearly all have had difficult times in reaching the UK and all are living in difficult circumstances with little money, often in poor quality accommodation. One of the main attractions in attending the refugee group is the provision of a hot meal and bag of fresh food. Many have little contact with British people outside the refugee group drop-ins. Others (typically younger) attend ESOL classes in the local Further Education (FE) college and

are working towards ESOL exams. Some who have left professional jobs in their home countries wish to take IELTS exams in order to apply for further university study. Several learners have low levels of literacy in L1 and for some using English / Latin script is a challenge. Oral levels of English are much higher than written.

Learners join the English language group on an ad hoc basis. A few attend every week, but others may only take part once a month or less. Numbers range from one to two to ten to twelve learners and it is difficult to gain a sense of who or how many will attend each week.

The student volunteers

The ESOL conversation class is primarily run by a group of university student volunteers from a nearby Russell Group university. These students are part of the charitable student organization *Student Action for Refugees* (STAR), which provides the infrastructure for recruiting volunteers, appointing coordinators for the group, and providing some TESOL training and support (http://www.star-network.org.uk). STAR is a national charity of approximately 27,000 students, which aims to welcome refugees to the UK. Student volunteers take part in a range of projects to work with local refugee groups, campaign to improve the lives of refugees, educate people about refugees and asylum, and fundraise to welcome refugees in the UK. STAR is made up of over forty-two groups at universities across the UK and a national team which co-ordinates and supports the groups. STAR groups are local students' union societies affiliated to the national charity.

The local conversation class group has one or two student project coordinators who organize the volunteers, topic and materials for each week through a closed Facebook group. Volunteer students come from a variety of academic programmes across the university (Medicine, Engineering, Modern Languages, Drama, English, Biochemistry are some of the disciplines represented in recent years). For the most part volunteers do not have teaching or ELT experience, although there is some training provided through the STAR organization. The coordinator has access to a greater level of training than other volunteers, typically completing some elements of a CELTA programme. The coordinators change each year, but may continue to be involved with the project as volunteer teachers.

Student volunteers have varying motivations for taking part in the project. Some are themselves from refugee or migrant family backgrounds, some are politically motivated by concerns about social justice and the migrant crisis, others are English language or MFL (Modern Foreign Languages) students with a desire to pursue English language teaching careers following university. Naturally, these motivations are not distinct from each other; students' reasons for volunteering are complex and overlapping. Certainly, for most students who have been involved with the group for a longer period of time it is relationships they have built up with learners which drive their engagement. One volunteer describes her motivation in these terms:

> *I am curious about meeting people from other places and learning about how their lifestyle may differ or be similar to ours. I think this is why I began volunteering in the first place, but the reason I keep coming back again is because I enjoy helping people. I feel good after I volunteer because I feel like I have helped the learners, even if it's in a small way. The people are lovely and appreciate what we all do for them; so I come back for them, for the learners.*
> (Sarah (a pseudonym): former coordinator of the student group)

The student volunteers and coordinators take part in the project across one academic year, from October through to May. Volunteers may continue from one year to the next, but the composition of the group fluctuates, depending on pressures on student lives. During exam periods and university vacations there are far fewer student volunteers available and in this time local community-based volunteers (often with ESOL or EFL teaching backgrounds or state school teaching experience) step in to keep the classes running (this group of volunteers are described in the section below). Typically in term-time student volunteer number are approximately eight per week; outside of term time there are two to three community volunteers who run classes.

It is worth noting that, although the students' university is the closest Higher Education (HE) institution to the town, it is not within the same community space. This means that often student volunteers do not have local knowledge of the area and this slight detachment from the immediate life of the refugees' community makes for some separation between the volunteers and the learners. Volunteer student teachers comment that they are unable to help with requests about travel or directions and do not feel they are able to welcome the refugees into the local community in the same way as if the classes were nearer to their own spaces of accommodation, study and recreation.

Such concerns aside, the STAR students nevertheless bring high levels of enthusiasm and engagement to the conversation club. Their commitment to the club keeps it going across the year and provides a strongly positive atmosphere in which refugees can meet English language L1 speakers.

Community-based volunteer teachers

As mentioned above, there is an additional small group of volunteer teachers who step in during university vacations or exam periods to provide conversation classes when student volunteers are not available. These teachers typically have ESOL, EFL or state school teaching backgrounds and qualifications. They are all women; the majority is older (typically over fifty) and are often retired teachers. Their impetus to volunteer is motivated by a wish to support refugees in their local community and use their professional expertise in this regard. Many have positive experiences of teaching refugees in their professional lives. Several come to the group through links with local churches.

In some respects, this group of teachers has a more distant relationship with the learners and classes, since they tend to teach only during university vacation or examination periods, and volunteer as individuals rather than as part of an organised group. However, there is a sense of continuity since they have been involved with the refugee group for several years and have formed strong relationships with one or two of the regular learners.

Teaching topics

Conversation sessions run by the STAR volunteers are usually planned around a topic, situation or everyday functions (e.g. food, health, shopping, or asking for directions). Student volunteers produce worksheets with topics for discussion or short newspaper articles. Teaching tends to focus on the vocabulary needed for the topic area, with use of pictures with some easier texts for discussion. Conversational topics are chosen (such as; your home language; your country; your favourite film) to stimulate discussion. One teacher has donated a set of *ESOL Skills for Life* materials (The Education and Training Foundation 2003) and regularly uses this material in sessions she and other teachers run in the student vacation time. This material is structured around a development in skills and systems and geared towards functional language for survival in the UK. Refugee sensitivities around

topics relating to family, home countries or difficult experiences are taken into account in choosing materials. Volunteers report finding negotiation of these subject areas difficult and steer away from topics which may be too sensitive for the refugees.

'Each week is a new class': Adapting to the dynamic nature of the group

A major challenge is the shifting nature of the classes from week to week, in terms of who attends both as learners and teachers. The learner attendance in the group fluctuates depending on several factors. Weather, national holidays, and transport difficulties can affect numbers. Ramadan has a big impact on attendance at the refugee group lunch. It is impossible to predict who will attend on any given week. Teachers can find that they have twenty learners one week and two or three the following. These may be mature learners with professional backgrounds and high levels of English (C1), or younger, college-age students with little L1 literacy and much lower levels (A1-2). All the volunteer teachers find these changing parameters difficult.

The setting also adds to the sense of flux for the group. The church room used feels temporary and there is little sense of ownership for the group. It is not set up as a classroom, and there is no possibility to leave a record of classwork within the room in the form of pictures, wall posters, and student photos. Resources go missing from week to week (for example, the class whiteboard has been mislaid; pens and stationery are available sometimes but not always). Building a sense of permanence and stability into the classes would help learners to experience some continuity in their learning.

Since classes are organised around vocabulary topic areas, each week sees a search by teachers for a suitable topic for the group. It is difficult for the volunteers to find conversation topics and activities that will work at any level and particularly for those at very low levels of English and/or L1 literacy. It is a constant challenge to identify topics that provoke sufficient discussion, but are not beyond the linguistic resources of the learners. The lack of a shared first language among the group also presents difficulties for the teachers. Although at times learners are able to help each other with L1 translations, there are not always higher-level learners present to support this. When there are sufficient volunteer teachers present, then each teacher works with a small group of learners (two or three) with shared L1 backgrounds.

There are some administrative systems for the classes (registers, records of work, filing of materials by topic and level) but these tend to drift a little over the course of the year, when teachers forget or are rushed at the end of a class, and routines do not continue.

It is clear that the main characteristic of the classes is their unpredictable and irregular nature; not only in terms of learner attendance and materials, but also in the teachers who attend, and the temporary feel of the classroom. In the longer term the change of STAR coordinators each year also adds to the transitory nature of the classes. However, paradoxically, this change also leads to some stagnation in the group over time, since the teaching materials developed over the course of the year by one set of coordinators are not usually continued and built on for the following year, but tend to be reinvented anew by each subsequent volunteer group.

In addition to the above, the case study participants themselves, both teachers and learners, express certain tensions in their own expectations of the teaching context and perceptions of the teacher, adding further to the dynamic nature of the classes. The following section considers participants' roles further.

Refugee learner views: 'Learners of English'

The learners clearly appreciate the classes and there are some who attend every week. All enjoy participation in classes when they are present. When asked what they like about the class, answers included:

'I find the volunteers to be kind and useful to teach me'

'I like the one-to-one attention'

'I like the variety in learning materials provided every week'.

The learners' thoughts and feelings about the class centre firmly on the language learning aspects, rather than other potential benefits such as contact with L1 English speakers, learning about British culture or the local community. When asked about their reasons for attending, the learners report their need to improve their English language. In reply to the question '*what do you get from the group?*' learners' answers included:

'*I have improved my speaking skills*'

'*I have learned many new words'*

'*I have more confident [sic] about my language*'.

More specifically, learners highlight spelling, grammar, listening and L2 learning strategies as areas they would like more focus on. Long-term attenders report that they have improved their speaking skills and increased their vocabulary and general confidence in using English. Even when specifically asked what they enjoyed *aside* from the ESOL work or what they remembered as specifically enjoyable, the refugee learners replied in terms of English language development (one advanced learner reported he enjoyed reading newspaper articles and interpreting the meanings). This may be a natural part of how people feel about English classes, but it is interesting that the group do not highlight the more social aspects of the group, but focus firmly on language learning outcomes.

Student volunteer views: 'A teacher or a friend? ESOL or Conversation?'

A clear theme emerging from discussions with the student volunteers is a tension concerning their role and relationships with the refugee learners. The sessions are seen by the STAR volunteers very much as a conversation club, rather than formal language classes, and this leads to a particular sense of role on the part of the students. One volunteer and a past coordinator of the group explained:

'*I've never viewed myself as a 'teacher' as such when volunteering, just a friendly face that helps the people who come to the club to learn English.*'
(Sarah)

The student volunteers emphasize the importance of getting to know the learners through sharing experiences, by having lunch together following the conversation class and sharing long-running jokes. The students have talked about the power of group laughter in the classes in helping refugees feel included. More personal friendships between students and refugees have emerged over time, with the student volunteers becoming more involved with the lives of the refugees. For some student volunteers these relationships have continued over two years or longer. A strong part of student motivations in being part of the group is to offer a more positive view of the UK population to refugees and to help refugees to learn more about British culture and move towards integration.

One student commented *'the biggest thing we do for the learners is being a friendly, English face'.* Students mentioned talking about fashion, pop music and other youth interests as a fun way of getting to know each other and help the refugees learn more about UK and Western culture.

Some students reject the role of a formal teacher and view other volunteers who adopt more of a 'teacher-persona' with refugees as being less effective. They see the 'traditional,

distant' school-teacher role as inappropriate for this group of learners. Volunteers are keen to emphasize what they see as the equal nature of their relationship with the learners and their shared endeavour in speaking English together. One student volunteer stated: '*it's more of a reciprocal knowledge sharing, rather than one person dispensing knowledge upon the other'.* One aspect of this relationship is that encouragement rather than correction is important; students see their role as helping to build learner confidence rather than formally correct language. Student volunteers ask learners to 'try again' and feel that giving people a non-threatening space in which to do this is important.

However, some volunteers sense that there is an expectation from learners for more formal, ESOL-like teaching. Indeed, this has been seen in the learners' perceptions of classes described in the earlier section. This is particularly the case for young male refugees who want to find work, and those learners who attend ESOL classes in the local FE college. These learners often bring ESOL homework with them to the conversation class and ask for help. The student volunteers find this a little challenging at times, since they have little formal English language teaching training and thus find grammatical and other linguistic explanations difficult to provide. Additionally, as ESOL classes become more difficult for refugees to join (due to cuts in local FE funding) there is more pressure on the conversation club to provide a more structured input.

> *'So maybe our role has changed, because there is less funding and less space on ESOL courses (I know that at least one course has closed in Stockport) so now we are under more pressure to give ESOL style teaching.' '(Sarah)*

Views from Community teachers: volunteer or professional?

The community volunteer group brings a great deal of professional teaching knowledge and experience to the refugee group. Their motivations in volunteering are strongly connected with a wish to use their professional backgrounds to aid refugees in their own community. They have very strong feelings about welcoming refugees into their community and celebrating their presence in the local area. However in addition, their motivations are linked strongly to helping the learners progress in English language and achieve language and wider goals (such as enrolling in college; integrating into their communities, finding employment). These aims are possibly more 'teacherly' in scope than those of the STAR volunteers; wanting to see learners learn and improve in English language related outcomes. Such desires may be born of long experience of the ESOL system where accountability for student progress is central. It is in this tension between their professional backgrounds and their peripheral volunteer status that certain frustrations arise.

The group acknowledges the many positives of the conversation classes: the safe space for refugees to practise English, the sense of engagement and the commitment and effort of the STAR volunteers. However, they also feel that the lack of continuity of language focus across sessions and the absence of a sense of syllabus – although this is recognized as a consequence of irregular attendance –mean that learners are not progressing as they might. They would like to see some building in of greater opportunities for language recycling and reinforcement to enable learners to progress more quickly. Most of the teachers in this group feel that a greater focus on aspects of language systems and accuracy would also be helpful for learners. They argue that without greater structural understanding the learners are unable to progress much further in their language development and use. Additionally, those with training in ELT Communicative methodology feel that a greater emphasis on the spoken word and with a reduced emphasis on text and reading/writing skills would be of benefit for the learners. They advocate a greater use of learner needs analysis to inform the aims and approaches of the conversation class. It has been difficult to voice some of these

concerns to STAR volunteers, given that there is little shared knowledge of second language teaching methodology or approaches, and that the teachers want to avoid appearing to interfere or to risk offending STAR volunteers. In any case opportunities for direct, face-to-face communication between the two groups are infrequent.

It is fair to say that the community teachers experience some tensions around how far they are able to determine the nature of the classes and teaching and the teacher development advice they might provide. There is a desire to offer support and training, but this is set against a caution about interfering with the STAR group decisions and moving the focus of the classes away from a student-led project. The limited amount of times across the year when the community group leads the teaching makes their contributions more peripheral. This has made for some difficult moments in communication and collaboration between the two groups of volunteers. After some trial and error, over a period of time, the more long-term community teachers have found roles which enable the two groups to work together. During periods when STAR volunteers are running the classes, the community teachers periodically observe classes and provide supportive feedback. They also offer some administrative continuity (periodic organisation of materials and resources; encouraging the maintenance of attendance records) and support with ideas for useful TESOL resources. It has sometimes been difficult for experienced teachers to take this more 'back-seat' role.

In summary, it is clear that this context is one of complexity and much change, with underlying tensions and frictions within it. Contingency and uncertainty are key characteristics of the teaching situation, making for an interesting teaching site full of potential, but one that is difficult to manage and steer to fruitful development.

Discussion and conclusion

Understanding something of the complexity of motivations, perspectives and drives of the various participants is valuable for all involved in the process of second language teaching in the refugee group. As shown here, the differing experiences and concerns of the volunteers are important elements which colour how the group works and develops. It should be emphasised that the groupings identified and the perspectives described here are a simplification of the complexity of the context, since not all motivations within each group are uniform or static. Volunteers' experience of teaching this group and their understanding of the learners and their needs naturally develops over time and people reach new, fuller understandings of the situation and their role within it as time progresses. Nevertheless, the tensions are visible and have some effect on the teaching and learning that occurs.

The pushes and pulls identified here between more formal and informal teaching approaches are not unique to this context, and indeed are part of on-going debate about approaches to second language teaching since Krashen (1981). However, perhaps they are more to the fore in this situation, due to the distinctiveness of the two groups of teachers and the weight of experience of ESOL teaching brought by the second group.

Yet it is important to remember that, despite the difficulties and tensions, successful learning and teaching undoubtedly occurs within this group. There are groups of learners who attend very regularly, have long-term goals and ambitions for their English language proficiency and who are enabled to move towards achieving these. Furthermore, learners have made friendships with volunteer teachers and come to greater understanding of British life and culture. The complexity of the relationships between the two groups of teachers does not stifle the development of the classes and ways of working between the two groups. However, some questions remain. Given the shifting nature of the context, is there enough

'firm ground' for building new and more efficient teaching approaches? Can volunteers make the most of both the dynamism of the context and the fixed points which do exist?

One area for potential development is seen in the occasional teaching practice observations of the STAR classes by an ESOL experienced volunteer. Following such observations, the ESOL teacher provides some feedback and support on some key areas including recycling and revisiting language points within one class, correction techniques, giving explanations of new vocabulary in L2, and ways in which to focus more on speaking and listening. This advice and support has been useful in helping the students to develop some basic ELT techniques and approaches. Broadening out this approach through a published set of guided observation questions and associated training packages for use with volunteer teachers for refugee groups might be a useful resource. Although initial EFL teacher training materials for CELTA qualification and Teacher Knowledge Test are available (e.g. Thornbury and Watkins 2007; Scrivener 2005; Spratt *et al.* 2005), these do not account for more complex and difficult circumstances of the refugee classes, nor the somewhat peripheral relationship to the EFL profession of some of the volunteers. Training materials acknowledging these aspects would fill a gap.

Similarly, volunteer teacher groups would benefit greatly from a set of materials and resources, which would enable them to cope better with the changeable nature of the class. Such materials would ideally include oral language tasks, be learner-centred, adaptable for multi-levels (or clearly graded), with space for repetition and revision of new language, and extension work to be completed outside class. There are currently a variety of materials available for ESOL teachers. Particularly helpful are websites of the British Council (https://esol.britishcouncil.org/) and the Education and Training Foundation's ESOL Excellence Gateway (https://esol.excellencegateway.org.uk/) which both feature a range of teaching materials, training and professional development resources and a collection of ESOL based research. However, here too there appears to be a space for materials more closely targeted at the particular context described here. The teachers' differing backgrounds, often tangential relationship to the EFL teaching profession, and importantly their commitment to the community basis of their volunteer work, mark out some distinctions to those who work within more formalised ESOL settings. A teachers' resource book centred on helping refugee learners explore and learn about the local community and cultures, and crucially supporting the building of relationships between learners, volunteers and others in the community, within a framework of language development would be of significant value.

At a broader level, it would appear that there is an additional need for support for similar volunteer groups in order to help all participants understand the contextual tensions more fully, to work within these constraints and tensions, but also to exploit pedagogic and collaborative working opportunities to the full. Such resources might focus on working with different volunteer groups and motivations and how each group might support each other more fully. Centring on how the range of volunteer alliances (beyond simply the ESOL volunteers) work and interact within the Refugee Support Group would be a useful starting point (indeed for one possible model for such an approach, see also Chick's work reported in Chapter XXX).

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