



# Adult refugee learners with limited literacy: needs and effective responses

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## Introduction

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as:

*‘ . . . a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.’*

([http://www.refugeeservices.org.nz/refugees\\_and\\_new\\_zealand](http://www.refugeeservices.org.nz/refugees_and_new_zealand) ) Currently, New Zealand accepts up to 750 refugees each year from around the world from countries as diverse as Somalia, Zimbabwe, Congo, Iraq, Columbia, Indonesia, Ethiopia, Burma, Bosnia, Eritrea, Iran, Bhutan and Afghanistan.

Typically, these people are ‘the casualties of crises such as brutal regimes, civil war, anarchy and famine. Often, they are at risk because of their ethnicity, political beliefs or religion. They may have endured persecution, torture, rape or abduction, or have witnessed killings. Many arrive after perilous journeys and detention in refugee camps, having lost loved ones, homes, possessions and jobs’ (<http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/refugees/1>).

Once they arrive in New Zealand, the refugees who have spent time in transit camps are initially inducted over a six-week period into local life at the Mangere Refugee Centre in Auckland.<sup>1</sup> They are also introduced to major refugee-focussed NGOs and other settlement agencies. From here, the new arrivals are dispersed around the country, going to larger population centres such as Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Wellington, Nelson and Christchurch. These centres are usually chosen because there are already compatriots settled there, as in the case of the Bhutanese in Palmerston North and Feilding and the Columbians in the Hutt Valley. Those who have been sponsored as part of family repatriation usually join their families directly on arrival in New Zealand.

On reaching their new destination, a range of services come into operation to help in the settlement process, including the Department of Labour, the Refugee Quota Branch and its Settlement Division, Work and Income, the local health board, Refugee Services Aotearoa, Regional Migrant Service (ARMS)<sup>2</sup> and Refugees as Survivors<sup>3</sup> - as well as a range of educational groups and institutions (see Woodley & Williams, 2012 for the example of Auckland).

Each new arrival is entitled to ESOL provision with a TEC-funded provider that usually matches the language and literacy skills of the learners. Typically, those with more education study at more formal institutions such as polytechnics, while those with low-level skills attend courses run by community-based organisations such as English Language Partners (ELP). Many often also attend non-government-funded programmes such as those offered at local churches if they are available in their community.

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<sup>1</sup> The Centre is currently under review.

<sup>2</sup> In Auckland only

<sup>3</sup> In Auckland and Wellington

## Research purpose

The purpose of this study was to document and analyse the learning needs and issues of adult refugees with low language and literacy skills by looking at how their prior experiences and current contexts affect their educational participation and learning. In addition, the study has sought to identify educational strategies for teaching these learners and provide a teaching resource for other teachers based on the project's findings. The specific focus of the study was adult refugee learners with low-level language and literacy skills currently enrolled in educational programmes with ELP.

## Related research

The purpose of this research review is to identify any studies about the challenges (and responses) of teaching adult refugee learners with low levels of literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) skills in English. The prime focus of the review is on the teaching of refugees as adult language learners, rather than broader topics such as settlement, although some of these topics are relevant to what happens in the classroom. Much of the literature covers immigrants generally or both immigrants and refugees; where possible, this review has been restricted to refugees only, as Hayward (2007, p. 18) points out there are important differences between the two groups:

- Refugees' migration is involuntary
- Refugees' migratory journeys are often precipitated by traumatic events and sustained periods living in transit camps
- Because of their sustained and prolonged losses, refugees' coping skills may be diminished and they may be less well equipped to deal with the new challenges of re-settlement.

Finally, it should be noted that refugees are a diverse group educationally with some having tertiary qualifications, but this study is concerned only with those who have low levels of literacy skills in their first language.

There is no authoritative data on the educational qualifications of refugees, but Blaker and Hardman (2001) report that 80% of adult quota refugees in New Zealand since 1995 have not completed a primary school education and about half of this group are pre-literate with the remainder semi-literate. Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Aotearoa New Zealand (2003) also report that of the quota refugee intake since 1994, 40% have no literacy skills in their own language and a further 40% who have beginner-level English have had fewer than seven years of schooling.

The initial sweep of literature for this review produced a large body of literature about refugees in general and one on refugee children (Hamilton & Anderson, 2000), but overall there were very few that matched the specific focus of this review. Secondly, many of the articles were based on writers' opinions<sup>4</sup> rather than original empirical studies. The result is that only a small number of references match the review's aims. This paucity of

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<sup>4</sup> Because of the low number of studies, some opinion articles have been included where they are based on relevant experience and credibility

pedagogically-oriented research has also been noted by writers about New Zealand ESOL (Roach & Roskvist, 2007; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Aotearoa New Zealand, 2003).

### **The importance of learning English and literacy skills**

There is some research evidence (Strategic Social Policy Group, 2008) that shows that becoming literate in the host country's language is essential for making friends outside their own community, finding and sustaining employment, as well as maintaining social and psychological well-being. This report quotes (p. 49) Winkelmann and Winkelmann's study (1998: 63) on the labour market position of migrant cohorts using 1981, 1991 and 1996 Census data, which found that the incomes of migrants proficient in English exceeded those of similar migrants who were non-proficient by approximately 37%. They also quote a Ministry of Education report on international students showing that those with better English language proficiency had more friends and were more satisfied with their life in New Zealand.

Refugees are therefore often identified as a high-need target group for educational interventions. This need is argued for both children and adults. With highly-qualified adult refugees, the need is usually about securing employment opportunities in keeping with their qualifications and work expertise. The New Zealand Immigration Service report *Refugee Voices* (2004, p. 232) indicated that only between 12% and 53% of refugees were working two years after arrival. Many of this group were working part-time and were still supplementing their income with a government benefit.

For those adults with minimal or no schooling experience, the need is primarily centred on their lack of literacy skills (including English language), often complicated by the fact that many are not literate in their first languages. Not being literate in one's first language has considerable implications for learning literacy skills in a second language. For example, if reading is not informed by the knowledge that text has meaning which is learned by learning to read in the first language, then learning to read in a second language will invariably be difficult and slower.

As Bigelow and Schwarz (2010, p.9)<sup>5</sup> argue,

Besides learning specific processing skills, a literate person learns to process information in ways qualitatively different from those of a non-literate person. Formal schooling provides particular skills, possibly used primarily in formal school settings, and the combination of thinking and performance skills is a reciprocal relationship that permits learning in a formal classroom setting. Gombert (1994) reasoned that the more education one has, the easier it is to learn all aspects of a new language. The less education one has, the more difficult it is to profit from formal education, where organization and thinking skills and school-based skills are needed to succeed.

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<sup>5</sup> This resource has the most detailed explanations of non-literate LLN learning and suggestions for teaching strategies with these learners. See also the review of ESOL research in (Benseman, Sutton, & Lander, 2005).

Learners who are reading for the first time in any language need to learn a range of reading-related skills such as interpreting figures, text organisation, even oral discrimination and picture interpretation. As Florez and Terrill (2003, p.3) point out, 'literacy learners need to understand that texts have a beginning, a middle, and an end; that English is read from left to right and from up to down; and that written words can represent a story, just as pictures do. They need to be ready to learn, to see patterns, and to associate symbols with objects.' Even for those literate in their own language, these skills need to be constantly developed when learning English.

Once someone has learned these sorts of skills, they can then be transferred to new languages even if they vary significantly from the original one in which reading was taught. However the process is further complicated if the learner comes from a country where the language is not alphabetic (e.g. Chinese, Korean) or has a non-Roman alphabet (e.g. Arabic, Nepalese).

### **Educational provision for refugees**

There are a number of studies (Altinkaya & Omundsen, 1999; Gray & Elliott, 2001; Roach & Roskvist, 2007; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Aotearoa New Zealand, 2003; Watts, White, & Trlin, 2001) that have detailed the overall shortfalls and inadequacies of educational provision for adult refugees in New Zealand. Their criticisms include not just the inadequacies of course availability (especially low-level and low/no-cost ones), but also the irrelevance of the teaching content of many courses. Altinkaya and Omundsen (1999) warn that the paucity of provision (p. 7) 'has the potential to create an *underclass of refugees* who subsequently experience significant direct and indirect discrimination. This will incur significant social costs and some economic costs (from foregone earnings and productivity) to New Zealand.'

Some writers (Altinkaya & Omundsen, 1999; New Zealand Immigration Service, 2004; Shadbolt, 1996; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Aotearoa New Zealand, 2003; Watts, White, & Trlin, 2001; White, Watts, & Trlin, 2001) have also identified specific barriers that prevent or restrict refugees' enrolment and attendance at classes:

- lack of childcare
- responsibility for caring for immediate and wider family members
- health issues, including disabilities
- financial barriers arising from low income to pay course fees
- the need to attend paid employment, including shift work
- access to, and affordability of, public transport in both urban and regional locations limiting access to classes and to preferred courses
- housing problems compounded by lack of information and awareness of housing options and rights
- gender barriers (within families and externally)
- living in rural or isolated areas
- understanding how 'systems' work in order to access information and resources.

## Learning issues

Calculating how much tuition is needed to move a learner with no English experience, to a reasonable level of fluency (a problematic notion in itself) and other literacy skills is fraught with dangers given the wide permutations of factors involved: the learners, their previous educational experience, personal confidence and so on. There are, however, some crude calculations available. Florez and Terrill's (2003) report on *The Mainstream English Language Training* (MELT) Australian project for Southeast Asian refugees in the early 80s, concluded that it takes from 500-1,000 hours of instruction for adults who are literate in their mother tongue, but have no prior English instruction to reach a level where they can function satisfactorily with limited social interaction in English.

Blaker and Hardman (2001, p.4) quote an Australian study by Ram in 1992 (the NCELTR project) that low-level literacy learners were found to need at least 400 hours tuition to progress one point on the ASLPR scale. This calculation means that these learners need between 800-1,200 hours to reach Survival English level (equivalent to 18mths – 2 years full time). From her study of Somali refugees in Wellington, Bihi (1999) suggests a more modest minimum of 520 hours of ESOL learning. McDermott's study of five programmes for adult refugees (2004) found that 100% of students who attended an ESOL programme for more than two years had achieved an Elementary level of English proficiency and some were working at pre-Intermediate level.

A TEC report on ESOL gaps and priorities (TEC, 2008, p. 6) acknowledged in particular that 'learning progress for pre-literate learners is extremely slow. Traditional assumptions about stair-casing to higher level programmes need to be challenged in the case of pre-literate learners.' The report recognises that these learners' needs are complex and require specialist resources and teaching approaches that are culturally and socially appropriate. An ESOL teacher of refugees (Kaur, 2011) also confirms the slow rate of progress with non-literate learners when first starting their courses due to poor concentration and short-term memory. For these reasons, she recommends no more than 10 learners in a class.

Most studies (see for example Hayward, 2007 for some of this literature) report the importance of understanding the psychological trauma that many refugee learners have endured prior to arrival in their new countries. Trauma can include physical and psychological torture, living in primitive conditions in transit camps for long periods, sustained separation from family and friends and cultural alienation in their new host societies. Adkins, Sample, and Birman (1999) discuss the role of stress that occurs when the burden imposed on people by external events or internal pressures on their lives exceeds their resources to cope. They identify three types of stress that refugees face:

1. *Migration stress*. Moving to a new country triggers a number of stressful life events at one time. When migration occurs suddenly as a result of political violence, war, or other catastrophes, refugees are functioning under conditions out of their control. Moreover, many of the losses associated with migration represent the loss of the usual coping resources - such as family, friends, surrounding community - that people would ordinarily rely on to help them cope with stress.
2. *Acculturative stress* results from having to learn to function in a culture different from the one an individual is born and raised in. Immigrants and refugees often do

not expect that the very fabric of life around them will be profoundly different. Ways in which people relate to each other and form and sustain friendships will be different, and how children go to schools and are socialised will change. Even the most simple of daily tasks, such as shopping for food or asking for directions, can become challenges involving not only the language barrier, but also the potential for deep cultural misunderstanding. New refugees and immigrants can feel that their very identity is threatened in the new culture (Ullman, 1997).

3. *Traumatic stress* results from extreme events that cause harm, injury, or death, such as natural disasters, accidents, assault, war-related experiences, and torture. Generally, it is believed that injury resulting from accidents and natural disasters is less traumatic than injury resulting from wilful acts by other human beings, such as torture. It is inevitable that individuals suffering such events will be changed by that experience, and research suggests that these changes will be psychological, social, and physical (Pynoos, Sorenson, & Steinberg, 1993).

Adkins, Sample, and Birman suggest a range of things to counter the effects of stress on their learners:

- Teachers can learn to recognise symptoms of mental illness, or abrupt behavioural changes that disrupt the class
- Teachers can discuss health and cultural content relevant to learners
- Teachers can network with others who have more knowledge and experience.

In her study of eight refugees and ten educators using in-depth interviews, Magro (2006-2007) concluded that while it is important not to pathologise the effects that war and other catastrophes may have on learners, these factors should also not be underestimated as learners come to grips with living in their new society. Even for less traumatised learners, Roberts et al. (2004, p.40) point out that 'despite their supportive learning environment the students are suffering from loneliness, depression and lack of appropriate expert counselling, lack of legal and language rights and information and have few opportunities to speak English outside the class and to integrate with members of the host community.'

Magro therefore argues that resettlement issues cannot be separated from language development and teachers should work from a broad definition of literacy that includes not only numeracy, problem solving, and the ability to read, write and speak English, but also emotional and social literacies such as motivation, interpersonal effectiveness, critical thinking, and cultural awareness.

Some writers (Altinkaya & Omundsen, 1999; Gray, A & Elliott, S, 2001; McMillan & Gray, 2009; Sobrun-Maharaj, Tse, Hoque, & Rossen, 2008) have pointed out that particular groups of refugees have greater or distinctive needs relative to others. These groups include older people, asylum seekers, those with physical disabilities, women and youth (potentially a lost generation who feel they don't fit into either their original or their new country).

In terms of specific issues relating to teaching refugees, Kaur's personal experience (2011) as a New Zealand teacher of refugees lists common issues with these learners:

- Lack of education in country of origin
- Not literate in mother tongue



- Concentration problems
- Self-perception - low self-esteem is matched with low expectations
- Low motivation, interest and confidence
- Distrust
- Fear of authority figures
- Sleep problems and tiredness.

### **Teaching strategies**

In terms of original research, there are only a few studies available. In a study about Sudanese refugees in Australia interviewing 30 experienced teachers, Burgoyne and Hull (2007) found that speaking, listening, reading, writing, numeracy and learning skills simultaneously may be too great a learning burden for these learners. They argue that there needs to be greater flexibility in course content and outcomes so that learners can concentrate initially on oral English language skills. They also conclude (p. 7) that the teaching of Sudanese refugees would work better if:

- registered training organisations provided teachers with relevant background information on the Sudanese students
- class sizes were reduced from 15 to 10 students per teacher for these learners
- Sudanese learners could be taught separately from learners from other backgrounds.

With regard to this last point, Barton and Pitt (2003, p.12) describe a successful programme for traumatised refugees in Sweden who would normally have dropped out of mainstream ESOL provision. The course integrated educational needs with the learners' physical and psychological needs. The course evaluation concluded that traumatised refugees need to be identified early and given special support, as those who have failed in other courses have little chance of successfully learning Swedish.

In their reflection on working with low-level refugee learners in New Zealand, Blaker and Hardman (2001) stress the obvious difficulty of working with groups of heterogeneous learners with multiple languages. They emphasise the necessity of involving bi-lingual tutors to bridge this divide and reduce the time needed to communicate effectively. A New Zealand evaluation of 62 ESOL learners by Shameem et al. (2002) has also demonstrated better results for those who were taught using bi-lingual tutors compared with those taught by English-speaking tutors. Results were also better for those with greater educational experience and who had longer periods of teaching. McDermott's evaluation of five refugee programmes (2004) also reported the value of 'ethno-specific learning' and having bi-lingual support. These programmes achieved very high rates of student retention (up to 100%) and learner motivation, with the greatest impediments being childcare and transportation difficulties.

There has also been criticism of the teaching skills of some ESOL teachers working with low-skill refugees with limited English skills. These writers (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Aotearoa New Zealand, 2003; Watts, White, & Trlin, 2001) have recommended greater professionalism, increased professional development (especially about working with low-level learners) and greater access to cross-cultural training and information and translated materials. A New Zealand survey of 280 immigrant learners

(White, Watts, & Trlin, 2001) reported that many were dissatisfied with the lack of translators, the high course costs and the lack of opportunities to practise their English. It should be pointed out that there is a diverse range of ESOL provision catering for refugees and migrants, from informal community-based courses through to formal tertiary education programmes (Woodley & Williams, 2012).

Finally, in terms of the teaching content for refugee programmes, McDermott (2004, p. 6) reported that 'most students aspire to independence in everyday life' such as daily tasks of shopping and visiting their doctor. In an English study of seven asylum-seekers, Roberts et al. (2004, p.25) found that this group of students wanted some key things in their courses:

- Greater independence and control in contrast to the lack of control over their past lives
- Integration into family networks and communities
- Emotional support.

The authors list a range of strategies for working with learners not literate in their first language including mother tongue literacy classes to improve attendance and helping them acquire literacy skills in their second language. They recommend these classes should be separate from those for other beginning-level English language learners and particular attention paid to cultural influences and their experiences (or lack thereof) with formal education.

Although their study was wider than refugee programmes, Condelli, Wrigley & Yoon's study (2009, p 152) of nearly 500 learners' outcomes using pre- and post-course assessments provided some clear indications of effective practices related to the outcomes achieved:

1. Instructional strategies
  - a. Bringing in the 'outside', making connections to real issues and events
  - b. Use of students' mother tongue for clarification
  - c. Varied practice and interaction
  - d. Emphasis on oral communication
2. Programme practices
  - a. Longer duration and intensity of classes
3. Student factors
  - a. Higher attendance
  - b. Prior education and skills
  - c. Age - younger learners learning faster than older students.

With regard to the use of bi-lingual support, the authors concluded (p. 153) that,

Beginning ESL literacy students are not able to discuss options or articulate opinions to a deep level if they still struggle with even basic conversation in the new language. They may be able to understand a simple scenario presented to them, but they will be hard pressed to discuss the situation in detail or suggest more than the simplest course of action... By giving students a chance to use their own language in discussions, teachers can help students think about consequences. By mixing the use of English with opportunities to use the native language where appropriate, the learning of English can be reinforced.

Florez, M., & Terrill, L. (2003) and Kaur (2011) also provide useful lists of specific teaching strategies to help overcome teaching issues with refugee learners. The former is from the perspective of learners, while the latter is from a practising teacher.

This brief literature review on teaching refugees has shown that research on this topic is minimal at best and severely lacking in the New Zealand context, especially with respect to recent studies. While there is unanimity that refugees clearly warrant high quality educational programmes, most writers argue that current provision falls short in both availability and quality. Refugees with low literacy skills are a distinctive group of learners for ESOL teachers to engage. They bring with them diverse and extensive experiences that few other New Zealand literacy learners could ever imagine or match. Inevitably, the effects of these experiences are integral to what happens in the ESOL teaching situation. The fact that many are not literate in their first languages also means that teachers cannot assume that they have many of the literacy-related skills that are normally taken for granted. Due to these factors, it is predictable that results for these learners will be slower to achieve and will require a skilful repertoire of teaching skills and commitment to achieve satisfactory outcomes for these learners.

The present study therefore provides a useful exploration of the learning needs and issues of adult refugees with low language and literacy skills by looking at how their prior experiences and current contexts affect their educational participation and learning. It also explores the educational implications of these needs for teachers working in this area.

### **Educational provision**

UNHCR quota refugees spend six weeks at the Mangere Refugee Education Centre: during that time they receive orientation in language and New Zealand systems. Diagnostic assessments are carried out during this time and each person is involved in establishing their individual portfolio outlining learning and settlement goals.

At the end of the six week orientation, refugees are settled in one of the following areas: Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North/Feilding, Wellington region, Nelson, Christchurch.

There is a variety of ESOL provision and providers for refugees and migrants depending on the level of language, type of previous education and goals. The main challenges are to provide services at the very lowest levels (where learning and teaching is intensive and measurable progress is slow) and services which take into account the particular backgrounds of refugee adults.

### **The ESOL-Literacy Programme in English Language Partners**

English Language Partners is a national provider of specialist tuition in English language and literacy. Refugees are prioritised in the classes which are held in all the settlement areas. Research based content and assessments are used, including diagnostic placement assessments, learning plans and individual portfolios. The syllabus is partially negotiated with the learners, who are involved in goal setting, choice of topics, monitoring and measurement of progress. Classes are double-staffed with a tutor and a bilingual assistant: this allows support from the first language where needed.

In common with most adult language learners, learning strengths vary from individual to individual: many learners have an excellent aural memory but find writing difficult. Others are more confident with reading and less so with oral language. Teaching is flexible to meet the needs of heterogeneous groups.

## **Methodology**

Informed by the literature review and discussions with key informants in ELP, a set of semi-structured interview schedules was designed and submitted for approval to an internal ELP research advisory group to ensure that they met both the research purposes and cultural appropriateness for the intended interviewees. The proposal was also approved by the ELP Ethnic Advisory Group, especially in relation to interpreting and consent procedures.

Auckland and Palmerston North were chosen as the sites for the study, based on their reasonable accessibility to the researchers and for good numbers of suitable interviewees. From a potential total of approximately 140 refugees in the two areas, a sample of 40 was chosen by the course co-ordinators. They were chosen on the basis of having completed enough tuition to be able to comment on their experiences in the class, were confident enough to provide feedback, could be accessed during site visits and had first languages in common to make interpretation in groups possible.

At each site, interviews<sup>6</sup> were held with programme co-ordinators (2), course tutors (5), bilingual tutors (6) and learners (36). An additional group of four learners were not interviewed due to the non-availability of an interpreter on the scheduled day. In addition, both researchers observed two classrooms prior to the interviews to gain an overview of how the classes functioned. These observations also served as useful introductions to the learners. Table 1 below is a summary of the study sample.

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<sup>6</sup> Interviews were carried out by the author and Debora Potgieter (assistant researcher). The content of the interviews varied across the different interview groups. The interviews with participants covered their experiences pre and post arrival in New Zealand, how they were recruited into their class, subsequent experiences in the class and future aspirations, Interviews with the other stakeholders focused mostly on the educational aspects of the class.

**Table 1 – Number and characteristics of interviewees**

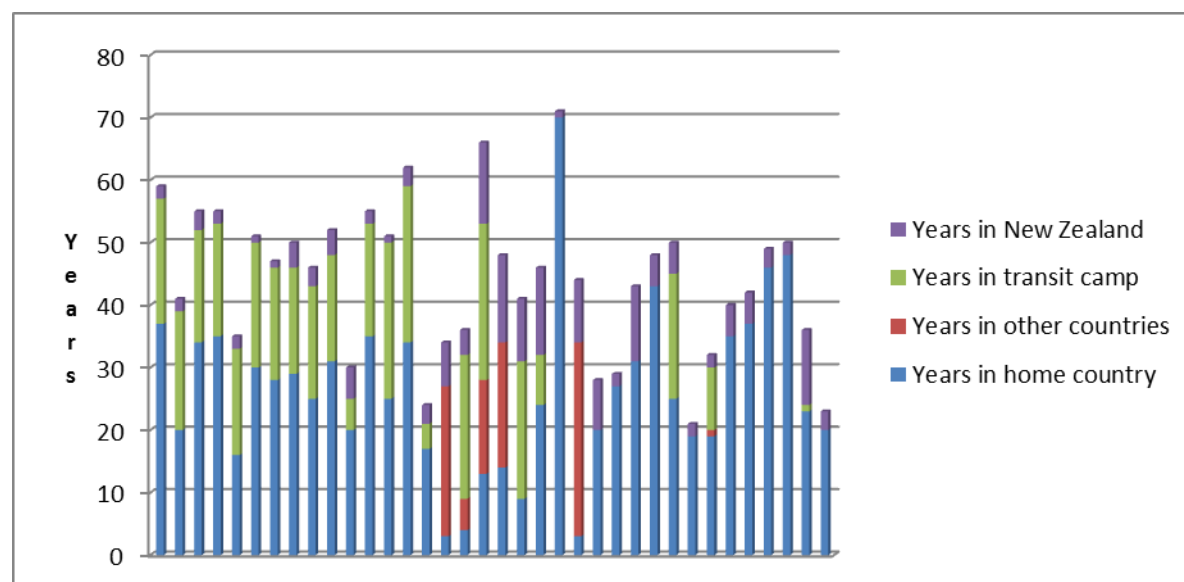
Site	Tutors	Bi-lingual tutors	Learners	Languages	Countries of origin
PN/Feilding	1	1	12	Nepali Burmese	Bhutan Burma
Wesley Centre	2	3	12	Tamil Dari Pashtu Amharic Urdu Burmese	Sri Lanka Afghanistan Ethiopia Pakistan India Burma
Massey Centre	1	1	9	Arabic Kurdish	Iran Iraq Kuwait Palestine
New Lynn Centre	1	1	3	Parsi	Iran Afghanistan
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>36</b>		

Of the 36 interviewed, 29 were women and seven were men. Their average age was 44.2 years, ranging from seventy-one years to twenty-one years. The great majority were married, with four widowed (all in their home countries), one was divorced and four were single. All have at least some family in New Zealand, including grand-parents, siblings and grand-children. Of those who have children, the average number of children per interviewee is just over two. Five said that they had sons or daughters still either in their home country or in North America.

Figure 1 below gives an indication of where the interviewees have spent their lives to date. The graph clearly shows the low number of years spent in New Zealand (4.9 years), but also how variable their experiences are in relation to transit camps. Overall, they have spent 15.3

years in camps, but about a third have not been in camps at all, although they may have spent some time in other countries before coming to New Zealand. The graph also illustrates how the great majority fall in the 30-60-year age bracket.

**Figure 1 – Refugee interviewees’ prior living locations**



The learners were interviewed in focus groups (mainly groups of three, but one of five) to provide a supportive environment among compatriots and ensure that interpreters were available. These focus groups appeared to work well in terms of generating data and ensuring that the interview questions were clearly understood by all of the group.

## Ethics

Each interviewee had the ELP Consent Form explained orally (via the interpreters for the learners) and all signed it prior to the interview starting. A copy of the Consent Form is included in Appendix A.

## Course description

The 36 learners were spread over six classes held at five different venues. All of the Auckland venues are local community centres, while the Palmerston North venue is the local ELP rooms and the Feilding one is a church hall. The classes currently have 20-26 learners<sup>7</sup>, with new learners still joining as the course progressed; in one course, six new learners had joined in the past week. All the classes had a tutor and a bi-lingual tutor who works alongside the course tutor. All tutors are paid. Most of the learners attend a total of 10 hours each week (usually over four sessions). Some also attend additional teaching sessions with groups like local churches and/or receive some tuition from an ELP Home Tutor.

The teaching content of the courses is broadly set by the national ELP curriculum, although most of the tutors said that they closely followed suggestions from the learners themselves and/or from current issues and needs arising from the learners. As one key informant said

‘it’s survival English, and eventually they can manage their own lives independently.’ Learner progress is assessed using the ELP assessment procedures against profiles together with learner portfolios.

In most cases, learners are recruited through Refugee Services social workers or contacts in their own communities. Course tutors were often notified informally of new arrivals (‘although you only count them when they actually arrive – it’s all very unpredictable’ one manager commented) who were then introduced to the tutor and the class when it was felt they were ready to begin. Although much of the paperwork in relation to the refugees was done by the national office of ELP, there were still more administrative demands for local ELP administrators than with other ELP students – for example, with WINZ and Housing New Zealand making constant unrealistic demands (e.g. requirement to present for courses or work interviews when they have zero English). The high rate of staff turnover in these agencies means that ELP staff are constantly responding to the same issue because the previous staff member had moved on and the replacement had no understanding or knowledge of the issues involved.

There were consistent comments that course attendance was unfailingly high – as one manager said, ‘they just love being here, they’re certainly not being forced.’ The great majority of the learners with pre-school children had made childcare arrangements (either informal or available at the centre at a cost of about \$3 a day); we only observed one child in the classrooms.

We were able to observe four classes in session. In all four, the class numbers averaged approximately 24 learners, with one tutor and one bi-lingual tutor. There were clear variations in English language skills within the classes; ranging from pre-literate, usually working in very small groups with the bi-lingual tutor if they spoke a common language, to Level Two or Three, working almost independently on an on-going project. Typically, the tutor was directing a main group activity, introducing for example days of the week, which was then followed by an individual activity such as completing a worksheet. This activity was often completed in pairs or involved informal peer teaching among the learners. While the learners were completing these tasks, the tutor would circulate among the learners, helping where needed or work with smaller groups on another activity. Learners usually sat next to others who spoke the same language, which facilitated their interaction and mutual help.

The bi-lingual assistant tutors (BLT) were used in a number of ways. Where BLTs had strong English skills and/or teaching skills, they would play a more prominent role in the classroom, supplementing the tutor’s teaching in a number of ways: repeating instructions to individual learners, repeating the pronunciation of key words and phrases, translating vocabulary into learners’ first language (L1), detecting issues as they arose, providing positive feedback in English and L1, setting supplementary work for those who had completed tasks, asking the tutor to clarify or repeat instructions, working with individual learners who were struggling with tasks. With BLTs who were less confident with English and/or were less confident in teaching skills, their main task in the classroom usually involved working with lower-level small groups and individual learners on activities directed by the tutor.

The BLTs working with learners who shared a language in common (other than English) clearly found it easier to work with all the class members. For example, in one class where the BLT’s first language was the same as that of all the learners present, the interaction was

unrestrained and flowed readily. In other cases, the BLT shared a first language with some of the learners, had some knowledge of some other learners' L1, but shared only their limited English with the rest of the class. In this case, the BLT's availability to learners was variable and therefore tended to be concentrated with the first two groups.

## Findings

### Learners' perspectives

A total of 36 learners were interviewed. As explained in the Methodology section earlier in this report, they came from 10 different countries, speaking a similar number of first languages as well as a number of second and third languages in addition to English. Their diversity extended to a range of religious backgrounds, different castes<sup>8</sup> and settlement journeys en route to New Zealand. The great majority had not attended any schooling in their home country, which means that most are not literate in any language, including L1. A few had attended school for up to three years and a smaller number had attended up to eight years. This latter group can read and write a little in their L1.

Their journeys from their homeland to New Zealand varied considerably. Some had spent many years in transit camps, while others had come directly to New Zealand as part of a family re-unification process. The trauma they had experienced also varied considerably; in one group, most of the men had been imprisoned and in some cases, tortured. Some of the women in this group had been raped. Those who had been in transit camps had faced many years of uncertainty about their future, social dislocation from family and friends, resentment from local people and prolonged periods of inactivity and uncertainty while they awaited decisions about their future settlement. The effects of this internment have often had long-term effect on these refugees: poor health (chronic conditions that re-occur periodically as well as long-term disabilities (from severely broken bones for example), neurological dysfunction (demonstrated by high levels of anxiety in unfamiliar settings such as the classroom) and feelings of alienation in their new setting. One BLT commented that one of the most enduring negative effects of living in transit camps is a deep-seated feeling of dependency because they were unable to work or provide their daily necessities of living (provided by those running the camps).

Only a few had any English prior to arriving in New Zealand.<sup>9</sup> Some had picked up some English during their time in transit camps, but this occurred largely on an informal basis.<sup>10</sup> Tutors commented that those starting the course with some English tend to have very little comprehension and operate on a 'word-by-word translation' model of speaking.

The great majority of the participants had been recruited to their course by a social worker (usually from Refugee Services), an extended family member, a friend, through a government agency such as Work and Income or from their own enquiries. The process of linking into courses appears to function very well, probably because of new arrivals' close

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<sup>8</sup> Religious and caste differences mean that tutors need to proceed carefully: for example in relation to food preparation and consumption.

<sup>9</sup> According to ELP assessments, the learners are predominantly preliterate through to a maximum of Profile 2 when starting on ELP courses.

<sup>10</sup> One person commented that because transit camp inhabitants do not know where they are going to be settled, it is not clear which language they should endeavour to learn even if the opportunity is available.



links with a range of social service agencies working to facilitate their settlement and also because of the tight compatriot communities that they quickly become part of when they arrive.

About a third of the group had been attending a literacy course for six months or less, another third for approximately 6-18 months and a third for two years or more. One person had been attending classes 'on and off' for about 10 years. Several others said that they had dropped out of classes in the past and had attended several other classes before enrolling in the current ELP one. They had dropped out mainly because they found them too difficult or because of domestic issues. Several had had their attendance interrupted because they moved around within New Zealand, such as needing to move from Christchurch following the February 2011 earthquake.

Asked what they wanted to achieve by attending their class, all expressed slight variations on learning enough English to be able to carry out daily tasks whether shopping, speaking to their kiwi neighbours or making enough progress to enrol in a higher level course at a polytechnic. Underpinning all their replies was a strong desire to achieve personal independence so that they do not have to rely on their children, spouse or a third party in order to do things such as talk to their doctor or their children's teachers. This desire was expressed by both men and women and especially by the older interviewees. About half said that they wanted to be able to get a job, although most realised that this was a long-term goal given their current level of English. Several older men said that while health issues precluded being able to hold down a full-time job, they would like to volunteer their time in the community – as one man said, 'so that I can repay New Zealand' - in return for what they have received. Other aims included to learn enough English to help support their children to finish school and to help them achieve what they want to do, to understand what their children were saying to their friends, to read street names, to identify food items when shopping, to get a driver's licence (mainly women) and to solve problems for their family.

The interviewees were asked their opinions of the current course they were attending. The responses were unanimously positive, with specific mentions of their tutors, the BLTs, the programme, the location, the timing of the class, being able to practise their English, various aspects of the teaching ('repeating until I remember'), achieving particular skills (e.g. being able to write name and address, using a bus, talking on the phone, using an ATM, using the Internet) and the personal support they have received since arriving in New Zealand. Many mentioned the positive value of having a BLT involved in their class.

Asked if there were any aspects of the course they did not like or would like changed, only a few identified any issues. These criticisms included the inclusion of children in some classes because of the noise, taking a break in the middle of their lesson ('time is too short'), having to put furniture away every day, the crowded conditions in the classroom and transport difficulties.

They were also asked if the course had helped them achieve their personal goals. Most responses to this question were positive, giving examples of tasks learners are now able to do (or start to do) because of the skills that they have learned on the course – as one learner said, 'it's helped a lot, I knew nothing before coming to class. Now I can go shopping on my own and pay my bills. I can take my wife to the hospital for her appointments without an interpreter.' Another said, 'I can recognise my street name now when I see it and greet

people on the way to class.’ Most of these achievements are of an immediate nature helping them function more easily, while longer-term achievements like getting a job are seen as aspirational and dependent on achieving greater fluency and confidence in English and literacy skills.

The interviewees were all asked what they found their greatest challenge(s) as learners. Many were not able to articulate specific challenges or said that they had no problems. Most of the challenges mentioned related to learning processes: being unable to hear sounds, speak easily, retain new learning (‘I’m too old’), spell English words or understand word meanings. Other challenges related to wider issues: lack of time to practise amid a busy family life, tiredness, homesickness, depression, lack of access to the tutor due to the large numbers in the class and constant new arrivals, sight problems and coping with family members’ health issues.

### ***Key factors in learning***

Finally, they were asked what best helps them learn. The responses to this question varied considerably, but often included some aspect of the BLT role on-site in the class.<sup>11</sup> Other suggestions included:

- the value of those with the same language working together
- the strong support from other learners and tutors
- practising outside class
- receiving immediate feedback from the tutor identifying errors
- writing two sentences daily using words put up by the tutor
- use of writing to help memorising
- clear explanations by the tutor of what is expected in a task
- homework sheets to practise on
- constant practice
- pictures/illustrations to indicate meanings
- use of CDs to consolidate learning
- revision of previous session – ‘it helps us remember’
- practising question and answer routines
- repetition to consolidate learning.

### **Course tutors’ perspective**

Five course tutors were interviewed. All were employed by ELP; some also taught non-refugee classes, but had been chosen for the current course specifically for their expertise in teaching low-level literacy to refugees. One manager commented that they have to proceed carefully when selecting and introducing new tutors. Even some of their experienced ESOL tutors had not lasted in the refugee classes as they were unused to the slow rate of progress. In some cases, inappropriate tutors had meant losing both the tutor and learners.

All the tutors were female and had formal teaching qualifications, including Certificate in Teaching English as a Second Language, Certificate in Adult Teaching, Bachelor of Education

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<sup>11</sup> One person said they had a BLT available to their previous class, but this person was not always available to the class.

(specialising in Adult Education), Graduate Diploma in TESOL, Diploma of Teaching, Higher Diploma of Teaching, Masters in Applied Linguistics and Master of Literacy Education. Most had several qualifications, one of which was at post-graduate level.

The tutors had an average of over 13 years' ESOL teaching experience, ranging from four to 25 years. Most had also done some ESOL home tutoring and several had extensive experience teaching in schools, including one person with more than 40 years. All had been involved in teaching refugees for more than two years, with some having up to ten years' experience. One tutor speaks English as a second language herself.

Asked what they wanted to achieve with their current class, all the tutors said that they aimed for fluency in basic conversational English language for everyday living, especially to help learners solve problems and challenges and thereby achieve greater independence. While all mentioned oral skills as the primary aim, some also specified literacy aims such as writing and reading. Several pointed out that this aim was quite basic in most cases because the learners also had limited literacy skills in their first language. In some cases, it involved discerning initial word sounds, learning motor skills for forming letters, learning a new alphabet, recalling previous learning, understanding the direction of text (and the fact that English text sits on top of a line rather than underneath), understanding new word orders and learning to listen, analyse and reflect using questions. As one tutor said, 'it takes a while for some of them to understand the difference between a question and an answer, let alone getting them to start asking questions or responding to them.' Another tutor stressed the importance of integrating the teaching of literacy skills with oral language skills.

Alongside these aims, all mentioned wanting to provide an introduction to successfully living in the New Zealand environment. As one tutor said, 'I want them to have good experiences in their host country to introduce them here and help them integrate.' Other aims mentioned included learners gaining general confidence, achieving a sense of accomplishment and feeling welcome and supported.

They were then asked what they feel constitutes success in the light of these aims. Here, several tutors talked about the importance of seeing changes in how their learners perceived themselves – 'if they are happy, engaged in their learning and realising that they can have success, they can do more than before.' Another tutor looked for changes in specific patterns of interaction: replying when asked a question, remembering from previous lessons, being able to discern all the words in a sentence, understanding the correspondence between words and sounds, using written prompts for speaking and transferring learning into new words. One tutor looks for changes in how learners participate in their community and especially in family life, where there are often parents with no English and where there is a strong reliance on children whose language skills have developed more strongly than the adults. Gaining confidence in English in these cases helps restore the confidence and feelings of self-worth of the learners as parents within their family.

As all of the tutors have had experience teaching ESOL with non-refugees, they were asked what differences they noticed in teaching refugees compared with other ESOL classes. Several mentioned the effects of psychological trauma on the ability to learn (usually in terms of poor attention span and 'nervous energy'), general homesickness and dealing with dislocated families where some family members are still in dangerous situations, but the

most frequent comment related to the low levels of literacy skill, which meant that the refugees had to 'learn to learn', picking up many basic skills (for example, establishing routines, setting goals, interpreting symbolic representations such as maps and diagrams, dealing with abstractions, sitting at a table, understanding rules of appropriate behaviour, following instructions, using glue) that teachers take for granted in other ESOL classes. As one tutor said, 'you have to start learning from the absolute beginning, you can't take anything for granted.' Other differences included very low levels of ambition 'because they don't know yet what they can do.'

With such low levels of basic learning skills, tutors find that learners are not able to work on tasks independently (either at home or in the classroom) as they are reluctant to ask for help, or if they do, find it hard to specify their difficulty. They also felt that refugees take longer to retain new learning. One very experienced tutor said she estimated that her refugee learners took 4-5 times longer to consolidate their new skills than other ESOL learners.

Other challenges are probably not unique to refugee learners, but are present nonetheless. For example, because of traditional perceptions of teachers and high initial dependency, most learners tend to see their tutors as experts to be revered, the sole source of learning and particularly as one who imparts knowledge. This 'teacher as expert' perception makes it difficult to initiate learner-centred activities where learners are encouraged to function in small groups, where they provide mutual help and support or where individual learners are set independent tasks. Several tutors commented that learners found it difficult to work in this learner-centred way initially, but gradually became comfortable with it over a period of months. New learners then joining the class often joined in more readily because current class members helped socialise them into these new activities.

Tutors reported no difficulties with recruitment processes or attendance. The only difficulties with attendance were due to what tutors see as valid reasons such as religious celebrations, bad weather (having to walk long distances to class) and coping with family crises and illness.

There were varied reports about completing tasks at home. Some tutors said that it was too difficult (especially with low-level learners and those with large families) and therefore did not set any. Others felt that homework was worthwhile, even if some had difficulty with completion. In some cases, it prompted valuable developments such as parents and children all doing their homework together and, in one class, three women who now meet on a regular basis to work on their homework. Higher-level learners tended to ask for additional work between sessions.

### ***Assessment of learning impact***

Typical assessment regimes included assessments using the ELP Assessment Kit twice a year (after Terms 2 and 4),<sup>12</sup> assessments of topics at the end of each term and on-going (formative) assessment as an integral part of teaching. While reading and writing assessments are formal, listening and speaking tend to be more informal based on teacher

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<sup>12</sup> Several tutors thought these assessments were too frequent given the slow rate of progress of many learners.

observation and checklists. All assessment material and ongoing samples of learner work are kept in individual learner portfolios.

Asked for their opinions about the assessments required of them, several tutors commented that they thought there were too many formal assessments required ('it takes a long time, it's a complicated process and energy-consuming') and that they relied more heavily on their professional judgement. One tutor commented, 'it [assessment] includes all the skills, but it's too time-consuming to be comfortable, whereas on-going assessment is very useful.' Another challenged the adequacy of the assessment tools because there is a 'mis-match between the tests and what the student is being taught. Some of the tests are given repeatedly so the students become familiar with the tests.'

Irrespective of the assessment tools being used, all the tutors agreed that most of the learners' gains are 'small and incremental.' One tutor explained, 'progress is slow and variable. It varies according to things like age and their previous education. Young learners with some schooling make much faster progress than older ones who have never been to school. Some take 4-5 years to get to a point where they are confident and comfortable with 'survival English' and can leave the class – but there's always pressure from WINZ to get into jobs.' Another tutor challenged the reliability of the results as the tests are not standardised and the conditions for teaching are not suitable, 'so you can't guarantee the accuracy of testing.'

In terms of impact outside the classroom, the tutors had varied viewpoints. One tutor was cautious about their progress – 'it's hard to say, they say that they are more relaxed and competent, but it's slow progress though.' Others were more confident that their learners were making progress, mainly because the course content was strongly influenced by the learners generating their own topics of current interest or need. One commented, 'they are more confident, it broadens their outlook and makes New Zealand a little more familiar and comfortable.' Another was more adamant – 'there's been a visible improvement. They can make themselves understood, they have better access to health services because they can communicate with doctors and so on with increased confidence and higher self-esteem.'

### ***Key strategies for success***

The tutors were asked to identify specific successful teaching strategies for literacy classes involving pre-literate refugees:

- 'being human' – owning up to mistakes (useful in de-mystifying the teacher as expert), being prepared to be light-hearted when appropriate, being self-effacing, using touch when appropriate (even with men)
- The importance of catering for everyone in the class, including higher-level learners who can easily be forgotten
- Ensuring that learners have all the requisite 'learning blocks' on which to build higher levels of learning – 'never assume they understand things we take for granted (like what a full stop is for) and if it takes a long time, then it takes a long time'
- Importance of everyone experiencing success by pitching teaching at the right level for the learner
- Ensuring relevance of teaching content by using 'realia' of everyday life tasks and issues

- Approaching tasks in several different ways (e.g. using pictures, speech and words) to ensure relevance; being prepared to rephrase and re-present if not successful
- Importance of teaching all four literacy skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking); ensure that writing is not the ‘forgotten skill’
- Constantly reviewing skills – ‘re-visit and re-cycle as much as possible by choosing resources that repeat prior learning to help them be confident’
- Importance of self-efficacy through praising achievement– ‘I *can* do this’
- The value of a cycle of modelling/acting/role-play/re-cycle/reflection/practise in pairs
- Importance of basic list of 220 sight words, with some taught every day
- Phonics, especially for low-level learners
- ‘Seizing the moment’, being responsive in your teaching, looking for opportunities to maximise learning with individuals
- Dictation with all levels.

As the use of BLTs is an integral part of teaching these courses, the tutors were asked for their assessments of this strategy. Their responses were universally positive. They valued their BLTs for a range of reasons: acting as a role model, helping identify and resolve issues in learners’ wider lives, providing instant clarification of language-related difficulties, providing help in small-group work, acting as an intermediary generally between the tutor and learners, picking up subtle cultural signals from learners, motivating and affirming individual learners and helping organise class events and outings. BLTs are also key to coping with large classes.

There were also a number of difficulties or limitations with the use of BLTs in some cases: restrictions when the BLT did not speak some of the learners’ languages, limitations when a few BLTs themselves had limited English skills and a danger that some learners become dependent on the BLT’s translation when they should be working harder to understand things themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the tutors were asked for any general reflections about what they had learned as a result of teaching their refugee course. One tutor said that working with such low-level learners had ‘made me think a lot more deeply about my teaching and broadened my teaching skills.’ The course had also helped her empathise more with her learners and see learning from their perspective.

Several tutors commented that working with refugees had made them more sensitive to cultural issues, giving them greater understanding of cultural barriers both inside and outside the classroom (especially the discrimination refugees face) – ‘it’s taught me how to meld different cultures together and about tragedy and dislocation.’ Another commented that ‘you can never assume they see things the same way as you do’ and that ‘even if their progress can be slow, everyone will learn, even the elderly.’ One very experienced ESOL tutor said that the course had taught her that while teaching in context is important, she now places more importance on teaching out of context with regular phonics spots, sight reading and constructing sentences as valuable activities.

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<sup>13</sup> One tutor commented that some learners who did not share a language with the BLT appeared to make faster progress because they had to work harder at understanding the tutor on their own.

## Bi-lingual assistant tutors' perspectives

Six bi-lingual tutors were interviewed, one in Palmerston North and the rest in Auckland. They originally came from Bhutan, Afghanistan (2), Ethiopia and Iran (2). Most spoke at least three languages (including English), with one person speaking six. In most cases, they had learned at least some English in their home country, usually at school. Several had also attended English language classes in transit camps. One tutor had picked up English when working in a New Zealand factory and later supplemented this through the ELP Home Tutor programme. Several had also attended polytechnic courses in New Zealand and gained certificates in English. Most were reasonably fluent in English to a level where they freely conversed in their interviews. Two were a little hesitant and struggled to express themselves at times.

Formal qualifications ranged from none to a PhD; in addition, one had a vocational qualification. All had completed the ELP 2-day bi-lingual certificate course and one had trained as a schoolteacher while in a transit camp. This person had considerable teaching experience in schools teaching mixed-age classes, a second had tertiary teaching experience in a specialist technology field and another had some early childhood teaching experience.

In sum, while sharing similar backgrounds to those of their compatriot learners, the BLTs were from very diverse backgrounds linguistically, culturally and socially; they also had a diverse range of educational and professional qualifications and teaching experience. All however, have the ELP BLT training in common.

Asked how they saw their role as BLTs, all mentioned 'supporting' and 'assisting' the class tutor in a collaborative way. They identified a range of ways they do this: for example, interpreting and explaining for the learners, facilitating communication generally, explaining cultural customs to the tutor and working with individual learners on tasks set by the tutor. All the BLTs were clear that the teaching agenda is set by the class tutor and that it is the role of the BLT to help achieve the tasks specified by the tutor – 'she explains what she wants and I translate, work with the students, making sure they know what to do.'

As one BLT explained, 'it's important to make the students feel safe – they know there will be someone who can explain.' Another explained, '[it's about] filling the gap, working like a bridge, explaining when they don't understand either in English or [L1].' This BLT said that it was important that the BLT shares the learner background with the tutor in order to explain why learners do or don't do things, as most of the learners had never been to school and didn't always understand what was expected of them.

Asked to reflect on their experiences as BLTs, all were unanimous about it being a positive experience – as one said, 'it works well, I am happy.' Several said that the role could be frustrating at times, mainly due to learners' difficulties in achieving their goals.

The BLTs named two key outcomes for the learners: improving their language skills in order to become independent and overcoming cultural barriers in order to integrate into New Zealand society and achieve healthy lifestyles in their new environment – '[it's great] every time a learner achieves their own small goal, maybe writing their name, go shopping or whatever.' One BLT said that her ultimate goal with her learners was that 'they can solve their problems by themselves – one day!'

The BLTs were also asked to list particular challenges they found working with low-level refugee learners. Specific factors or issues they identified included:

- Coping with constant influxes of new learners who need to be integrated into the class routines as well as learn to be learners
- Coping with the demands of large classes, often in confined spaces
- Coping with multi-level classes
- Being able to identify what learners specifically need help with
- ‘Getting them to understand’ – especially with instructions
- Giving due attention to single learners whose L1 is different from others in the class
- Lack of patience as the tutor and BLT endeavour to provide individual attention in a class of 20+ - ‘they need a lot of help and can’t work on their own much’<sup>14</sup>
- Coping with the different ethnic groups in the class where these groups had very different values (‘there are different sets of rules for some groups’), for example in relation to gender issues.
- Achieving progress with older learners (several BLTs disputed this observation)
- Difficulties in completing tasks outside the classroom because of learners’ low level of basic skills and very limited access to help.

There were also mentions of factors outside the classroom such as transport, financial difficulties, looking after relatives with serious or on-going illness, lack of childcare and issues involving their children. One BLT also said that the learners were subjected to racism in their community, especially around issues of religion.

### ***Key factors for success***

Asked what are the key factors in helping learners achieve their goals, the BLTs identified the following:

- Creating and sustaining a welcoming and supportive learning environment
- Patience – ‘you need to be very patient with them and explain things in ways they can understand’
- Ensuring they can have basic literacy skills such as holding a pen
- Working alongside tutors who are skilled in working with low-level learners
- Constant revision of previous learning to ensure consolidation of skills and knowledge
- Rote practice of oral skills, especially with very low level learners to ensure they have a solid foundation of key foundation skills such as greeting people and introducing themselves or dealing with shopkeepers.
- Varying teaching strategies according to the needs and skills of the learner
- Having ready access to support in L1, especially for very low-level learners
- Ensuring that learners with a common language can work together on tasks so that they can pool their knowledge and skills to maximise vocabulary and understanding of task requirements

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<sup>14</sup> The analogy used in some teaching observation studies is referred to as “keeping all the spinning plates (on sticks) spinning” and making sure that none of the plates falls. In other words, the tutor sets all the plates spinning by setting a task for individual learners to work on and then constantly goes round the learners needing the most help.



- Careful grouping of learners within the classroom to ensure that cultural values are not threatened (e.g. grouping older men away from younger women in some cultures)
- Helping with phonemic awareness
- Helping learners to practise new skills outside the classroom
- Showing respect for learners in terms of their age (especially older men), religion and culture
- Providing pastoral care outside the classroom – ‘they trust me with their problems from daily life’
- Understanding that learners’ previous trauma can be played out in the classroom in the form of constant headaches, difficulties in concentrating on tasks and on-going health issues
- The need for on-going professional development (even as an informal group) to further develop their skills as BLTs
- Field-trips to significant New Zealand sites such as Parliament, a local farm and Te Papa.

### **Outcomes**

While improvements in English language skills did not always come readily or quickly with many of these learners, the BLTs reported that learners were keen to apply their new skills in situations outside the classroom. In particular they reported achievements such as being able to greet people, identifying themselves when needed, using ATMs, talking to their children’s teachers, interpreting the origin and intention of written correspondence and purchasing items in a variety of types of shops.

The BLTs consistently mentioned the importance of gaining confidence not only in English language and literacy skills, but also the confidence to try these new skills outside the classroom. The most valued act of independence is seen as being able to visit health practitioners such as a GP or the hospital without having to have someone (usually a child) accompanying them to interpret.

Using purpose-developed assessments, teachers capture learning gains including small gains and gains that are not solely language based, such as the increase in confidence exemplified above.

### **Discussion**

A review of the research literature has shown that there are few studies on refugees as learners in New Zealand contexts. It also showed that there are concerns about the quality of provision for them. This study has provided some insights into the nature and extent of refugees’ learning needs as well as some elucidation of strategies to achieve impact on their language and literacy skills with a longer aim of achieving successful settlement in New Zealand.

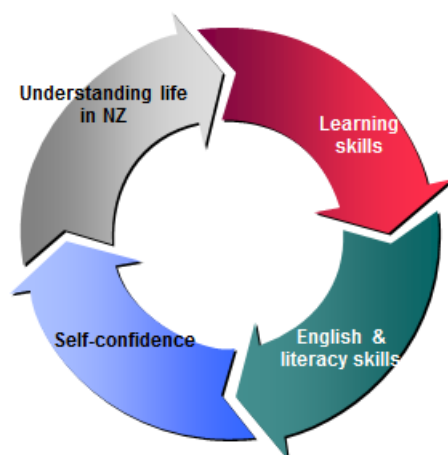
The challenges teachers face in achieving impact with their learners primarily come from two main sources: the social and pedagogical background of the learners and the nature of the content being taught. In both these respects, ESOL literacy courses for refugees present considerable challenges for the tutors involved.

While they do have diverse backgrounds and experiences, many refugee learners also share much in common that constitutes a considerable challenge for their teachers, especially in order to achieve the degree of impact that might be normally expected in a classroom. As this study and the review of the related research literature has shown, many refugees have encountered different types of trauma as a result of being exiled from their home country, undertaking a long and complicated process of transit through refugee camps and intermediary countries, before starting the gradual adaptation to their new environment. It is difficult to assess the degree of impact these experiences have on refugees generally and in relation to learning in particular, but it is clear that these learners bring much to the classroom that is not always immediately discernible that can impede and delay their rate of progress compared with other learners.

Added to these psychological constraints, the great majority have had at best minimal schooling experience and in most cases, none at all. As mature-age adults – with many skills not well recognised in a New Zealand context - they lack the ‘learning blocks’ necessary to facilitate learning that most learners acquire as school-children and take for granted as adult learners. Knowing how to behave appropriately in a classroom is not inherent behaviour, so for many refugees ‘learning’ starts with skills as basic as holding a pen, discerning between questions and answers and learning to work co-operatively on set tasks with their classmates. In addition, they need to comprehend the intrinsic nature of literacy itself – that written symbols represent sounds, words and meaning. In order to do this, they may need to learn a new alphabet and different directional conventions about how writing is presented on the page – from left to right, from top to bottom, on top of the line and not the reverse.

Even with these basic learning skills underway, many refugee learners begin acquiring their English and other literacy skills at the lowest level as they have no, or minimal, previous English and they often lack reading and writing skills in their first language. With all of these factors in play, progress is usually slow and painstaking, requiring the tutor to carefully scaffold skills, building on the small steps previously achieved and constantly revising in order to consolidate these initial gains. Making progress in language and literacy skills is developed through a balance of contextual learning to ensure personal relevance and motivation, but also the teaching of structural aspects of language to ensure correct guidelines for English usage. Learners and teachers alike summarise the priorities as patience, repetition, recycling.

As the learners develop their learning skills and fundamental literacy skills, they also develop a set of skills, attitudes and knowledge about their new environment, enabling them to undertake daily tasks in their community with increasing confidence. These gradual developments in turn build self-confidence, which in turn helps develop the motivation to further develop language and literacy skills. The self-confidence that comes from achieving learning milestones is also augmented by affective elements resulting from a supportive and stimulating learning environment. All these components combine to provide a positive momentum, which gathers force as the different factors mutually reinforce each other. This wheel of progress is extremely difficult to turn initially, but can gain momentum with skilful exertion on the four components.



There are inevitably impediments to achieving this momentum. Psychological factors resulting from the refugee experience provide resistance that is unseen, but unquestionably present in the learners' abilities to take on new skills in an unfamiliar environment. External factors relating to managing family crises, coping with scant resources and a lack of knowledge and familiarity about support mechanisms and services can also impede what happens in the classroom. At worst, open discrimination exacerbates a feeling of anomie in surroundings that are vastly different from those left behind in the home countries. Within the classroom, crying babies, crowded conditions and high and increasing roll numbers also counter what the teaching staff can achieve.

## Conclusion

All those interviewed for this study were asked to identify factors or strategies they thought helped refugee learners learn English and literacy skills in their context. Each of the groups, tutors, bi-lingual tutors and learners, offered different assessments, but they also shared many in common:

- Teaching strategies and skills
  - Constant revision of previous learning to ensure consolidation of skills and knowledge
  - Varying teaching strategies according to the needs and skills of the learner
  - Having ready access to support in L1 with BLTs, especially for very low-level learners
  - Importance of everyone experiencing success by pitching teaching at the right level for the learner
  - 'Seizing the moment', being responsive in your teaching, looking for opportunities to maximise learning with individuals
  - Approaching tasks from different ways (e.g. using pictures, speech and words) to ensure relevance; be prepared to re-phrase and re-present if not successful

- The value of a cycle of modelling/acting/role-play/re-cycle/reflection/practise in pairs
- Ensuring that learners with a common language can work together
- Teacher qualities
  - Patience!
  - Understanding that learners' previous trauma can be played out in the classroom
  - 'Being human' and de-mystifying the 'teacher as expert'
- Teaching content
  - Ensuring that learners have all the requisite 'learning blocks' on which to build higher levels of learning
  - Ensuring relevance of teaching content by using 'realia', everyday life tasks and issues
  - Importance of teaching all four literacy skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking)
  - Importance of basic sight words, with some taught every day
  - Phonics, especially for low-level learners
  - Dictation with all levels
  - Rote practice of oral skills, especially with very low level learners to ensure a solid foundation of key skills.
- Teacher development
  - The need for on-going professional development for teachers and BLTs
- Learning environment
  - Creating and sustaining a welcoming and supportive environment
  - Careful grouping of learners within the classroom to ensure that cultural values are respected and not threatened
- Interpersonal relationships
  - Importance of learners believing they can succeed (self-efficacy) through praising achievement
  - Showing respect for learners in terms of their age, religion and culture
  - Understanding that learners' previous trauma can be played out in the classroom in the form of constant headaches, difficulties in concentrating on tasks and on-going health issues
- Outside the classroom
  - The need to practise new skills outside the classroom
  - Field-trips to significant New Zealand sites
  - Pastoral care for issues outside the classroom.

It is difficult to know the extent and specific impact of these strategies on refugees' learning outcomes without substantial studies involving classroom observation and pre-/post-assessment of their skills. In addition, the learning outcomes are part of a complex process of resettlement.

Nonetheless, the strategies constitute a valuable pointer to what refugees value in the classroom and what tutors and their bi-lingual assistant tutors rate as effective. To a significant extent, the findings support current practice.

There is a great deal of existing knowledge about working with this group of learners: in New Zealand, most of this expertise is in the heads of the practitioners. The lists above summarise the most important elements of working with adult refugee learners according to the experience of those who work with them. Existing literature (mostly from overseas) supports the findings, and the findings support the aim of this project (see page 3) - to provide a systematic documentation of these learners' distinctive needs as well as evidence of effective educational strategies for use in other ESOL- literacy and other adult education programmes.

Although there has not been any specific assessment data included, interview feedback, some observation and other research all point to the magnitude of the challenge to achieve impact with these learners, usually requiring in excess of 500 hours of tuition to achieve significant results.<sup>15</sup> In particular, the very low level of language and literacy skills coupled with refugee experience mean that teaching in these classes is probably among the most challenging situations that tutors can undertake. In order to initiate and gain momentum with their learners, tutors and BLTs need to ensure that they start building skills from the very beginning, carefully consolidating these skills as well as addressing important personal and social needs that are intertwined with these processes. Ensuring that all these factors are addressed and overcome is rarely straightforward, but when achieved can produce valuable, albeit modest, results which are instrumental in assisting effective resettlement and participation in the new country.

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<sup>15</sup> Most of the learners in this study receive 320 hours of tuition per annum.

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## Appendix A – Consent Form

\_\_\_\_\_ has explained to me that s/he is doing a research project about \_\_\_\_\_

(name of researcher)

S/he will ask me questions and record my answers.

### I understand that

- If I cannot understand this form someone will explain it to me in my own language.
- I do not have to take part in this research.
- I can stop taking part in this research at any time. This will not be a problem.
- If I stop taking part in the research my information will not be used in the research report.
- If a topic or question makes me uncomfortable I do not have to talk about it.
- The information I tell the researcher will be stored safely and destroyed after one year
- The researcher might ask for some of my work or a photo for the research report.
- I do not have to give the researcher any of my work or a photo. This will not be a problem.
- My name and any information that identifies me will not be written in the research report.
- If I have any questions I can ask \_\_\_\_\_ (name of researcher)
- Before the report is published the researcher will show me the part of the report that is about me and I can read it if I wish.
- The research report might be published and used outside our organisation. It might also be used in conference presentations and put on our website.
- If I am not happy about the research or do not understand it, I can ask \_\_\_\_\_. This person is not part of the research team.

I understand this form. I agree to take part in this research.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Interpreter (if used) \_\_\_\_\_