



Reflective Critical Analysis of a Case Study in ESL Learning Context: Challenges and Issues for Adult Asylum Seeker and Refugee English Learners in Wales, UK

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Abstract

This article evaluates a case study of language learning and teaching in adult asylum seekers and refugees ESL beginner learners in a 10-month teaching period in Wales, UK. Communicative and intercultural competencies are the two main focuses in this context, whereas social identity, motivation, and monolingual bias influence the outcome of English learning. Since the researcher was the course's teacher for 10 months, this study examines the teaching environment and learners' behaviour through reflective critical analysis under Gibbs' Reflective Cycle. The study aims to highlight the pedagogical gap in language teaching for these groups. Though the classroom used English as the lingual Franca, most learners whose native language is Arabic tended to use the translation method to enhance their understanding. This article reveals the challenges in this case study as (1) a potential information gap caused by an inaccurate translation that the teacher could not verify, (2) demotivated learners' willingness to participate impact their learning outcomes, and (3) incapability to link learners' existing literacy in English. This study also suggests several aspects to solve these issues, including (1) applying task-based learning and communicative language teaching to raise learners' intercultural awareness, (2) providing visual aids in class and adopting translanguaging as pedagogy to encourage learners to build connection with their prior knowledge, (3) use scaffolding to help learners improve step by step, and (4) encourage for group work collaboration to create a supportive community. The study provides valuable insights into English teaching to adult asylum seekers and refugees to teachers and relative parties. It can also inform future policy-making changes regarding ESL teaching to asylum seekers and refugees.

Keywords: intercultural competence, multilingualism, reflective critical analysis, teaching methodology, translanguaging

1. Introduction

Due to continuing persecution, political conflicts and ongoing violence worldwide, especially in Africa and Middle East countries, there have been an increasing number of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK, European countries, Canada and America. With an increased number of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK, the government aims to promote the integration of this group into British society (Home Office, 2004). Learning English is necessary for them to interact in society, build relationships with neighbours and find jobs. Based on the urgent purpose of integration, an ESOL lesson programme has been carried out to cultivate migrants' English-language skills and promote opportunities for them to access public resources (Home Office, 2004; Phillimore, 2011; Filmer & Federici, 2018). However, researchers in most language studies have reported that most adult asylum seekers encounter several challenges, including insufficient motivation, lack of first language literacy or insufficient time to practice enough language competence (Smith, 2016; Salvo & de C Williams, 2017). Moreover, as being illiterate or receiving little education in the L1, some refugees may feel discouraged from accessing English language classes. There are examples of European countries that offer literacy courses and special tools for teachers on how to teach those who are illiterate (EMN, 2016). These issues potentially impede their integration process into society or well-being (Chamorro et al., 2023). Nevertheless, these issues might not be universal to all contexts worldwide.

Due to potential challenges, various language teaching methodologies have been applied to teach asylum seekers and refugees. Firstly, teachers apply computers to assist in language teaching. Aiming to attract these groups' attention and improve their motivation, the language teacher aimed to use computer games such as vocabulary games and crossword puzzles to assist in language teaching (Henriette & Jeong-Bae, 2010). Before teaching language, they taught them basic computer skills as preparation for efficient learning. While computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is often regarded as an effective tool for enhancing second-language learning motivation, it can be significantly hindered by computer resource shortages and technical issues in certain situations (Hani, 2014). During the COVID-19 pandemic, using digital tools to support language learning was considered the most effective way to maintain a productive learning environment (Mahyoob, 2020). However, Potocky (2021) found that many refugees in resettlement programs possess limited digital skills, creating barriers to navigating websites and accessing learning resources. The inadequacy of digital competencies significantly impedes the efficiency of teaching practices, resulting in a situation where teachers cannot progress in their instructional methodologies. The emerging issue emphasizes the necessity of teaching essential digital skills to these populations so they can thrive in our increasingly technology-driven society, especially as traditional blackboard classroom teaching advances into a digital teaching environment.

Secondly, apart from modern technology, traditional language teaching classrooms have been integrated with practical skills training, such as cooking, so women refugee groups can learn English through actual application (Riggs et al., 2012). These community cooking classes offer refugees the opportunity to build social connections and foster a sense of belonging (Peguero, 2024). Additionally, these community-based programs create a relaxed environment where female refugees can access language education more easily. Though Western countries commonly provide mixed-gender education and equal education opportunities, some female refugees from Sudan, Islamic or Arabic cultures tend to receive gendered-segregated education due to the influence caused by religious or traditional factors (Hatoss & Huijser, 2010). Thus, targeting the female groups' language learning, these practical skills are associated with basic human needs, which are easier to connect with the teaching content (Ciribuco, 2021). To trigger a positive cognitive transfer from these learners' L1 to L2, Ciribuco (2021) suggests

using translation as assistance to build mental association for lexical mapping between their L1 and English while allowing learners to emerge themselves into a cooking environment. However, in most ESOL learning contexts, refugees and asylum seekers learn English from volunteers who do not share the same native language (Al Hariri, 2018). Volunteers may struggle to explain complex concepts without the shared language under relative instruction.

Because of the language and cultural gap caused by volunteers, community-based approaches have gained increasing attention from authorities to cope with issues for refugees and asylum seekers (Soltan et al., 2022; Karadag et al., 2021). The community-based approach refers to these groups learning from each other by emerging into their community, where enhanced motivation and engagement can be easily guaranteed (Mahon, 2022). This approach has been chiefly applied to mental health interventions for the traumatization refugees and asylum seekers experienced (Karadag et al., 2021). During mental health intervention, these groups can use their native language to share their experience and enhance understanding. In contrast, if applying the same community-based approach, language learning requires at least someone who shares the same cultural background and the target language at the advanced level. It can teach this language in the community by using the translanguaging phenomenon. However, due to the shortage of talent resources, peer or community support cannot be easily established in the ESOL learning environment. Thus, considering multi-dimensional challenges from educational, social and psychological perspectives, Benseman (2013) suggested that the processing of learning the target language is a slow progress towards adult refugee learners. The journey includes processes to understand life, develop literacy and language skills, and build self-confidence, which also, in turn, reinforces the whole process by creating a positive feedback loop for integrating into society.

The current study critically evaluates an ESOL learning context conducted by a volunteer in Wales, UK. Due to privacy considerations, the name of this community and the people involved will not be disclosed. This community is one registered charity for local asylum seekers and refugees in Wales, UK, providing food, support and weekly learning opportunities for English. English lessons are organised into three classes in this charity: a women's group, a beginner's group, an intermediate level group and an advanced class for IELTS preparation. The researcher of this study was a volunteer teacher in this community to teach the adult beginner group so that the first-hand experience would be reflected as the focus of this paper.

2. Method

The teaching process does not involve research as this study is a reflective analysis after teaching. The study examines the teaching environment and learners' behaviour through reflective critical analysis under Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988). The cycle includes six sections: describing the event, tracing the feelings during the process, evaluating the positive and negative parts, critically analysing the root cause, summarising the event, and proposing suggestions on the following action based on the overall reflection. Though the framework values six sections equally relevant, this study will not consider tracing feelings during the process to keep objectivity. Gibb's model provides a thematic-orientated framework for contextual reflections (Markkanen et al., 2020). Guided by this reflective model, it allows for self-assessment on the past event and help teachers for improving teaching skills (Podder & Mizan, 2021; Quinton & Smallbone, 2010).

Though Gibbs' Reflective Cycle has been widely applied in education, its application as a research methodology has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. As the whole processes mainly relies on personal reflection based on individual experiences, the analysis can be subjective and potentially biased (Boud et al., 2013). However, these personal

interpretations can offer unique insights from various perspectives, which may contribute to refining existing theories and contexts. Additionally, the reflection process heavily depends on memory recall, which can lead to inaccuracies (Rubínová et al., 2022). This limitation could be mitigated by encouraging summary reflections after class, which could reduce the time between the teaching event and the writing of reflection paper.

As a reflective report, the study first collected all teaching plans used during these 10 months, followed by the thematic categorisation per teaching methodology. Since teaching is part of a volunteer-based project, no fixed teaching materials exist. Instead, the teacher adopts self-designed materials, which are adjusted based on the feedback and reactions from each class. The teaching materials' difficulty level and content design are adjusted based on students' reactions, performance, progress, and results from previous classes. By analysing the teaching plans from the past 10 months, it is possible to observe the evolving methodologies, adaptations, and changes implemented over time. Building on Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, this paper applies the framework to reflect on teaching plans. It begins by presenting the teaching context and students' backgrounds, followed by a critical analysis of the context and associated issues from a comprehensive perspective, addressing both positive and negative aspects. Suggestions and solutions are then proposed to address the identified issues. The entire process of applying Gibbs' Reflective Cycle is integrated throughout the paper's content.

3. Teaching context

In our context, the charity community is voluntary and welcomes new joiners, so the number of participants who attend weekly activities fluctuates. It is a similar situation for the beginners' English class, so the students' numbers could range between 12 and 25, containing much variation in language proficiency. The author taught the beginner class for 10 months and communicated with each student before or after class to learn more about them. Most beginner' English Class students came from Sudan and Egypt, and some from Western Europe. The learners' primary first language was Arabic, Spanish, and French. The writer, also the volunteer teacher for the beginner group, had been learning EFL for over twenty years. As second language learners, the teacher and students shared multicultural experiences during the class.

The main focus of the class was practicing speaking and listening skills, improving grammar knowledge and expanding frequent vocabulary. All lessons were delivered using the presentation, practice, and production (PPP) teaching model, explicitly explaining crucial knowledge, controlled practices, and real-life situations (see Example 1). Lessons were divided into several topics related to daily life, such as festivals, food, sports and weather. Even though the topics are familiar to all learners, some still found the class content challenging. Because of the different writing styles and alphabets in Arabic and English, learners whose first language was Arabic with lower English proficiency and lower literacy had difficulty in spelling and writing in English. In certain situations, their more capable peers translated English into L1 to explain unknown elements for them to gain a better understanding.

Example 1: The roleplay activity from in-class handout sample

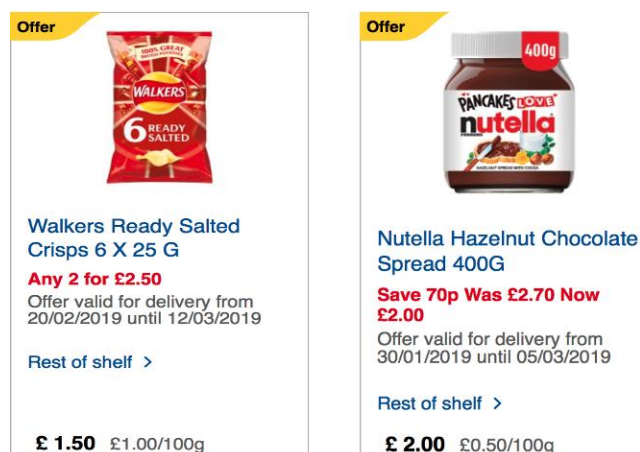
A: Is ... on sale?

B: Yes, it is. It is .../Sorry; we don't have a discount. It's regular price/standard price.

A: Is there a possible discount for ...?

B: Sure. It was...But now...

(to be continued in the next page)



Source: (Pictures are from TESCO online Groceries)

4. Critical evaluation of ESL learning in current case study

According to the above-mentioned teaching context, this part critically analyses the design of the teaching model. Considering the flexible attendance in the beginner class, it is challenging to design progressive teaching in writing or reading with homework as practice or in-class feedback. Thus, the course focuses mainly on communicative competencies. The two sections of section 4 and 5 actively engages in a critical analysis of the teaching methodology applied during ESL instruction, followed by section 6 with several suggestions based on the identified issues in section 5.

4.1 Translation methodology

The communicative competencies were the implicit knowledge of “spontaneous comprehension and production” (Zhang, 2015, p.459). This competency was cultivated through ‘languaging’, including interpersonal and intrapersonal interaction (Swain & Watanabe, 2013). Meanwhile, the course adopts explicit teaching. Through explicit teaching of language knowledge within specific topics, learners build some knowledge framework in their declarative memory or on their notes as a reminder. Explicit instructions strengthened frequency and salience (Schmidt, 1990). Therefore, the explicit instructions clearly explain the critical knowledge during the lesson and enhance learners’ understanding through repetition.

Though the teacher did not share the same language with learners, translation methodology was adopted among learners. They interacted and negotiated meaning with peers or in groups while carrying out class activities. During the “peer-to-peer collaborative dialogues”, learners analysed metapragmatic features and supported their language development (Taguchi, 2015, p.36). Interaction within group activities is interpersonal communication as a transformative act (Daniels et al., 2007), using language to deliver thought and reflect on knowledge. According to Long’s (1996, p.452) interaction hypothesis, interaction “connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention and output in productive ways”. Therefore, translation of the first language contributes to language learning during interpersonal interaction.

4.2 Real-life teaching materials

Using real-life teaching materials aimed to bridge real-world scenarios with language learning. This approach enhances learners’ engagement and enthusiasm while increasing opportunities for interaction with peers and the teacher. Thus, learners benefited from producing output during interactions that simulated real-life situations in class. Swain (1995) also supports the

idea of output that has a reflective role in language learning. During the collaborative discussion process, learners modified their input and were aware of potential gaps they had. The gaps trigger changes from language input to intake (Mitchell et al., 2013), transforming explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge. The gaps were the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in the learners' cognitive learning process. The ZPD is knowledge or skills the learner has not yet achieved that can be attained with relevant support (Vygotsky, 1978). The translation throughout the in-class interaction increased task comprehension and scaffolded potential gaps. Joint engagement as a mediator also emphasises attention to certain aspects of meaning and functions of language learning (Feuerstein et al., 2003; Poehner & Infante, 2017).

Furthermore, intrapersonal interaction happened after the group discussion and before they answered questions in front of the class. Although they had negotiated answers, learners still needed to organise their thoughts with inner speech. Intrapersonal speech is developed from young children's inner speech that talks to and for themselves to formulate internal thoughts rather than talking to external subjects (Vygotsky, 1978; Mitchell et al., 2013). It also acts as a tool to modify thoughts and consolidate knowledge within given structures and rules. Thus, learners improved their English communicative competencies and built confidence naturally.

4.3 Intercultural competence

Students also built intercultural awareness and understood multicultural values in class. Although some concepts differ in different languages, they used English as a lingua franca to pursue mutual comprehension (Jenkins, 2007). They also shared stories and concepts from their own culture to contrast differences. Because cultural experiences and values can be shared and negotiated (Clausen, 2007; Hofstede et al., 1990), learners increase comprehension and retention of new concepts in British culture. Moreover, interpretation and relatedness are essential to developing intercultural competence in language learning (Byram, 1997). Learners sensed British culture from the perspective of their own culture during the process, which created a harmonious intercultural encounter. Translation into learners' L1 also presented their understanding of diverse cultural concepts.

However, there are debates about how to teach culture in class. As a dynamic component, culture has different layers: visible behaviours and emotions, understandable norms and unspoken rules, invisible beliefs and values (Hall, 1977; Hofstede et al., 1990). It is not only native speakers that contribute to the formation of a culture, but migrants and migration also develop novel meaning in it. Furthermore, the critique of stereotypical cultural concepts is supported by the notion of native-speaker fallacy. It opposes the native speakers' standard of cultural learning because it disregards diversity among speakers in the target culture beyond stereotypical perceptions (Holliday, 2008; Kramsch, 1998). Instead of learning a cultural model, Meyer (1991) suggests learners should learn appropriate behaviour and a flexible manner to deal with cross-cultural problems by admitting the existence of cultural differences. Most importantly, the goal of culture teaching in the classroom should broaden learners' views rather than changing them. Therefore, the teaching context in the current study demonstrates an example of intercultural competence development in a more implicit teaching environment.

5. Issues with ESL learning in this context

5.1 Issue 1: Inaccurate Translation

Even though translation being used in the classroom brought several positive effects, the accuracy of the translation content cannot be verified. Because English alone was used for teaching, learners' comprehension and translation accuracy cannot be guaranteed. Interpretation can change the original meaning of language. Three dimensions should be

considered during translation: “linguistic equivalence”, “functional equivalence through a cultural filter”, and the negotiation of cultural translation based on the language user’s needs (Kramsch, 2019, p.1). Although Gee et al. (2007) argue that people with similar social backgrounds or who speak the same languages can better “guess” meaning, the accuracy of students’ translations still cannot be checked by the teacher who does not know the learners’ first language.

Implementing bilingual or translanguaging language teaching in this classroom is difficult since the teacher speaks only English. Monolingualism acted out in this class, which views languages as two solitudes: English and other first languages. It also ignores the dynamic features of multilingualism repertoires. Scarino and Liddicoat (2016) point out that multilinguals have flexible semiotic and linguistic repertoires constituting parts of their eco-linguistic capacities.

5.2 Issue 2: Demotivation

Due to the flexible attendance policy for the English class in this context, learners with lower English proficiency tend to attend less frequently. This low attendance is caused by the fact that they may feel less connected to the group and show lower interest in participating. These individuals often have limited literacy skills, which is not only related to their English proficiency. These reasons impact their ability to learn English effectively because low literacy hinders comprehension and decreases motivation. Furthermore, this chain reaction experienced by asylum seekers and refugees is closely related to how their identity is perceived by society.

Social identity affects learners’ motivation and attitudes towards language learning (Norton, 2013; Scarino & Liddicoat, 2016). Identity is the self-perception of one’s status and imagined possibilities for the future (Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2016). Negative self-recognition becomes an obstacle for learners in developing critical literacy abilities. Thus, language competencies are impacted by to what extent they accept British culture and their degree of willingness to integrate into the local community. However, comments that demonstrate lower acceptance of asylum seekers and refugees are published on social media, which leads to the public’s opinion being biased. How this group of people perceive themselves influences their language learning progression. They will have a lower status if they view themselves as outsiders to British culture or unwelcome members of society. They are more likely to respect the authenticity of English texts in books, newspapers and media and less likely to challenge or critically value them. Whereas words are subjective, reporters with personal stances are more likely to use them to manipulate the public’s opinions and thoughts. This contributes to constructing the figured world that is a “cultural model” (Gee, 2014, p.97). Thus, pluriliteracies and critical literacy are complicated to deliver in teaching when learners are not willing to change their self-perception. However, this situation could be reshaped once they become confident in their English performances and change their perception of being an outsider from a foreigner to a local member.

6. Suggestion on future ESL teaching for asylum seekers and refugees

6.1 Solutions targeting the application of translation in class

According to the application of translation, teachers should initiate some changes in the classroom to solve this problem. They should pair or group learners at higher and lower English proficiency levels so that teachers can check the comprehension accuracy of students with higher proficiency and ensure the accuracy of their translation delivery.

On the other side, as Arabic accounts for a large proportion of asylum seekers and refugees (Home Office, 2019), the government should recruit ESL teachers who can speak Arabic fluently to use translanguaging or bilingual instruction as a pedagogy in class. Additionally, language teachers could utilize certain digital tools such as Google Translation (GT) to assist in translating specific concepts or vocabulary during language teaching. It has been reported that using GT provides refugee language learners confidence and freedom (Bogachenko et al., 2024). Though the inaccuracy of interpreting complex messages has been criticized (Brown & Grinter, 2016), the more proficient learners or ESL teachers could help check for accuracy while learners use them. However, training is necessary, as most asylum seekers and refugee learners lack digital literacy.

6.2 Encouraging an inclusive and diverse learning environment

Asylum seekers and refugees within the community typically share diversified cultural backgrounds. Creating a friendly environment to encourage learners to share their multicultural experiences and cultivate their intercultural competencies is necessary. Because identity is dynamic and multiple, learners and teachers should embrace diverse identities in the language classroom (Norton, 2016; Axmedova & Zarmaskhonov, 2024). It should start with teachers changing their identity roles from being a teacher to a friend, aiming to share their own multilingual and multicultural experiences.

This method develops students' intercultural competence in the language classroom (Kramsch & Zhang, 2018). By creating such an inclusive environment, teachers could encourage group work collaboration that builds a supportive community within the classroom. Therefore, by sharing stories in the classroom, students can discuss and review their previous knowledge. Additionally, project-based learning focusing on global focus issues could promote refugees' connection with real-world issues (Axmedova & Zarmaskhonov, 2024). Involving in different scenarios through engagements, learners hear others' unique viewpoints that broaden understanding. Such inclusive engagement also applies to the use of language in the context of socio-cultural background.

6.3 Scaffolding learners' existing knowledge

Learning English through English-only instruction is often perceived as requiring a high level of proficiency (Cummins, 2020). In this monolingual language teaching instruction, a lack of native language support can pose a significant challenge for learners with lower literacy or language skills to understand complex concepts. Therefore, asylum seekers and refugees in English-speaking countries should be encouraged to recognize life experiences similar to the knowledge they have already acquired during class.

Instead of teaching content isolated by the traditional PPP model, task-based learning can be more effective in increasing learners' motivation instantly. Compared with traditional teaching where learners passively receive language rules as input, task-based learning allows learners to learn the function of language while doing tasks (Nguyen et al., 2021). Apart from using real-life scenarios, the tasks need to be provided with visual aids in class to stimulate learners' memory from their existing knowledge in their L1. During the process, teachers need to assist students with step-by-step scaffoldings so that learners are more likely to build connections with their prior knowledge. Although visual aids or multimedia methodology have been widely applied for children or teenagers' classroom to improve interaction, Quecan (2021) proved that visual aids are effective teaching material for elementary and intermediate level L2 learners to lower anxiety, build confidence and improve comprehension.

Moreover, to enhance the efficiency of adults' language learning, comparative analysis (CA) is recommended for adult learners acquiring a second language. A critical period for the

naturalistic acquisition of a second language (L2) does not apply to adult learners because “Universal Grammar (UG) is no longer available to adult learners” (Mitchell et al., 2013, p.87). Consequently, learners should be encouraged to compare the target language with their first language to identify similar structures and quickly develop an awareness of differences. As Schmidt (1994) asserts, “more noticing leads to more learning” (p.18). When similar features or meanings are translated equivalently from English into their first language, familiarity with language rules can help learners improve their retention of language knowledge. This approach facilitates understanding and provides learners with a practical strategy to bridge the gap between their existing linguistic framework and the target language, fostering deeper comprehension and long-term acquisition.

7. Conclusion

Teaching English in English-speaking countries provides an ESL environment for asylum seekers and refugees who use English as a lingual franca. Even though such an environment provides learners with an emergent English environment in which to use English, they still need help learning English if their English proficiency is low. To some extent, the translation process between their peers enhanced their comprehension, but the accuracy cannot be checked by the English teacher who does not share the same native language with learners. Moreover, learners with lower literacy or being illiterate could not link their existing literacy in English. Most importantly, demotivated learners forced to attend the classes are reluctant to participate in the in-class activities, which, in turn, causes subsequent impact on their learning outcomes.

In conclusion, this study highlights several contributions to ESL teaching practices and theory. The study emphasises the importance of employing task-based learning and communicative language teaching to boost learners’ intercultural awareness and motivation in multicultural classrooms. By fostering comparative analysis techniques and integrating translation strategies supported by bilingual assistants, teachers can address the low motivation challenges posed by low literacy levels and social identity influences on learning. To improve the accuracy of peer translation, it is recommended to apply translation tools such as Google Translation into the classroom to support this process. Most importantly, these suggestions require collaboration among various stakeholders, including educators, community organizers, and policymakers, to enhance the learning experiences of adult asylum seekers and refugee ESL learners, particularly in English-speaking environments. Due to the large number of Arabic asylum seekers and refugees (Home Office, 2019), governments should recruit more advanced English speakers with the same cultural background to better assist ESOL teaching. Additionally, policymakers should explore the development of ESOL programs that integrate vocational training, such as cooking certification. This approach can significantly increase annual earnings and enhance language proficiency among participants (Heller & Mumma, 2023). By promoting integration among these groups, such an ESOL program simultaneously builds individual capabilities, creating a more cohesive and skilled community. It represents a mutually beneficial pathway for personal development and societal cohesion. Only with enough assistance from authorities and relevant parties, the target learners could they learn English more efficiently and integrate into society.

Acknowledgment

This paper did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The author would like to thank the comments and suggestions from the anonymous reviewers and editors from the journal.

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