

Raising the drawbridge

Merilyn Moos examines the government's record of cutbacks to ESOL provision, focusing especially on how they affect refugees and asylum seekers

While the Government and indeed many in the media protest how important it is for refugees and asylum seekers to learn and speak English in order to 'integrate', in practice the Government has been cutting back on ESOL provision.

In May 2016, Refugee Action published the report *Let Refugees Learn* which shows that the Government's Skills Funding Agency has slashed ESOL funding from £212m in 2008 to £95m in 2015, a reduction of more than 50 per cent, and that was before the recent cuts.

Since then, things have got worse. While previously ESOL was funded partly and separately through the community learning budget, since 2016/17, it is just one part of the Adult Education budget (all funded by the Skills Funding Agency) and crucially no longer ring fenced. The reason given: a 'considerable underspend'! (*TES* quote from a spokesperson from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, drawn from Commons briefing report November 8, 2017).

But this cut was not the result of a lowering of demand. In a survey of ESOL providers carried out by the National Association for Teaching English and other Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA) in 2014, so before the most recent cut, 80 per cent of responders said their institution had '... significant waiting lists of up to 1,000 students ...'; 66 per cent said that lack of funding was the main cause of this.

The Association of Colleges, not a militant organisation, said of the recent withdrawal of funding that it would 'add to the isolation of some communities', would impact on integration and that it would 'have an immediate and devastating impact on ESOL provision across the country'.

ESOL has already been subject to death by a thousand cuts. In 2011-12, the funding provided for ESOL in the workplace was withdrawn. This may seem like a relatively minor matter but it isn't: work is where ESOL classes are easily accessible and where a culture can be built up, hopefully through the unions, of encouraging attendance. Another reason to fund ESOL work-based classes is that low-waged migrant workers don't qualify for free classes, so they get stuck in low-paid jobs, where they don't need much English but where they have neither the money nor time to attend ESOL classes outside work. When I was still teaching, ESOL courses were eligible for automatic fee remission but this was abolished back in August 2007 under a Labour government.

The Casey Review

In July 2015, Cameron commissioned the *Casey Review* into opportunity and integration which was published in December 2016. The report stated that a shared language is fundamental to integrated societies and that data from the 2011 Census highlights 'English language proficiency issues in Muslim, Polish, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities'. The report gave a large tick to the economic effectiveness of ESOL teaching but lamented that where there was provision, it was increasingly geared towards access to the higher skills jobs market and not for a lower level of learning. Generally, it urged the Government to take ESOL more seriously and to make available sufficient funding for community-based English language classes, and that local authorities should

prioritise English language through the adult skills budget, where there is a need. The Government have not responded.

In line with the *Casey Review*, in April 2017, the All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees published a report, '*Refugees Welcome? The Experience of New Refugees in the UK*'. Yet again, the report stated that English language was key to successful integration for refugees allowing them to 'rebuild their lives and make full use of their talents and abilities to take part in and contribute to British society'. The inquiry report also concluded that there was a regrettable lack of a government cross-departmental strategy setting out how all refugees can be successfully integrated into the UK, including ESOL. It highlighted the shortage of ESOL classes and the reductions to ESOL funding which have 'led to longer waiting lists, a decline in teaching hours and a lack of classes that meet the needs of refugees', and recommended the Government address these issues.

ESOL providers

Over half of the ESOL providers recently surveyed by Refugee Action said their ability to provide high quality ESOL classes has worsened over the past five years. Almost two thirds of the providers said they had waiting lists for ESOL courses, with almost half of providers saying the wait averaged six months or more. The report quotes one provider:

The Government says the number of adult learners is dropping, but they have reduced funding so we can take less. Demand is higher than it has ever been. We are continually asked to do more with less.

Moreover, the providers were only making available an average of five hours of ESOL classes per week, where previously it was about nine hours. Five hours is less than is needed by most refugees, especially those with only basic or no English.

The effect on refugees and asylum seekers

It is of course impossible to quantify the effect on refugees as it is unknowable what the effect of an absence is. In May 2016, the Refugee Action report argued that refugees 'have a great determination and desire to learn English' but are finding it ever harder to access ESOL classes because of funding reductions that have 'resulted in shortages of provision, waiting lists, and other barriers to

participation, particularly for women'. The prospects for high quality provision are additionally undermined, the report contended, by the fragmentation of ESOL provision between multiple government departments and by the lack of an ESOL strategy for England.

A report early in 2017 by *The Independent* found that migrants in parts of the UK are waiting up to three years for government-funded English classes, despite Parliament saying new arrivals should learn the language upon entering the country. The system was in a state of disarray.

The issue of loneliness comes up repeatedly. The *Independent* reported that many refugees feel desperately isolated and lonely, and the absence of English intensifies this. Moreover, the cost of an ESOL course can be up to £700, way beyond the means of the vast majority of refugees. In a recent Lords debate on ESOL for refugees, on 24 October 2017, Dame Caroline Spelman also highlighted the role of English language skills in preventing loneliness and in promoting integration. Indeed, as documented elsewhere, Spelman highlighted that long waiting lists for ESOL classes caused by funding reductions were impacting on the mental health of refugees, especially those who were isolated, in particular women.

One recurring theme is the impact on women. The *Carey Report* highlighted that the cuts particularly disadvantaged women and girls. Refugee Action also stated that women with children were found to have particular problems accessing ESOL classes, often due to a lack of childcare. They found 77 per cent of ESOL providers were unable to provide childcare at all or enough to meet the needs of all those who want to learn. This is more likely to intensify the woman's sense of isolation. The '*Refugees Welcome*' report also drew attention to how exploitation and violence especially affected refugee women. It is ironic though not surprising that the Government is constructing the very situation it then creates racist mythologies about: the failure of refugee women to 'integrate'.

Although I'm not here going into the detail, there is also the vexed issue of which refugees are eligible for free ESOL classes. On July 20 2017, Lord Dubs, in response to the All-Party Parliamentary report '*Refugees Welcome?*' asked which refugees receive student support. He was supported by Lord Rosser who asked about what happens to refugees once they have been granted protection by the UK government. Rosser said that, unlike previously, in effect there was now a two tier system; those who arrive through a resettlement route receive support in accessing services and finding employment; but for those who have gone through the asylum system there is now no such support.

The reply was not helpful. Baroness Williams, the Home Office rep in the Lords, stated that adults who are granted refugee status are as eligible for funding from the Skills Funding Agency as is any other British resident. But the Government have to prioritise. 'To support local authorities, an additional £10 million has been provided so that they can deliver additional English language training *for those arriving under the resettlement programme*' (my emphasis).

One aspect not to be overlooked in understanding the cuts in ESOL provision for refugees is the increasing islamophobic undercurrent in dominant educational perspectives. This is, for example, revealed in Ofsted's recent recommendation, vociferously supported by Amanda Spielman, its head and chief inspector of schools, that inspectors question Muslim primary school girls if they are wearing a hijab (as ever presented under the guise of preventing the sexualisation of young girls). This comes a couple of years after the deplorable Trojan Horse fiasco when the Tories falsely accused a few Birmingham schools of being the subject of some sort of fundamentalist Muslim take-over.

Conclusion

There is an increasing tide of racist hysteria expressed by government spokespersons and by many bits of the media, which often focuses on the 'failure' of the refugee to learn English and therefore their failure to integrate. Frequently, refugee women are pinpointed as especially isolated and therefore not able to be 'one of us'.

Campaigning for more and free ESOL classes is crucial both because extra provision is essential but also because it provides us with a way of concretely challenging racist stereotypes.

Recommendations

We need to push for:

- All asylum seekers and refugees to receive free ESOL classes.
- Government provision of additional funding for local authority provided ESOL classes.
- No waiting lists.
- Funding the additional costs of learning, such as childcare, where they represent a barrier to learning.

Where we stand:

Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.