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Refugee Agency and Autonomy in English Language Acquisition

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Abstract
This article looks at an ethnographic study conducted at Integrate Ireland Language and Training[1], an organization which provides English language courses for adult refugees. The research project was a qualitative, longitudinal investigation which explored the motivational role of goal-setting in adult language learners. During a twelve-month period (2003-2004), multiple data-gathering techniques were employed including participant observation, group interviews with learners, teacher interviews, attitudinal questionnaires, and archival research. The research aimed to record and to analyze the motivational impact of a curriculum designed to encourage learner autonomy. In this paper, I give a brief overview of the context of refugees in Ireland and the provision of English language training. I explore the concept of autonomy in language learning, argue that it is particularly relevant in the context of language provision for refugees, and present the work of Integrate Ireland Language and Training. I then review the main characteristics of ethnographic research and data collection methods, before providing a narrative account of the experience of learning English as a refugee in Ireland, and the relevance of encouraging autonomy in the language classroom.

Key words: autonomy, refugees, adult education, second language learning, ethnography

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> My daughter every day say, oh mama, speak English! But no good speak English, last night my daughter she say, no speak English mama! […] Sometimes I speak in the shop, customer service, maybe problem, and, speak at the doctors, speak maybe about my daughter, because before, nothing speaking! ((laughs)). Now I speak little and more confident, little little.
>
> Alina (Romania)

> Now I not need the translation, all the time take, translation. Myself translating. I go to Social Welfare, wherever. A little idea correct, I have idea correct spelling. Little little, no one hundred percent, I think myself. Before all the time, come on please, reading, what is this, reading English paper, now no problem, anything understand.
>
> Ivan (Moldova)

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[1] The opinions expressed in this paper are entirely the author's, and do not necessarily represent the views of Integrate Ireland Language and Training, its directors, managers, teachers or students.

Introduction

These two extracts from interviews with adult refugees learning English in Ireland contain a wealth of information on the reality of the task which faces individuals who arrive in a new country and enter the language classroom. Bilingual children, the health service, schools, money, recreation. The challenge of learning enough English, and the right English, to cope with the demands of everyday life is immense. In response to this challenge, we have witnessed the growth of various educational initiatives, from different sectors of Irish life, providing English language tuition for immigrants to Ireland. This paper reports on an ethnographic study conducted at Integrate Ireland Language and Training, an organization which provides English language courses for adult refugees. This research project was a qualitative, longitudinal investigation which explored the motivational role of goal-setting in adult language learners. During a twelve month period (2003-2004), I employed multiple data-gathering techniques including participant observation, group interviews with learners, teacher interviews, attitudinal questionnaires, and archival research. The research aimed to record and to analyze the motivational impact of a curriculum designed to encourage learner autonomy. In this paper, I begin by giving a brief overview of the context of refugees in Ireland, and then discuss the provision of English language training for adult refugees. I next explore the concept of autonomy in language learning, and argue that it is particularly relevant in the context of language provision for refugees, and present the work of Integrate Ireland Language and Training, where I conducted twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork. I finally review the main characteristics of ethnographic research and data collection methods, before providing a narrative account of the experience of learning English as a refugee in Ireland, which focuses on the stories of several students who chose to be part of the project. I believe that these stories demonstrate that helping learners take responsibility for their own learning has a positive impact on life beyond the classroom, which in turn helps learners to gain access to civil society, and to take charge of their own future in Ireland.

The context: refugees in Ireland

The arrival of individuals seeking asylum under the UN Geneva Convention (and 1967 Protocol) came later to Ireland than to neighbouring European countries, where emigration outstripped immigration until 1996. In addition to individuals who have been granted asylum according to the Convention's definition of a refugee[2], Ireland has also been host to a small number of Programme refugees, the result of government decisions following crisis situations, for example, groups of Bosnians and Kosovars in the 1990s; also, since 1998, a quota of refugees has been accepted under the UN resettlement scheme. Convention and Programme refugees have the same rights and entitlements as Irish citizens, as well as the opportunity to avail of free English language provision,

[2] "A person who owing to 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; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it" (UNHCR 1951)

delivered by Integrate Ireland Language and Training at twelve centres around the country.

The increase in requests for asylum in the 1990s was rapid and dramatic: statistics from the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner in Ireland (ORAC 2006) show only 39 requests for asylum in 1992; in 1996 there were 1,179 applications, by 2002 this had increased to 11,634 applications[3]. Numbers have since decreased and stabilized: there were 4,265 applications in 2004, 4,323 in 3005 and 4,314 in 2006. Approximately 10% of applicants are granted refugee status in the first instance. Those who are refused asylum may apply for leave to remain on humanitarian grounds. In 2002, 4,071 people were granted such leave to remain (Fanning 2007: 25).

The difficulties faced by individuals who become refugees are manifold. After usually forced migration and a traumatic journey, perhaps assisted by traffickers, people enter the system of dispersal and direct provision. Introduced in 2000, this is a system whereby asylum seekers are assigned full-board in 'reception and accommodation centres' around the country, with only a small weekly payment of €19.10 for adults[4]. Various backlogs in the asylum process have led to waits of between one and two (and until quite recently, even three) years for a decision on cases. During this time asylum-seekers are not entitled to seek work (see Fanning *et al* 2000).

Historically a country of emigration, rather than immigration, Mac Éinrí describes in the past the 'prevailing official attitude towards foreign immigrants' in Ireland as "one of caution, if not outright opposition" (2001: 6). The Irish government has had to create policies and infrastructure in a very short space of time with little previous experience in the field (Torode 2001: 49). Much of the Irish population is largely uninformed about the reality of those seeking asylum in Ireland, described by Torode as "ambiguous, complex and varied" (2001: 59). Ryan *et al* discuss the reaction of the popular media, who "generally portray asylum seekers as voluntary migrants or 'bogus refugees' who move to Western countries because they are attracted by their strong economies or the possibility of living off their social welfare systems" (2007: 113). There is confusion about the terms used: refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, illegal migrants etc., (Torode 2001: 35). At the receiving end of suspicion, racism and resentfulness, those seeking asylum and those granted refugee status may experience exclusion and isolation (Collins 2002), which can in turn generate feelings of resentment towards the host community and contribute further to marginalization. The implications for mental health for those who have fled their home, with the psychological stress of pervasive "depression, fear and loneliness" cannot be overstated (Ryan *et al*. 2007: 114).

[3] ORAC statistics can be consulted at http://www.orac.ie/pages/Stats/statistics.htm

[4] See the Reception and Integration Agency's website, http://www.ria.gov.ie/, for an official account of the system of dispersal and direct provision. For details of the difficulties experienced by individuals in reception centres, such as the impact of the environment on single and nursing mothers, monotony, poor nutrition, lack of privacy and risk of violence, see for example Lichtsinn and Veale (2007) and Ryan *et al* (2007).

English language provision for refugees

Lack of English language proficiency is a serious obstacle which limits refugees' social involvement and access to services and institutions. A Vietnamese refugee, Tuyen Pham (Sheridan 2007: 144) describes the isolation experienced in the Vietnamese community, especially for older adults:

> Still, the older ones feel very lonely, very sad, and they have no English. Imagine, they are just sitting there in their corner at home…I can see that in my grandparents. I can see that, actually, I can see that myself, and it is very sad […] to talk to their neighbours, but they're unable, language barrier. Going shopping, doesn't know what to buy, you know, doesn't know how to question: where I can find this and that?"[5]

Access to interpretation services during the asylum process, in the health services and with police can pose problems, and there have been complaints about partiality, insensitivity and lack of accuracy (Ryan *et al* 2007: 126; Fanning and Mac Éinrí 1999). In a commissioned report on the language needs of refugees, Little discusses the twofold nature of refugees' language rights: (i) "the right to preserve their own language as a central element of the individual and group identity they have brought with them to Ireland", and (ii) their right to the opportunity to integrate into the new English-language community, which requires that "every reasonable effort must be made to help them develop an appropriate level of proficiency in English" in order to enjoy "free access to Irish society in general, and to education, training and employment in particular" (2000: 1).

Past language provision in Ireland for refugees has included mainstream EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes alongside European language students, ill-suited to the needs of immigrants. Language instruction for Vietnamese Programme refugees in past decades was severely lacking and inappropriate, provided by special educators trained in teaching the deaf (Maguire 2004). Refugees are an extremely diverse group of individuals (in terms of ages, education, profession, urban/rural etc.) and even within specific ethnic or national groups any assumption of homogeneity is misplaced. Halilovic-Pastuovic for example discusses the heterogeneity of the Bosnian Programme refugees who arrived in Ireland from 1992 onwards:

> One needs to be aware of the extraordinarily ethnic mixture […] Apart from Bosnian Orthodox and Bosnian Catholics, who might or might not think of themselves as respectively 'Serbs' or 'Croats', there were Bosnian Muslims whose religious practice varied greatly, from practising individuals to individuals with a more secular orientation. There were also minorities of Jews, Germans, Hungarians and Roma populations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, all of whom were and are in themselves heterogeneous (2007: 160-161).

[5] This extract is from an extensive interview conducted at the Vietnamese-Irish Centre, one of eighteen interviews which investigated the long-term process of cross-cultural adaptation (Sheridan 2005). See also for example Collins' account of the needs of asylum seekers in Cork (2002).

Autonomy in language learning

Given the diversity of language needs experienced by refugees, it may be argued that a learner-centred approach is the most appropriate means of organizing English language training. One of the key shifts in language pedagogy in the late 1980s, the principle of learner-centredness places the learner, not the teacher, at the centre of the learning process (Nunan 1989; Tarone and Yule 1989). This focus on the learner rather than the instructor, programme or materials is closely related to the idea of learner autonomy, where the goal of teaching and learning is to allow learners to take control of, and responsibility for, their learning in the classroom as a prerequisite for more effective learning and independent functioning in life (Little 1991, 1996, 2007; Benson and Voller 1997; Benson 2001). An early definition of autonomy by Holec emphasizes that it is "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (1981: 3). Little defines autonomy similarly as a *capacity*, "for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action" (1991: 4). Autonomy is often misunderstood as independence. Deci, an American social psychologist, unpicks the difference between independence and autonomy in this regard:

> Independence means to do for yourself, to not rely on others for personal nourishment and support. Autonomy, in contrast, means to act freely, with a sense of volition and choice. It is thus possible for a person to be independent and autonomous (i.e., to freely not rely on others), or to be independent and controlled (i.e., to feel forced not to rely on others) (1996: 89).

Little also helps dismiss misconceptions surrounding autonomy and 'going it alone', stressing that as "we are social beings our independence is always balanced by dependence; our essential condition is one of *interdependence*" (1991: 5, emphasis added). Kohonen defines this type of interdependence as "being responsible for one's own conduct in the social context" (1992: 14). Within autonomous learning practices, it is argued that learning is optimized through collaboration; within this social context 'scaffolding' or guidance is provided by more experienced peers or a teacher, gradually relinquished as learners develop control over the task in hand (Wood *et al* 1976).

Context: Integrate Ireland Language and Training

Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT)[6] is a government-designated body responsible for co-ordinating ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision for adult refugees in Ireland.[7] Adult refugees (and other individuals who have been granted 'leave to remain' on humanitarian grounds) are entitled to attend English classes at one of IILT's centres throughout Ireland.[8] Students attending General English classes

[6] Integrate Ireland Language and Training's website can be consulted at http://www.iilt.ie

[7] This paper focuses on the case of language provision for people with refugee status (whether Convention or Programme refugees, as well as those granted leave to remain). Asylum seekers have yet no entitlement to government-funded English tuition, and thus depend on a variety of initiatives from the voluntary sector.

[8] There have been two major political occurrences which have had an impact on eligibility criteria for English language classes at IILT since my fieldwork. Firstly, the referendum on Irish citizenship changed legislation which previously granted Irish passports to those born on Irish soil (*jus solis*). Since 2004, Irish citzenship has been granted as a *jus sanguinis* right, deriving from at least one parent with Irish citizenship. During fieldwork, many students at IILT were parents of children born prior to the 2004 Irish Nationality

enrol for a full-time course of twenty contact hours per week over a term of four months. In 2004, 529 learners were enrolled in General English classes. Of these, 59% were male and 41% female. Learners attending classes run by IILT tend to reflect the top countries of origin of refugees seeking asylum in Ireland. IILT aims to help learners become autonomous, and teachers systematically encourage students to assume responsibility for the content and the modalities of the course, as well as encouraging ongoing self-evaluation and reflection on the learning process. Learners are assisted in developing individual learning agendas which correspond to their personal needs, and are introduced to the notion of goal-setting in the classroom, whilst working in a collaborative environment through pair-work and group-work. In the next section, I will draw on data collected during an ethnographic study (Carson 2006) of adult refugees learning English at Integrate Ireland Language and Training.

Ethnographic methodology

Ethnographic research has its origins in cultural anthropology and sociology; research which employs an ethnographic methodology seeks to describe and analyze the practices and beliefs of communities and cultures (Freebody 2003: 75), "the art and science of describing a group or culture" (Fetterman 1998: 1). It is one of the principal research designs in applied linguistic research, described by Chaudron as "a qualitative, process-oriented approach to the investigation of interaction" (1988: 46). It typically uses participant observation as a method of data collection, which is subsequently analyzed using an inductive, grounded approach. Nunan mentions an over-simplified though helpful analysis of the difference between psychometric, experimental studies and ethnographic research: psychometry is a hypothesis in search of data, whereas ethnography is data in search of a hypothesis (1992: 56).

Gathering data by participant observation, a term which is used to describe a range of fieldwork activities, is essentially a general strategy whereby the ethnographer is present in the everyday life of the group in two roles – honorary member and researcher; the extent to which the research is truly part of the proceedings varies, as does the visibility of the research role . In the case of this research at IILT, my investigative role was visible, all students knew I was conducting fieldwork for my doctoral thesis; the participation role was that of classroom assistant. There have been various attempts to map out the spectrum between observing and participating; perhaps the most well-known is the continuum proposed by Gold (1958) with the completely detached observer at one end, the completely involved participant at the other and occupying the central group the observer-as-participant and the participant-as-observer, and over the course of fieldwork, the researcher inevitably shifts between detachment and involvement (Powdermaker 1967). A major challenge in educational ethnographies is attempting to hone

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and Citizenship Act, and were granted leave to remain because children born here automatically became Irish citizens. This is no longer the case. Secondly, the enlargement of the European Union in 2004 and in 2007 meant that nationalities which were previously eligible for classes at IILT are now EU citizens and are thus are no longer eligible for English language training. This has affected students from Poland, Romania and other Eastern European and Baltic countries.

observational skills in the classroom, a very familiar environment for many researchers, which renders it difficult to single out pertinent incidents. Maintaining a logbook containing even the most mundane observations is a common and useful means of documenting participant observation. I made overt notes during class which were entered into my logbook after my visits. This logbook was then annotated by class-teachers.

The ethical implications of observing, describing and analyzing a group of individuals are numerous, especially when dealing with a vulnerable section of society. Responsibility ultimately lies with the researcher to ensure that no harm comes to any individual because of their participation in the study. When trust has been established between a researcher and a group, it is often difficult to stop individuals sharing some sensitive personal details. In the case of a longitudinal study, the group may forget there is a researcher present, or fail to understand the implications of publications arising from their participation in the project. A fundamental step to protecting subjects is a complete guarantee of confidentiality, including disguising the identities of the group in such a way as to prevent their names being associated with the pseudonyms published, yet without confounding important variables. In this research project, subjects were provided with pseudonyms; some identifying features were slightly altered (e.g. assignation of a neighbouring nationality). These steps, in the context of large numbers of learners enrolled at IILT (715 students in 2004, 514 in 2003), ensured that participants' identities were comprehensively protected. The research was conducted in full compliance with Trinity College's Good Research Practice guidelines[9]. Access to IILT was granted by its Director; all staff and students at IILT were aware of my status as researcher. Detailed ethical guarantees were provided, as well as participant information leaflets about the project to students. Informed consent forms were obtained from participants, who had the opportunity to review all data.

Fieldwork was conducted at IILT from May 2003 to April 2004, over three terms of four months each, preceded by three months of piloting work and getting to know the staff and premises. I spent one session per week during two terms in one classroom, and spent the third term with the next proficiency level. At the end of the first and second terms, I made the decision to remain with the largest group of students. By the end of the study, thirteen learners had participated in my data collection. When finding participants, I sought individuals who were happy to participate in the project, and who gave me permission to use the data. Attrition levels, frequently an issue in adult educational contexts, meant that that some individuals dropped out along the way. This study gathered data from thirteen learners at IILT. The learners were not pre-selected or chosen in the first instance, but gradually emerged as a core group. There was considerable movement in classrooms where I was observing, due to students dropping out or moving up proficiency levels at the end of term, so it would have been impossible to select a class and conduct participant observation alongside the same stable group of learners for a prolonged period. I commenced fieldwork with the lowest proficiency level of learners in the hope that some would remain at IILT for twelve months. All the participants in the project had completed

[9] http://www.tcd.ie/research/dean/#general

secondary education, and on entry, their English proficiency levels were approximately A1[10] (European Common Reference Level).

Student	Gender	Date of Birth	Nationality	Secondary Education	Third-level Education
Adrian	M	1973	Romanian	Y	N
Alina	F	1974	Romanian	Y	N
Eduardo	M	1960	Angolan	Y	Y
Ivan	M	1976	Moldovan	Y	Y
Mina	F	1971	Iraqi Kurd	Y	N
Neda	F	1974	Iraqi	Y	N
Nicolae	M	1973	Moldovan	Y	Y
Pin	M	1963	Vietnamese	Y	N
Rose	F	1970	Congolese	Y	N
Samira	F	1977	Afghan	Y	N
Tatjana	F	1979	Bosnian	Y	N
Tomasz	M	1978	Polish	Y	N
Vladimir	M	1968	Romanian	Y	N

Table 1: Profile of participants

Data collected at IILT included: logbook from overt participant observation, where I worked as a classroom assistant (observer's log annotated with teachers' comments, open to participants); a closed-format attitudinal questionnaire for learners (twenty statements using a five-point Likert scale) administered at four intervals over twelve months; four semi-structured audio interviews (see Table 2 below) with groups of two and three students; one audio interview with both teachers in the final month of fieldwork; one open-format attitudinal questionnaire for learners also administered in the last month of fieldwork. These data were further triangulated by samples of class-work, and student records of attendance, punctuality and progress (maintained by students in their own portfolios).

Data from the closed-format questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and proportions) and presented in tabular and chart form. The questionnaire contained four subscales: intrinsic motivation in learning English; perceived competence as a learner; intrinsic motivation in goal-setting; perceived competence of goal-setting. Qualitative data from the interviews, open-format questionnaires, logbook and supplementary sources were scanned and categorized according to patterns and

[10] The descriptor for the A1 proficiency level reads: "Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help" (Council of Europe 2001: 24).

chronological developments. The data were subjected to qualitative content analysis (thematically, by individual learner, chronologically, including counter-patterns). This analysis employed a 'grounded' approach, whereby theory is derived from data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This almost organic relationship between research questions and data collection create the space for a 'thick' description of both behaviour and context . The ethnographic product of this study was an extensive narrative organized around four points throughout the year of fieldwork. The wide range of data sources offered triangulated perspectives on the same episodes.

Table 2: Topics discussed during semi-structured audio interviews

	Interview 1	**Interview 2**	**Interview 3**	**Interview 4**
Topics discussed **(chronological order)**	• Impressions of new building • Enjoyment of learning English • Making progress in English • Difficulties in learning English • Future ambitions • Coming to school as an adult • Atmosphere in school • Targets for the week • 'Good' students • Experiences of Ireland • Children • Watching TV, films • Travelling to home country • Childcare in Ireland • Christmas plans	• Impressions of new building • Making progress in English • Difficulties in learning English • Watching films, comprehension • Learning French and English, comparison • Learning computer skills • Spelling tests, learning new vocabulary • Why learn English, just for a job or more • Depending on Social Welfare • Integration and learning English • Speaking fluent English • Personal targets, future ambitions • 'Good' students • Problems faced by refugee learners	• Enjoyment of learning English • Classwork • Speaking only English in class • Multicultural classroom, new friends • Making progress in English • Not wanting to change classes • Making progress and age • Targets, ELP • Future ambitions • Angola, orphans • Romania, orphans • Corruption, dictatorships • Experiences of authority in Ireland • Racism • Future plans to learn English	• Impressions of new building • Getting to school • Pregnancy, maternity hospitals • Miscarriages • Future plans to learn English • Future ambitions • Making progress, coping in daily life • ELP, targets, review • Motivation • Difficulties in learning English • Health problems • Classmates and their English • Atmosphere in school • 'Good' students • Tiredness and learning

The vast array of literature on motivation is daunting for any researcher, particularly after an extended period of focused fieldwork. My investigation, as an inductive, ethnographic study, was data-driven, not theory-driven. The task that faced me was thus one of coalescing and explicating the data I had gathered, the individuals I had met, and stories I had heard. In my account, I argued that building a curriculum and classroom practice from a basis of learners' needs and life experiences had a positive impact on learner motivation and learners' experiences in the classroom, which in turn helped learners to adjust better to life beyond the classroom. The following discussion provides some insights into the data gathered at IILT in the English language classroom, and the experiences of learning English as a refugee in Ireland.

Discussion of data

Refugees' reasons for being in Ireland, experiences of learning English, and relationships with the English-speaking community, are complex and contradictory. Satisfying the inherent human need to make connections with others, the need for interdependence that is part of our essential nature, is a vital ingredient for fulfilment and well-being. Obstacles which hinder this sense of belonging may in turn hamper a learner's motivation to learn English, and have a negative impact on their progress. In the context of second language learning (as opposed to foreign language learning), refugees have to learn to relate to the community of the new language, but this community is also their *host* community; as Little comments, "they are separated from the linguistic community to which they owe their sense of ethnicity and personal identity" (2000: 1). The following discussion between Samira from Afghanistan and Adrian from Romania is indicative of such contradictions[11]:

SAMIRA[12] I think, in my idea, all the people that live in, the Irish people, they are very kind.
[…]

ADRIAN Ah not all […] Like every country. Bad people and nice people. There is, like you, you very nice, but example, going park my wife and my children, and Irish children said, go back in your country. No good for children. They know this from the parents, because six, seven, eight years, they don't think to say this, go back in your country. I think they heard this in the house, the parents saying.

Some of the participants in this study did not have much contact with the Irish community beyond school. For example, Eduardo from Angola, when asked in the same interview as Samira and Adrian if he had good experience with the Irish, said, "for me, 80%, because I don't talk Irish people". My data revealed layers of fear and suspicion when dealing with English-speakers outside of school, who speak too fast, don't

[11] All data are cited verbatim; spelling errors from written data have been corrected.
[12] All names have been changed to protect identities. Some nationalities have been replaced by neighbouring nationalities.

understand or perhaps pretend not to understand. Samira shared her experience of looking for a new house,

> Last night I speak on the telephone with one person that have a house, and they are looking for a house, and I say for them, I am looking your house, what is your address. He doesn't understand me! Say, what you say, I cannot understand, sorry. And put the phone. I was so sadness, I speak clear! […] I was so nervous, I thought, am I lazy? I can't speak!

Integrating into a new host community means running the almost inevitable gauntlet of racism:

ADRIAN: They put fire on Nigerian man's house or car, and they put a fire, you don't know, I have friends live in a bad area, they, they, broken, or what you call it ((gestures filling a bottle and throwing it))
LORNA: Petrol bomb?
ADRIAN: In the house. This happens, in Blanchardstown.

(Audio interview)

Most of the participants in this study had children, and had witnessed their process of connecting with a new environment:

ADRIAN: I mean, in the school is not happen, because the teacher say to parents, speak with her, what I know in my experience. Teacher speak with the parents, speak with the other children, and no very big problem. But first when my little girl, oh yes, problem. No play with her, ok.

Hughes *et al.* (2007: 230) discuss the social impact of immigration. They note that children from non-Irish national backgrounds are significantly more likely to report bullying at school than other children. Smyth *et al.*'s research on post-primary education in Ireland shows that non-national children are more likely to report isolation, and not to view themselves as popular (2004, 2006). Samira, despite her earlier assertion, cited above, that the Irish people were very kind, spoke shortly afterwards about an experience of a younger family member at school:

> in the kindergarten, and one girl from Irish say, I don't want to play with you because you is black. She cry, she cry. She come home. […] She cry, and uh, last night, she cried, one of my friends, she's really bad, she come and say for the children, do not play with this girl because she is from the foreign country.

Nicolae from Moldova did not seem to enjoy life in Ireland nor did he seem to want to integrate into Irish society, "for some people, Irish people is difficult, for me is very difficult". He had no firm plans either to complete his language study or to remain in Ireland. Nicolae seemed to be learning English because he had no choice, he had not found a job and he preferred to attend class than remain at home, "don't like, coming to

school, for learning […]. If you don't want to stay in home and can't no work, then is good". He gave the impression that he was not studying English by choice; rather his choice was affected by external factors beyond his control. He did not appreciate much, understandably, about the Irish weather, "I don't like too much this country, you know, the cold. I prefer to live in France. Very good country, for me, because I know the language". The move to the next class level however, in January 2004, seemed to bring about some changes in Nicolae's attitudes to learning English and attending school. His new teacher wrote in my logbook in January 2004:

> Nicolae's attitude to his English I imagine is similar to his attitude to anything he does: he wants to do a good job. He enjoys making connections between his existing linguistic knowledge and new information encountered. Nicolae will work at an activity until it is finished or until he loses interest in it.

His final confidential administrative report read:

> Nicolae has strong reading, comprehension and communication skills. He completes class tasks with determination and will always clarify anything he doesn't understand. He is an intelligent student and a pleasure to have in class. Small grammatical errors hamper written and spoken production, as I think communication is perceived as more important than accuracy.

Nicolae, despite an inauspicious start, completed twelve month's of study at IILT, and found employment in the construction industry.[13] A further breakthrough occurred for Polish learner Tomasz, who, whilst "able to communicate perfectly well" (teacher interview), seemed to lack study skills to return to the classroom and to cope with homework, particularly writing. Signs of apparent boredom and a lack of interest in all group activities transpired to be outward manifestations of this struggle, along with initial low attendance rates. However, although Tomasz made "a very very slow start […], once he got going he was absolutely fine" (teacher interview). A line in his progress report for the end of the first term read "Suddenly one day in week 5 you started speaking English!" Attendance and punctuality improved, as well as participation in class activities. In a later audio interview, Tomasz commented on his progress, "For me, maybe, I see a difference every day. Maybe other people don't see the difference". For him, the difference seemed partly to lie in how much he understood in class: "when we were in the first class, I got, uh, 80%, now I got 90%". In addition to increased comprehension, his attendance records improved from 78% in term one ('unsatisfactory' according to IILT's regulations) to 91% in term two. He found the seven months in class by the time of our interview had passed very quickly, "they go like that ((makes noise of air passing)). Tomasz was positive about his future prospects:

> In one year, it's not possible to learn? Uh, I think maybe 70%, 80% learn, maybe 79% […] maybe when we leave this school, maybe we speak very well, very well. One year I think we speak very good.

[13] See Carson 2007 for a case study of Nicolae's experience in the English language classroom.

The relationship between progress and empowerment was evident in the classroom. Tatjana from Bosnia commented in the audio interview that when she arrived at IILT,

> I didn't know anything […] maybe a little, what is your name or hello, hi, help, you know ((laughter)). But you listen on the TV, you know, words, but now is good. I go on the hospital sometimes alone, I don't need translation, yeah? […] about blood (press) (presh), […] pressure, yeah, and urine and something, headache, backache or something […] Many things.

Ivan from Moldova commented on the impact of his progress in English on his daily life:

> Now I not need the translation, all the time take, translation. Myself translating. I go to Social Welfare, wherever. A little idea correct, I have idea correct spelling. Little little, no one hundred percent, I think myself. Before all the time, come on please, reading, what is this, reading English paper, now no problem, anything understand.

Alina from Romania shared a similar experience of increased confidence:

> Sometimes I speak in the shop, customer service, maybe problem, and, speak at the doctors, speak maybe about my daughter, because before, nothing speaking! ((laughs)). Now I speak little and more confident, little little.

These learners want to learn English, and are attending a full-time English language course. However, their relationship with the target language and English-speakers is contradictory and constantly changing depending on context, interlocutors and outcomes. Norton's concept of 'investment' instead of motivation, developed through her work with immigrant women in Canada, is useful to clarify the power relationships involved when refugees learn the language of the host community (1994, 2000). Norton suggests that as learners interact in the language they are learning, they are constantly reorganizing their sense of who they are, and their place in the social world around them. She uses the term 'investment' to describe learners' relationships with the language they are learning, and the social world of that language. This approach views motivation not as a psychological trait but as a social dimension of an individual's range of identities as a speaker.

Some individuals, like Eduardo, may choose not to speak to Irish people, as a face-saving or self-protective strategy. Others, like Samira, take the risk and sometimes suffer negative consequences. Nicolae is an example of a student who made notable progress despite some negative attitudes and hostility. Norton argues for:

> a conception of the language learner as having a complex social identity that must be understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction (1995: 13).

Any individual's story is contradictory and full of non sequiturs, and the learners involved in my study were no exception. These students' mixed attitudes to starting a new life, learning English, attending class and seeking out the best for themselves and their families reflect the complex social relationships that characterize us all.

Learners at IILT have diverse experiences of formal education, ranging from those who may have only attended primary school through to those with third-level qualifications. The participants in my investigation had all attended secondary school, and most had learned some English already. All spoke at least one other second or foreign language. The teacher in the first classroom commented that this was unlike her previous two classes, some of whom had never attended school as children. The curriculum at IILT is generated from learners' needs, interests and ambitions, in order to help them learn "the English they need to live and work in Ireland" (IILT 2008). This is mediated by the European Language Portfolio, a language learning tool which enables students to set and record personal targets, reflect on their progress, and manage their own learning agenda. Rose from DR Congo and Nicolae from Moldova commented on this system in our group interview.

ROSE Susan gives us that right to choose what we need, that is very important. You know, sometimes she can say, what do you want to do now? You know? She can't say, now is only grammar. No, she say to you, what do you want? Do you want grammar? […] We are free to do whatever we want. That is very very important […]

NICOLAE Somebody want grammar, somebody want revision […] she makes everything, maybe you want grammar, I want only spelling test, and she makes three or five things with different persons.

The advantage of this system is that it allowed flexibility in the classroom, with several parallel activities often running at the same time, mediated via pair-work and group-work, with regular plenary sessions as well. The first teacher, who taught the lowest proficiency level students who arrived at IILT, commented in my logbook that the first target that learners expressed in class was simply to "learn English". As term progressed, the system of using checklists within the Portfolio to break down the monolith of "learning English" into different skill areas led learners to articulate specific targets. Nicolae from Moldova wanted to learn more words "about construction", and "new words from Driving Theory Test to get Driver Licence". Vladimir from Romania wanted to "write about myself and my daily life". Eduardo from Angola wanted to "give additional information in an interview situation". Learners were also asked about long-term goals. A Congolese student, Rose, wrote that her long-term goal was to find work "as a receptionist in a hotel or something similar". In our audio interview, she said,

> my first target is I want to learn very very well, I want to speak very very well English. I want to speak English like an English woman. Then, looking for a job, like receptionist, or call centre […] maybe I can learn another language too, maybe Dutch.

Rose was very aware that learning English was a necessary step towards employment and integration, and she also talked about how, by integrating, she could improve her English. This bi-directional relationship between integration and language proficiency is embedded in the inevitable bi-directional nature of language learning: we can only learn a language through use, through speaking, even when we feel we may not have the skills to do so. In the audio interview, Rose outlined her some of her learning strategies outside the classroom:

> Some books, newspapers, watching TV, is very important, in English, and sometimes, you know the, the movies like, Eastenders or Coronation Street, yeah, is nice because you can put the, the […] yeah, test, this is good at the same time, you can read.

Rose was outspoken in class when she felt other students were being overly critical of Ireland. Her teacher commented in an interview that,

> If anyone would criticize Ireland, like the weather or the traffic or the smoking on the buses, she'd be straight to the "you're a guest in this country, this is a good life, let's make the most of it".

Rose was conscious of criticisms levelled at immigrants, and agreed with some of their criticisms. She thought that some learners only attended class because they did not want to seek employment (audio interview),

> People come here only because, you know, social say, oh go looking for a job, and they say, oh no, I want to go to school, I want stay. Some people, I'm not sure, but some people say I'm only here because social give me money.

In the audio interview, Rose entered into a heated discussion with Nicolae from Moldova about learning English in Ireland. She was adamant that simply taking classes because they were available, or even learning just enough English to cope, was unacceptable to her. Part of her debate with Nicolae was about a hypothetical person who didn't speak English, and was employed as a driver. She pointed out that low income jobs favoured by some immigrants that do not require much English were not adequate if the worker were to fall sick, "maybe he lose his leg". Nicolae's response was that he would be taken care of by social welfare, "if he lose a leg, it's for social pay". Rose insisted this was the wrong attitude, and that moreover, even in the case of an accident, the worker would still have to speak some English in order to be able to cope, "if today he go to hospital […] he have to speak […] and this and this and that and my wife, you know?". Later in the same interview, conversation again turned to the importance of speaking English, which Nicolae continued to contest. Rose stressed, "if you are driver you have to speak English, because you are a driver *here*. Maybe you have some problem, if Garda came, you can say, I'm driver!"

Rose's motivation to learn English was mainly driven by her desire not only to obtain employment but to connect with the society around her. She wanted to "speak English"

like an English woman", and was defensive of her new home. She believed that some mastery of English was a necessary step for integration. For Rose, the linkages between the classroom and her personal goals were important factors in her enjoyment of learning English, and her progress. Rose's success at IILT was evident in her rapid progression through the proficiency levels; at the end of fieldwork she left IILT to attend a FÁS training course in hospitality.

Social psychologists Deci and Ryan describe a continuum of autonomy which underlies all extrinsically motivated behaviour, from externally imposed goals through to the personal integration of those goals (2000). When people identify with and assume external motive as their own motives, they are beginning to behave more autonomously. The most autonomous behaviour is thus found when individuals integrate the external contingencies with their own values, and their own sense of self. This makes sense in the context of refugees learning English. Refugees in Ireland generally learn English because of its extrinsic value; their motivation is goal-oriented. Many learners do not want to be in the classroom on a full-time basis. Yet these goals may be imposed on individuals who feel the pressure to learn for various reasons. The language classroom provides a social context (in the words of one teacher, "the cement") which can encourage autonomous behaviour and the shift of responsibility from teacher and textbook to the learner.

In the context of adult refugees learning English, the outworking of the concepts – responsibility, reflection, decision-making – described earlier in this paper are clearly vital. The aims of English language provision and autonomous learning operate on two levels, immediate and long-term. Holec argues that it is very unlikely that individuals who have attained a level of autonomy *in* the classroom will exist *outside* the classroom in a state of dependence and passivity (1981: 34). The English language classroom is thus one of the most appropriate fora to assist refugees to achieve not only an appropriate level of mastery of English, but also the tools to access further education, training and employment, whether on a temporary or permanent basis.

Conclusion

Learning English is essential for adult refugees in Ireland. From the perspective of the host community, equipping refugees with language skills means they are more likely to access training and employment, to become less welfare-dependent and to participate in their local community. Individuals move from passive recipients to active producers, and take charge of their own lives. Some of these steps are simple: going to the shop, describing symptoms to a doctor, talking to a child's teacher. Other steps, such as putting down roots in a new community, establishing a credit history, participating fully in a child's education, are more demanding. Learning English may have an important psychological impact, redressing exclusion, alienation and depression; speaking English helps refugees take control of their lives:

> You just assume that everybody brings their rucksack and their apple for break and they go home and do their homework diligently. It's just not the case, it's just not the case with our learners.
>
> (Class teacher, audio interview)

Language provision for adult refugees is a challenge in any context. The sheer variety of educational experiences, ages and cultures renders a 'one size fits all' curriculum entirely inappropriate. Each learner brings "not only their local experiences into the classroom, but also their memories of experiences in their native country and their own visions of the future they desire in their new country" (Norton 2000: 134). Drawing on learners' experiences, preferences and personal ambitions in the classroom creates a social environment where motivation is not simply how much or why an individual wants to learn English, but is instead the outworking of autonomous behaviour. The two learners who speak at the beginning of this article describe the process of learning English, and their small, and gradual, achievements in daily life, "little little". Learning to take charge of one's learning and become autonomous is not a quick fix. It is a slow transformation, "a direction, not a destination" (Rogers 1961: 186). I suggest that the most important part of learning English is learning to make your own voice heard.

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