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A Case Study of English Language Acquisition by Chechen Programme Refugees in Roscommon, Ireland

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Abstract

This research explored the acquisition of English by Programme Chechen refugees who arrived in Ireland eleven years ago. Many of them had less than a basic level of English. To meet their language needs, an intensive English course was set up by the local Vocational Education Committee. However, the refugees' basic needs such as health care, parental care took precedence over language provision. The study found that the Chechens were unable to fully participate in and benefit from the language course. The process of acquiring English happened to a large extent outside the classroom. The study also looked at how the Chechens acquired language outside the classroom and within their social environment. The findings from assessments, a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, individual case studies and notes made from empirical observation all reinforced each other. This research showed that the Chechens in Roscommon town have become well integrated; they are independent and plan to stay. Most of them speak English quite well and are continuing to improve by participating in local society. However, based on the results of this research, it is recommended that in future, an initial language course for programme refugees should be adapted to allow for immediate pressing concerns over housing and health for example, and that such a course should be less intensive and longer. The paper will be of interest to those who teach refugees at any level as well as teachers of English as a second language and education policy makers.

Keywords: ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), Integration, Motivation, Programme Refugees, Second Language

Introduction

This research looked at Programme Chechen refugees in Roscommon town. A group of 30 Chechen refugees were placed in Roscommon by the government in 2005. They were housed and given English language lessons. The purpose of the research was to explore how well the Chechens have fared since 2005; how well their English has progressed; how well they have integrated and how settled they feel in Ireland. It asked the questions:

- What is the Chechens' current English level?
- How have the Chechens acquired any improvements they have made in language?
- What attitudes and beliefs about language acquisition do the Chechens hold?
- What has motivated the Chechens to improve their English and to integrate?
- What difficulties have the Chechens encountered in their experience of living in Roscommon?

Refugees in Ireland

By contrast to many European countries with long traditions of refugee protection and strong legal frameworks “*the Republic of Ireland has a problematic history in relation to refugees*” (Moreo & Lentin , 2010, p.10). Ireland ratified the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1956. This created a legal distinction between asylum seekers and refugees. It established the right to work for refugees, entitlement to welfare provision, benefits, housing, education and training. Ireland fulfilled this obligation in a piecemeal fashion in the decades following 1956 (Loyal, 2011).

An asylum seeker is a person who seeks to be recognised as a refugee under the terms of the 1951 Convention. Asylum seekers do not have the legal rights of refugees until their

applications for refugee status have been granted (Goodwin-Gill, 1996; UNHCR, 1967). A convention refugee is a person who fulfils the requirements of the definition of a refugee under the terms of the Geneva Convention. A programme refugee is a person who has been invited to a country following a Government decision in response to a humanitarian request, usually from the UNHCR either for the purposes of temporary protection or resettlement (ibid). Since 1956 programme refugees from Hungary, Chile, Vietnam, Kosovo and Bosnia have come to Ireland, and figures are provided in Table 1.

Nationality	Year of Arrival	Numbers Registering
Hungary	1956	530
Chile	1973	120
Vietnam	1979	212
Bosnia	1992-99	1,228
Kosovo	1998-99	1,053

Table 1 Numbers of programme refugees invited to Ireland prior to the Chechens

Chechen Programme Refugees

As of summer 1999, there were about 600,000 Chechens in Chechnya. At present more than half of those people are refugees. They fled Chechnya because of the well documented war between separatists and Russia. In 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union many republics became independent states. The subsequent Chechen government and population were split between those who wanted to maintain close links with Russia and those who wanted greater separation. Russia invaded Chechnya in order to keep its hold over Chechnya. It was a brutal conflict in which many civilians suffered greatly. Thousands were killed and thousands fled the country. Chechnya has also lost almost all of its former non-Chechen population, several hundreds of thousands of different ethnic groups – Russians, Armenians, Ingush, Georgians, Ukrainians and many more (Harzig,

Hoeder, & Gabaccia, 2009).

In 2005, Ireland accepted 41 Chechen programme refugees, and 30 of them were resettled in Roscommon. Before coming to Ireland, they were in emergency refugee camps in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan.

Language Acquisition of Refugees and the Role it Plays in Integration

In response to the increasing number of people seeking asylum in Ireland and in order to meet their needs an Interdepartmental Working Group was established by the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform Mr. John O'Donoghue in 1998 (Interdepartmental Working Group Report, 1999, p.32). The aim of the Working Group was:

"To review the arrangements for integrating persons granted refugee status or permission to remain in Ireland, including the appropriate institutional structures for the delivery of these services and to make recommendations."

The role of the Department of Education was to provide education for the school-going age refugees' children and also English language training for adult refugees (ibid). In order to co-ordinate arrangements for English classes The Refugee Language Support Unit was established and funded by the Department of Education and Science so refugees could be fully integrated into Irish society. The Working Group adopted the definition of Integration: *"Integration means the ability to participate to the extent that a person needs and wishes in all of the major components of society, without having to relinquish his or her own cultural identity"* (ibid. p.9). The most comprehensive approach to integration has been developed for Programme Refugees. Measures have been developed by the Refugee Agency, which provides a variety of support such as housing, language tuition and employment training (Watt, 1999). English is considered *"a key success factor to facilitate immigrants to integrate into society at social and economic levels (...a range of governance structures and organisations have been established all with differing degrees of emphasis on*

meeting the English language needs of this diverse group of people... to equip immigrants with the necessary linguistic skills to enable them to function capably within society”

(Horwath Consulting Ireland, 2008, p.10). This research was particularly interested in how the Chechens have acquired language outside the classroom and within their social environment since their initial intensive English language course.

Motivation and Student Autonomy

Motivation has a direct influence on second language acquisition. There is a correlation between what students do and learn and how this influences their motivation (Pintrich, 2003). Students who are well motivated learn well; when the learning is successful they become more motivated. Motivation must include features such as persistence, attendance to tasks, a desire to achieve goals, enjoyment. Motivation is the driving force behind the effort of a learner (Gardner, 2000).

In Gardner & Lambert's (1959) "Orientation Index", learning a new language is classified either integrative or instrumental. Integrative orientation means that the learner wants to know more of the target language, more about the host culture and to become part of it. Instrumental orientation means that the learner wants to use it as a "tool" to obtain a job, to be better educated.

According to Knowles (1995) *"there is convincing evidence that people who take the initiative in learning (proactive learners), learn things better than do people who sit passively at the feet of teachers (reactive learners). Proactive learners enter into learning more purposefully and with great motivation"* (p.22). In other words, learners' autonomy increases learning effectiveness. Dickenson (1995) describes autonomy in L2 (second

language) learning as one of the best aspects of motivation, and at the same time, one of the most difficult things to develop. Non-English speaking incomers to Ireland such as migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees often choose to do an English language course initially. Subsequently, their motivation to progress their English on their own and outside the classroom depends very much on their individual motivation. This research looks at how the Chechens have individually progressed since their initial English language course which was mandatory.

While there is considerable research around second language acquisition, it is dominated by language teaching for children and third level students; there is little research regarding adult learners particularly programme refugees. This paper researches the language contacts and language acquisition of the Chechen programme refugees and the progress they have made outside the classroom since their initial intensive language programme.

Language is what people use in their daily lives and what they use to express, create and interpret meanings and to establish and maintain social and interpersonal relationships (Kramsch, 1994). Social interaction provides the necessary opportunities to practice and improve learners' communicative competence and ability (Schuman, 1986).

Research Methodology and Methods

The study is primarily qualitative and used an interpretivist perspective . The methodology selected to address the research questions was a collective case study. The most commonly used data collection instruments in case studies such as in this study are interviews, participant observation, tests and questionnaires. The data was collected in the following ways:

- an assessment of participants' English proficiency in order to evaluate their

current level of English;

- a questionnaire in order to discover the Chechens' attitudes and beliefs about language acquisition;
- semi-structured interviews in order to understand what has motivated the Chechens to improve their English and to integrate in Irish society;
- individual case studies and empirical observation in order to reinforce and further explore the Chechens' experience.

Participants' Profile

The subjects for this study were eight adult Chechens who arrived in Roscommon as programme refugees in 2005. They were given an intensive English language course on arrival in which I was involved as a teacher and translator from the outset. This research has afforded me an opportunity to chart the Chechens' progress and integration. In my experience as an English language teacher, I have noticed that very little interest has been shown in the language progression and integration of asylum seekers and refugees locally in County Roscommon, in other words, in rural Ireland.

Language Assessment

A Cambridge diagnostic Online Test for beginners was given to evaluate the participants' language ability at the outset of this research (Cambridge English. (n.d.) Cambridge English language Assessment, <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/test-your-english/>). A test for beginners was chosen in order to show a range of ability. From their spoken English, it was clear that some of the participants had acquired quite fluent English whereas others had not. The second test, ESL Language Studies Abroad was to find the participants' approximate level according to the European Language Framework: Beginners,

Elementary, Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate or Advanced.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire devised was divided into four sections:

- 1- personal data, 2 – past language learning experience, 3 – beliefs about language learning, 4 – attitudes to independent language learning.

Demographic information taken from the questionnaire included students' age, gender, native language, their marital status, educational background. Taking into consideration the students' English level and, according to Dornyei's recommendations (2003), the questions were worded simply in order that they could be understood easily. The questionnaire was paper-based and it was administered at a different time.

Semi-structured Interviews

There are many definitions of the concept of Interview, but I prefer the one given by Kvale who says, "*An interview is a conversation that has a structure and purpose*" (1996, p.6). According to Folkestad (2008) "*Interviews allow the respondents to reflect and reason on a variety of subjects in a different way (...) we can get a deeper insight in how they think and reflect*" (p.1). Thus interviews in this research were carried out as a tool to get information about the participants' language behaviour.

Unlike structured interviews, where the interviewer plays a neutral role and does not insert his or her opinion in the interview, in semi-structured interviews the interviewer follows the guide, but is able to stray from the guide when he or she feels this is appropriate. I was able to observe the participant group on making contact with them, discussing the research project and its ethical implications of my involving them in my

research. These preliminaries were friendly and relaxed and gave me some insight into how settled these Chechens may be. Consequently I was able to write the questions for my interviews with some prior knowledge. The semi-structured interviews in this research allowed for further discussion.

Data Analysis

In my research, there were several stages of data analysis: ongoing analysis, notes, data collection. Notes were written after the interviews. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis. I was able to use the questionnaire, the interview and empirical notes taken over a period of two months.

Individual Case Studies

Individual case studies were written as an amalgam of information from the questionnaire, the responses during the interviews and from my empirical observations of the participants while interacting throughout the research.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

A summary of findings across the individual cases follows:

All the participants found the initial English course helpful in spite of the fact that not all of them could attend a full intensive course.
In this sample, the more highly educated participants had achieved higher English competence.
Parents with children who spent more time in Irish schooling have better language proficiency; they gained vocabulary through reading children's books.
All the participants are happy in Roscommon and planning to stay.
Unlike some other groups of refugees who live close to each other, the Roscommon Chechens live in different parts of Roscommon town with English speaking neighbours. They enjoy socialising with these neighbours and consequently this has affected their language acquisition.

Language Acquisition and Integration

“Integration means the ability to participate to the extent that a person needs and wishes in all of the major components of society, without having to relinquish his or her own cultural identity” (Watt, 1999, p.9). This study found that the Chechens after ten years in Ireland were quite well integrated into Irish society. This was demonstrated by the fact that more than one of the participants wanted to point out that they do not need a translator any longer. They want to be independent. Nevertheless, all the participants have preserved their own cultural identity by speaking Chechen at home and encouraging their children to do so. The findings showed that it was the fathers who wanted Chechen spoken at home. This points to an interesting fact that men are more concerned about keeping up with their cultural identity than women.

The attendance and completion of the initial intensive course varied among the refugees for a number of reasons: health issues, accommodation problems, lack of child minding facilities. Only one of the eight participants completed the course, although they all said in interview that they had found the course useful. However, they said that, after having lived here for some time and having acquired some level of competency in English, now might be a better time for an intensive language course. Ellis describes a second language learning as *“the way in which people learn a language other than their mother tongue, inside or outside classroom”* (1997, p.3). This study found that the Chechens acquired their English mostly outside the classroom.

Motivation

The Constructivist theory of Dewey and Vygotsky (Table 2) seems to have most relevance to the Chechen’s acquisition of English. Their learning has been social and interactive.

They all enjoy talking to their English speaking neighbours and their children. Even the

partially deaf participant, who has hardly any English, makes a point of greeting his neighbours in English. Vygotsky also states in his socioculturalist theory that all cognitive development is a result of social interaction. All the Chechen parents interact well with their children's schools; they talk to the teachers and go to parents meetings.

Vygotsky emphasises the role of the social environment in motivating learners. The Chechens are not socially isolated and do not suffer from a lack of language learning opportunities with native speakers. This welcome interaction further increases motivation to improve. Motivation and attitude are very important issues as far as language learning is concerned.

When Gardner discusses motivation, he talks about "*desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes towards learning the language*" (1985, p.54). All the participants in this study wanted to learn English at the outset and want to improve. Their attitude towards Ireland and towards English is favourable. They all want to stay in Ireland. There is an example of integrative motivation. For all of them, in spite of their situational difficulties, acquiring English has been a pleasure.

Cooper & Fishman (1977) identified another type of motivation as Developmental or Personal. Activities, such as watching movies, following sport, reading books and magazines in the target language, are all activities the Chechens engage in. Watching TV and reading books is a type of Developmental or Personal Motivation. Watching TV exposes the learner to authentic language, spoken by native speakers. Unlike the methodical process through textbooks where vocabulary and grammar are carefully controlled, by watching TV the learners get a sense of what authentic language sounds

like; they get accustomed to the real rate of speech of the language. The Chechens' rate of speech of English is close to that spoken by the Irish. This shows that TV is an excellent way to get used to the regular speed at which native speakers talk. The Chechens like watching children's TV and children's cartoons, and English movies with English subtitles for the hard of hearing.

Reading children's books is a natural way to acquire a new language. It is easier for learners to gain vocabulary as it is inherently repetitive in children's books. Children's books have simple grammar and vocabulary. Appealing pictures of fuzzy ducks and teddy bears help both children and parents to follow the story line and learn new vocabulary easily, sometimes just by looking at the pictures.

Resultative motivation (Ellis, 2008) describes learners who are successful and so become more motivated. Most of the participants retain a positive attitude towards acquiring English; they haven't given it up because they found it too difficult. The more successful of the participants, those who are working, have become more motivated to get better at English.

Participants' Autonomy

Autonomous learning is impossible without motivation. Almost all the participants are eager to learn more English, they are curious about the people who speak the target language and their culture. The Chechen refugees have decided what and how to learn English, whether they want to learn by themselves or with others. Each learner has her or his own individual needs and preferences. Autonomous learning bolsters intrinsic motivation and interest in the host country. Being autonomous learners, the Chechens

draw on their intrinsic motivation when they accept responsibility for their own learning and commit themselves to develop the skills of reflective self-management in learning. Success in learning strengthens their intrinsic motivation, their learning is efficient and effective.

Additionally, the participants are highly motivated on behalf of their children. They are very ambitious for their children; they want them to do well at school and to speak English well. Their decision to stay in Ireland has in some cases been influenced by seeing their children happy and settled here. They believe that their children are developing an Irish mentality and they are comfortable with this.

The level of language skills depends on the ability and motivation of the learners (Okada, Oxford, & Abo, 1996). As has been mentioned previously, all the participants have been living in Ireland for the same time. However, their level of language competence varies according to their individual abilities, skills and motivation. The students who had the highest scores in the tests and are most fluent in English all had previous higher education. They had been used to learning, some of them learning new languages and they appear to have found learning English easier than the other participants.

Attitudes towards the Host Country

For the most part, the Chechens' acquisition of English has been successful because they have positive attitudes towards Ireland. Unlike asylum seekers, programme refugees do not have a choice of the country of their resettlement. The Chechens came to Ireland through third countries where they had stayed for more than three years. It was exhausting to wait for the authorities' decision where to be sent for a safe place to live. In one case

a family was twice refused by the Netherlands and Denmark. When they learned that Ireland had accepted them they were relieved and happy at the same time. All the Chechens were very happy to come to Ireland and consider Roscommon as their native town. After the trauma and upheaval of their earlier lives they find the quiet and peace of a small town like Roscommon very attractive. These positive attitudes have undoubtedly affected their language acquisition.

Two participants now run their own businesses. Setting up one's own business is another way of achieving full integration into a host country by personal contribution into a society. It is noteworthy that all the participants are now Irish citizens which appears to be a significant demonstration of their successful integration into a new society which is again no more "*a new society*", it became their home land, home town.

Conclusion

This research explored the acquisition of English by Programme Chechen refugees who arrived in Ireland eleven years ago. The aim of the research was to look at the current level of the Chechens' English; their attitudes and beliefs towards acquiring English and their motivations to improve their spoken English.

The collective case study research with a qualitative approach produced a number of findings that complement each other. The findings from the assessments, the questionnaire, the semi-structured interviews, individual case studies and notes made from empirical observation all reinforced each other. The individual personalities which became apparent in the individual case studies also shared a lot in common.

Data collected from the two assessment tests showed considerable variation among the

participants from very little English in the case of one participant with hearing difficulties to quite fluent. The most fluent participants are employed or have taken the initiative to become self-employed. They also have a third level education background. Additionally, these better performing participants have children who have been longer within the Irish educational system. However, none of the participants have near native speaker fluency. Their speed when speaking English is close to native speaker's speed but there are approximation and errors even in the most fluent. Little (2003) considers that approximation and errors appear to be normal for languages learners and *"have a positive role as a ladder that gradually ascends towards native speaker proficiency"* (p.3). At the same time he states *"that the majority of naturalistic second language acquirers never attain native speaker proficiency"* (ibid, p.3). The Chechens recognise that they will not attain native speaker proficiency. However they are very pleased that their children at school are rapidly attaining a proficiency in English that is close to that of native speakers'. Regardless of errors they may make, the language skills acquired by the Chechens in speaking, reading and writing have resulted in making them feel happy and confident when using English in everyday communication and when completing official documents.

The process of acquiring these language skills happened to a large extent outside the classroom. All the Chechens found the initial intensive English course on their arrival helpful. However their situational difficulties at that time regarding housing, health and child care meant that they were unable to fully participate in and benefit from the course. Little (2003) says that classroom or instructed learning would speed up the language acquisition process.

Note: The refugees now have Irish citizenship. In this study I have moved loosely between using the term students, refugees and participants depending on the context.

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