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### Citation

Cox, Sarah (2021). Can an Ecological, Multilingual Approach Help Us to Better Support Reunited Refugee Families in Scotland with Language Learning? *Theory and Practice of Second Language Acquisition*, 6(2) pp. 11–34.

### URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/96838/>

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## **Can an Ecological, Multilingual Approach Help Us to Better Support Reunited Refugee Families in Scotland with Language Learning?**

### Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the relationship between academic literature, policy, and practice in terms of language learning within the specific context of refugee families who have recently reunited in Glasgow through the British Red Cross Family Reunion Integration Service. The paper presents research findings from a pilot teaching study, working collaboratively with participants within their first few weeks of arriving in Scotland to explore whether an ecological, multilingual approach to language learning is effective in this context. Building on principles of translanguaging with participants using their full “linguistic repertoire” (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010) and drawing on Norton’s construct of “investment” (2013) the paper explores key themes of empowerment and identity in the classroom. The results enable us to draw conclusions regarding the balance of power in the classroom and the impact of the recognition of refugees’ own languages within the learning process.

*Keywords:* ecological approach, translanguaging, family reunion, multilingualism

### **Research Context**

Rising immigration into Europe and the current shifting political climate in the UK have placed immigration and the corresponding support services for migrants at the centre of current public and political discourses. The increase in migration into Europe which peaked in 2015–2016 is often referred to as the refugee crisis but is framed differently by Phipps as the “crisis of hospitality” (2018). In 2015, this international humanitarian crisis saw the number of people forcibly displaced worldwide reach 65.3 million, including 4.9 million people

newly displaced from Syria (Scottish Government, 2018, p. 14). This is the highest number of forcibly displaced people since World War Two.

In 2012, in response to rising immigration figures, Theresa May in her position as Home Secretary announced plans “to create here in Britain a really hostile environment for illegal migration” (The Guardian, 2018) with the expressed aim of reducing immigration. The introduction of the policies of the hostile environment set the scene for much of the negative discourse concerning immigration in the years that have followed, establishing a narrative that was used very effectively by politicians within the campaign to leave the EU in the 2016 referendum. By leaving the UK, pro-Brexit politicians stated the UK could ‘take back control’ of its borders and reduce immigration with this being seen as a necessary and desirable outcome.

The negative discourse on immigration is also frequently linked to the debate on language learning which publicly emphasises the need for migrants to learn and speak English as a priority. The use of languages other than English is viewed with suspicion and projected as a threat to national identity with the implication that social cohesion can only be achieved if the UK shares one common language. In reality, the UK has never been a monolingual country and recent years have seen increased support for indigenous minority languages such as Gaelic, Scots, and Welsh. However, the dominant narrative in the UK media reinforces the prioritising of English with the expressed aim that everyone should learn English.

Political discourses emphasise these ideas. In a report to the UK government on immigration, Dame Louise Casey, government official, stated that the UK should set a date by which time everyone in the country “should speak English,” claiming that a “common language” would help to “heal rifts across Britain” (BBC, 2018). Two consecutive UK Prime Ministers have publicly reinforced this narrative. In 2011, David Cameron, then Prime Minister, warned that “immigrants unable to speak English or unwilling to integrate have created a kind of discomfort and disjointedness which has disrupted communities across Britain” (The Guardian, 2011), the previous year, he expressed the need to reduce immigration to “tens of thousands” (The Telegraph, 2010). In 2010, he also publicly stated that Muslim women should learn English to help tackle extremism and that those who do not should be deported (The Telegraph, 2010). David Cameron is not alone in his view. In July 2019, just months before becoming Prime Minister, Boris Johnson stated “there are too often parts of our country [...] where English is not spoken by some people as their first language [...] and that needs to be changed.” He continued that the most important priority for immigrants should be “to be and to feel British [...] and to learn English,” claiming that “in many parts of England you don’t hear English spoken anymore” and “this is not the kind of community we want to leave to our children and grandchildren” (O’Grady, 2019). These discourses

are consistently given media attention in the UK, placing the responsibility of language learning solely with ‘the other,’ creating a sense of ‘them’ and ‘us.’ This emphasises the necessity for newcomers to adapt to the host community in terms of culture and language, promoting an assimilation style of integration.

There is a stark contrast between the UK wide anti-immigrant sentiment and the way that Scotland welcomes ‘New Scots.’ Scotland’s integration policies and language learning strategy evidence a more inclusive approach with 62% of the population of Scotland voting to remain in the EU in the 2016 referendum. As immigration is a reserved matter under the control of the UK Government, and the support services are devolved to Scottish Government, this can create tension in terms of the balance between UK policy and local support services. This is particularly relevant for Glasgow, where this research took place, as it has the highest concentration of migrants in Scotland.

## **The Policy Context**

Scotland has a well-established history of welcoming newcomers. As Scotland’s largest city, Glasgow has played a key role in this since becoming Scotland’s only dispersal centre for newly arrived asylum seekers in 2000. Glasgow is currently home to approximately 11% of the total dispersed asylum seeker population in the UK (Migration Scotland, 2019). Scotland has also welcomed 2,500 Syrian refugees in all 32 of its local authorities as part of the Syrian resettlement program and continues to welcome refugees and asylum seekers with a range of support services for education, housing, benefits, and employment. Whilst the policy context for ESOL delivery in England might be described as “assimilationist” (Han, Starkey, & Green, 2010) and monolingual, Scottish approaches to integration emphasise a multilingual environment and a multilateral approach to language learning (Phipps, 2018) cited in (Meer, Peace, & Hill, 2018). I will focus here on two policies which inform refugee integration and language learning in Scotland: the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy 2018–2022 and Scotland’s ESOL Strategy 2015–2020.

## **The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy 2018–2022**

Based on the “indicators of integration” framework (Ager & Strang, 2004), the New Scots strategy provides a holistic model of refugee integration with the aim of supporting integration from day one (Scottish Government, 2018). The strategy sees integration as a “long-term, two-way process, involving positive change in both individuals and host communities, which leads to cohesive, diverse communities” (Scottish Government, 2018, p. 10). Scotland

“values diversity, where people are able to use and share their culture, skills and experiences, as they build strong relationships and connections” (Scottish Government, 2018, p. 10). The policy values a collaborative approach requiring effective engagement with refugees; “for approaches to integration to succeed, they must be about working in and with local communities, as well as with refugees and asylum seekers” (Scottish Government, 2018, p. 11).

In terms of language, the two-way integration process reflects that “refugees have the opportunity to share their language and culture with their local communities [to] promote good practice, in which the home language of refugees is used in positive ways” (Scottish Government, 2018, p. 54). It is recognised that language skills are not limited to improving English. The principle of sharing languages is promoted by supporting English as an Additional Language (EAL) pupils in schools with the national strategy, *Learning in 2+ Languages*, which highlights the importance of ensuring ongoing development of pupils’ home languages, recognising that this can also help with the acquisition of a second language.

Although EAL provision effectively supports the inclusion of home languages for children of school age, the situation for adult learners is different with no recognised strategy for how to incorporate learners’ own languages within English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision. It is important that “Scotland’s linguistic diversity is promoted and as a result is valued, enabling refugees to contribute effectively to Scottish society” (Scottish Government, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, & Scottish Refugee Council, 2017, p. 55) yet no specific guidance on how this relates to classroom practice is given. Most current ESOL provision and training courses for new ESOL teachers remain focused on predominately monolingual teaching methods. The imbalance between opportunities for adults and children to incorporate their home languages into the learning of English also adds to the varied experiences of family members following family reunion (I will consider these factors in further detail under Family Reunion and the need for a Multilingual Approach). With no funding directly linked to the ‘New Scots’ strategy, its success is dependent on existing support services. In terms of language learning this includes Further Education colleges, local authorities, and voluntary sector organisations.

### **Welcoming our Learners: Scotland’s ESOL Strategy 2015–2020**

The importance of language learning for integration is recognised within *Welcoming Our Learners: Scotland’s ESOL Strategy 2015–2020*: “Language skills are central to giving people a democratic voice and supporting them to contribute to the society in which they live” (Education Scotland, 2015, p. 6).

It highlights the need for “relevant, accessible provision” and for the “right kind of ESOL” (Education Scotland, 2015, p. 3). The strategy aims for “the continued growth of Scotland as a diverse, complex, multicultural and multilingual nation” (Education Scotland, 2015, p. 2) and “recognises and values the cultures of learners and the contribution that New Scots make to society and the economy” (Education Scotland, 2015, p. 9).

There is an established practice of using only English in the classroom underpinned by the longstanding belief that using solely the target language is the best way to teach. Traditionally, languages have been kept separate in the classroom with little or no acknowledgement of the natural interaction between them, both internally (cognitively) and externally (interpersonally) (Cook, 2001). There is a belief that teaching in this way gives maximum exposure to English, increases opportunities for learners to use the language they are learning, and makes full use of the time spent in class as learners may have limited opportunities to practise their English outside of class. As this is the accepted norm, teachers have little need or motivation for integrating learners’ own languages into their teaching. It is also based on practical reasons as ESOL classrooms in Scotland are typically very mixed in terms of languages.

Multilingual teaching methods such as translanguaging are relatively new concepts and require further development in specific contexts to allow teachers to gain confidence in using them. With the importance of heritage languages recognised at policy level within New Scots and the ESOL Strategy, the large refugee/asylum seeker community in Glasgow and the strong ESOL community already in place, Scotland is in a strong position to lead on the development of translanguaging within specific contexts. Academic literature signals that teaching monolingually may no longer be the best fit for our changing communities; “the increasingly multilingual and multicultural nature of global exchanges is raising questions about the traditionally monolingual and monocultural nature of language education” (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 654). There is a need to recognise the “multilingual realities” of our ESOL learners’ lives (Simpson & Cooke, 2017). This research provides an opportunity to explore these themes within the specific context of reunited refugee families in Scotland. I will outline the context for family reunion in the following section.

### **British Red Cross Family Reunion Integration Service**

Family Reunion is a key legal route through which high numbers of refugees obtain legal protection in the UK with one in three refugees currently arriving in this way (British Red Cross, 2018), more than the combined total of refugees arriving through all other resettlement programmes. However, the BRC report that family reunion has received inadequate funding with programs

such as the Syrian Resettlement Programme receiving significantly more financial support. In response to this, the BRC established the Family Reunion Integration Service in September 2018. This is the first time that UK wide funding has been allocated for this specific need. The service is expected to support 3,000 people in eight locations in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland over the next three years providing much-needed specialist support for these families.

During the difficult process of coming to the UK and seeking asylum, families can be separated for extended periods, causing distress and anxiety for family members who may lose touch. BRC research highlights that due to the slow process of reunion “family reunion is a goal and aspiration that many live with for years, as they endure periods of extended separation and often anxiety about other family members’ safety” (Harris, 2015, p. 40). Being reunited with family members is recognised as key to well-being and is “an important step towards successful integration” (British Red Cross, 2018). Within the UK wide project, Glasgow has a specific focus on “rebuilding the family unit.” BRC research indicates that “the longer the period of separation, the poorer the outcomes when the family reunites” (Harris, 2015, p. 40). Arriving in the UK at different times can result in family members having significantly different experiences in terms of integration and access to support services. The first family member to arrive has additional time to adjust, to learn the language and to establish a life before the joining members (most usually wife/partner and children) arrive. In addition, all benefits are paid to the ‘sponsor,’ creating a financial dependency for the joining family members who are not granted refugee status in their own right. Discussions with BRC staff highlighted the significant challenges faced by women who arrive in the UK in this way including accessing support services and childcare responsibilities which can make it difficult to attend activities outside the home, putting them at an increased risk of isolation. New Scots highlights barriers to integration for women as: “lack of confidence; disrupted or no previous access to education; less time available, due to other caring responsibilities or lack of childcare; and family opposition to socialising, learning or working” (Scottish Government, 2018, p. 17). The BRC highlight that these barriers may be felt even more keenly by women whose partners have already settled in the host country.

At the time of writing, the current UK political crisis and the possibility of a no-deal Brexit threatens existing family reunion rules. A recent article in *The Guardian* revealed that the Home Office plan to end family reunion for children the day after Brexit “if the UK leaves the EU without a deal, the Dublin Regulation, which allows for the transfer of asylum-seeking children and adults within the EU to join family members, will no longer apply to the UK.” The same article warns that “if the government fails to protect family reunification, the consequences could be fatal” (The Guardian, 2019).



This research provides a close-up view of the challenges faced by these families and their integration experiences from day one. Glasgow has a strong partnership of ESOL providers working to support New Scots with language learning. Current ESOL classes provide opportunities for integration through inclusive approaches for people at all stages of their integration experiences with reunited refugee families accessing classes in the same way as other migrants. In the following section I will consider the ways in which the needs of these families may be different to other ESOL learners, particularly at the point of reunion and shortly afterwards.

### **Family Reunion and the Need for a Multilingual Approach**

Family members may have different experiences with language learning, and this can impact family dynamics as children may have more opportunities to integrate through school. In contrast, adults may have fewer opportunities to socialise and learn the language, particularly if they do not work outside the home. As a result, situations may arise where a parent has to rely on their child to communicate, creating parent-child role reversal which can place strain on relationships (Harris, 2015, p. 75). In some cases, parents may also encourage children to speak English rather than their home language, which can also lead to conflicting views of how/when to use each language. The BRC have highlighted the need for further research into the impact of language learning on family dynamics due to an increase in the numbers of reunited families accessing support services, suggesting that difficulties do not end at the point of reunion. BRC research also shows that women benefit from learning language with their children (Harris, 2015), a recommendation also made by The British Council (2017). These recommendations provide a starting point for this research.

In addition to the policy context and the BRC work, there is a significant body of academic research which recognises the benefits of multilingual learning (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008; Simpson & Cooke, 2017) suggesting a valid alternative which may be particularly beneficial within this context. In this paper I put forward the case for how an ecological, multilingual approach can better meet the needs of reunited refugee families in Scotland. I will begin by situating the research within the relevant literature which underpins my theoretical framework before presenting the pilot study and its findings.



## **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

My theoretical framework is informed by drawing together key literature on language ecology (Haugen, 1972, van Lier, 2004), multilingualism (Blackledge & Creese, 2010), translanguaging (García, 2010) and identity (Norton, 2013; Block, 2007; Canagarajah, 2011). In this section I will consider each of these in turn and their relevance for this study.

### **An Ecological Approach to Language Learning**

Haugen defines language ecology as “the study of interactions between any given language and its environment” (Haugen, 1972, p. 35). An ecological approach focuses on the interaction of factors within a given context, seeing language learning as connected to the physical and social context: “language only functions in relating these users to one another and to nature i.e. their social and natural environment” (Haugen, 1972, p. 35). It is also internal “part of ecology is psychological as the interaction with other languages is in the minds of bi and multilingual speakers.” Language is viewed as dynamic in nature rather than having defined, inflexible boundaries. Van Lier states, “in ecology, practice and theory are closely interrelated, dynamic and emergent, never finished or absolute” (van Lier, 2010, p. 1). Van Lier explains that “an ecological theory holds that if you take the context away, there is no language left to be studied [...] with language it’s context all the way down” (van Lier, 2004, p. 20). It considers the learning process, the actions of teachers and learners, “the multi-layered nature of interaction and language use, in all their complexity and as a network of interdependencies among all the elements in the setting” (van Lier, 2010, p. 2).

### **The Place of “Linguistic Hospitality” within an Ecological Approach**

By incorporating learners’ own languages and acknowledging their significance we provide “linguistic hospitality” (Phipps, 2012) for New Scots, supporting the ‘two-way’ integration process and countering some of the effects of the current UK hostile environment. The approach values learners’ existing linguistic resources allowing us to draw on what is already known and build on this by tapping into the interaction between languages which Haugen describes. As many ESOL learners already know several other languages, viewing these as a resource has significant benefits for language learning and confidence. Acknowledging these skills also enables us to reassure learners that they are not starting

at the very beginning of language learning and that the languages they already know have value and significance: “the meaning of a new piece of knowledge will emerge not from the syllabus but from the connections the learner will make with his/her own prior knowledge and experience” (Kramsch, 2006, p. 104).

### **Multilingualism and Translanguaging within an Ecological Framework**

We are beginning to see a gradual paradigm shift towards the inclusion of multilingual perspectives in foreign and second language learning environments (Prada & Turnbull, 2018). This shift enables new perspectives in terms of critically analysing monolingual teaching methods and considering new ways forward.

Translanguaging (García, 2010; Simpson, 2017) complements an ecological framework by promoting the use of learners’ full “linguistic repertoire” to complete tasks “without regard to watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named languages” (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015, p. 281). It gives scope for learners to co-construct meaning, mirroring the way languages are used outside the classroom. The fact that translanguaging occurs naturally among multilinguals, whether teachers teach it or not (Canagarajah, 2011; García & Kleyn, 2016; García & Wei, 2014) has led to its popularity. Cenoz and Gorter recognise translanguaging as “a recent and extremely successful concept in the area of bilingual and multilingual education that has gained wide acceptance in the literature in a short period of time” (2017, p. 910).

Translanguaging recognises that people bring their own knowledge and experience to the learning process; a key feature of an ecological approach. It places learners firmly at the centre of their own learning in “a system which orients toward the user rather than the linguistic code” (Simpson, 2017), it promotes a sense of self-worth that is not linked solely to English language level, echoing the priorities of New Scots in recognising refugees’ own skills.

### **Translanguaging as Practice**

It is recognised that further consideration of how to embed translanguaging in practice is needed as it has been criticised as pedagogically underdeveloped (Canagarajah, 2011, García & Kleyn, 2016). Further research is needed to establish how it may be implemented as a suitable teaching approach in a multilingual context (Lewis, Jones, & Baker, 2012).

In practical terms, guidance on how to implement translanguaging activities is presented in the CUNY-NYSIEB-guide (Celic & Seltzer, 2011). Simple adaptations can be made to incorporate activities such as empowering learners

to use their languages and increasing visibility of other languages in the classroom, for example, by learning to say ‘hello’ in each other’s languages (García & Wei, 2014). Other suggestions include learners working together in ‘language pairs’ using the language of their choice. Actively contrasting languages is also considered helpful to build vocabulary, improve reading comprehension and promote metalinguistic awareness, which is associated with enhanced language learning (Rauch, Naumann, & Jude, 2012).

### **Focus of the Current System**

Current support systems for refugees focus on getting people in to ‘the system’, to prepare people for work, college or study. These goals are seen as key to integration but are called into question within a recent report on refugee integration in Glasgow (Meer et al., 2018): “the governance of language provision becomes technocratic, managerial, or disciplined towards a single goal” (Wood & Flinders, 2014, p. 161) namely “to facilitate language training in order to build capacity and readiness to enter the labour market” (Meer, Peace, & Hill, 2018, p. 32). Such an approach measures success of language provision in terms of employability, contradicting the holistic approach laid out in New Scots.

For those newly arrived, such goals can seem out of reach as they adjust to their new lives. In the case of Glasgow, this new environment might be a significantly different climate and the reality that any English you might have learnt before arriving may not resemble the variety of English you hear in the local community. It is difficult to think about longer term plans when facing such profound change and in the case of reunited families these adjustments are taking place when families may be living together again after a period of many years. In this context an ecological, multilingual approach can be particularly beneficial to support those who have come to the UK under the most difficult of circumstances and are now placed within the system of our hostile environment. For many forcibly displaced persons, language is quite literally the only thing they may bring with them from their home, making its recognition incredibly important.

### **Power, Balance, and Identity**

In considering issues of power and identity, I turn to Norton’s construct of investment, which counters the idea that motivation is an intrinsic character trait of the language learner and ignores the significance of unequal teacher/learner power relations (Norton, 2013). Norton suggests that if learners invest in the

learning process, they understand the benefits of improved language skills and the symbolic (language, education, friendship) and associated material resources (capital goods, money) which in turn increase cultural capital and social power (Norton, 2013). Norton's construct recognises the connection between investment and identity in the classroom (Norton, 2013). The learning environment and approach to learning has significant implications for how invested learners feel in the learning process.

Norton recognises that “pedagogical practices in language classrooms can either constrain or enable students in their reimagining of possibilities for both the present and the future” (Norton, 2013 p. 17) and that “classroom practices can recreate subordinate student identities, thereby limiting students access not only to language learning opportunities but also to other more powerful identities” (Norton, 2013, p. 17). Classroom practices where English is dominant and privileged above all other languages may not be the best way to foster the ‘investment’ which Norton describes, and there are also implications for social justice. Language classes have an important role in adapting to the new context a process which Block refers to as “reconstruction and repositioning” (2007, p. 75). In the following sections, I will illustrate how these key themes were embedded in the pilot study and reflected in the findings.

## Methodology

### Research Design

The research is situated within an interpretivist paradigm. The aim of the study is to consider whether an ecological, multilingual approach to language learning is effective in supporting reunited refugee families in Glasgow. The main teaching study, which followed the pilot, took place over a period of six months engaging three families within their first few weeks of arriving in Scotland. The pilot study formed the first part of this research project and I will present the findings from this initial phase in the next section.

The aims of the pilot study were to deliver four two-hour learning sessions using translanguaging methodology with three women and their children who had recently arrived in Glasgow through the BRC Family Reunion Integration Service and to evaluate these teaching methods and materials before leading into the main study. The content of the learning sessions was decided in collaboration with the research participants in line with the principles of collaboration within the New Scots Strategy, allowing participants to co-design the project.

Data was collected via ethnographic observation during the learning sessions, field notes, participant feedback, and semi-structured interviews at the end of the pilot. The BRC provided interpreters to assist with ensuring informed consent and the interviews. Key findings were checked with research participants with the support of an interpreter. At the end of the pilot, the data was analysed using the six-step process of thematic analysis laid out in Braun and Clarke (2006). The interview data, my own observations and fieldnotes will be discussed under Key findings and Discussion.

## **Learning Sessions**

The study incorporated translanguaging methodology with learners working together and using their full linguistic repertoire to complete tasks, participants worked with family members in their own language to do this. The characteristics of a co-learning relationship were embedded in the study... (Brantmeier, in García & Wei, 2014, p. 113):

- all knowledge is valued;
- reciprocal value of knowledge sharers;
- care for each other as people and co learners;
- trust;
- learning from one another.

Our learning environment was based on:

- shared power among co learners;
- social and individualised learning;
- collective and individual meaning-making and identity exploration;
- community of practice with situated learning;
- real world engagement and action.

## **Participant Profiles**

### **Participant L**

L is from Eritrea and speaks Tigrinya. She has a ten-year-old daughter. They were separated from L's husband for five years before reuniting in Glasgow two weeks before the pilot. L attended Primary School in Eritrea for three years then was unable to continue due to the war.

### **Participant U**

U is a Tamil speaker from Sri Lanka. She is here with her husband and two children aged 10 and 17 who also attend the sessions. U finished secondary school in Sri Lanka and learnt English as a foreign language for a few years at

school. Their family was separated for several years and reunited in Glasgow a month before the pilot study.

### **Participant K**

K is from Sudan. She arrived in Glasgow two weeks before the project started. She speaks Arabic and attends learning sessions with her two sons aged 10 and 12. They were separated from her husband for several years before coming to Glasgow.

## **Key Findings and Discussion**

### **Day One: Situating the Learning**

I had very little information about the participants before the pilot project. Two days before the first meeting the BRC confirmed a few key details which helped me to plan the first session. I knew the families came from Eritrea, Sudan, and Sri Lanka, the ages of their children and how long they had been in Glasgow. I did not know how much English they knew or how much education they had been able to access prior to coming to Scotland. With this in mind I planned the first session would cover the aims of the research and a few introductory activities to illustrate the kind of tasks I hoped to do in the sessions with the hope of engaging the learners' *investment*. I wanted to find out what the participants wanted from the sessions so that I could make them as tailored and collaborative as possible. The BRC provided interpreters for the last hour of the first session to enable me to explain informed consent and to make sure the participants could ask any questions.

As the participants had been in Glasgow for just a few weeks, it was necessary for me to meet them at the BRC office for the first session so I could travel with them to the University and show them the way. Three women and four children (aged 10–17) were waiting for me when I arrived at the BRC. Two of the husbands had accompanied their wives and children to the BRC and they helped me check names on a list. I noticed how nervous and uncomfortable the women and children looked. None of the group could speak more than a few words of English and outside each family group the participants did not share a language which limited their interaction with each other.

The first session focused on the practicalities of getting from the BRC office in central Glasgow to the University. This also served the purpose of introducing participants to bus numbers, the location of the bus stops and how to use the travel tokens provided by the BRC and it situated the learning within the context of Glasgow. As the participants followed me to the bus

stop, I tried to chat to them and explain where we were going using maps provided by the BRC and a lot of body language. We arrived at the School of Education and stopped at the multilingual ‘welcome’ sign at the entrance to identify all the languages we knew, taking time to try to pronounce each other’s. I wanted to give everyone a sense of the University being a place where all languages were welcome as a starting point for our project. This activity also allowed me to get an idea of whether participants could read in their own language before we reached the classroom. Negotiating the bus journey to and from the class proved to be a significant challenge and formed an important part of the learning within the pilot study. I also accompanied participants to the bus stop after our sessions and waited with them for the bus, but reduced this gradually to ensure a balance between support and creating dependency. Learning to use the bus, including recognising the bus number, timetables, tickets, the location of the bus stop are major barriers for those newly arrived not only in terms of language but also cultural differences such as maps, buying a ticket, and money. Support at this stage proved to be vital as were the travel tokens as the participants were not yet receiving benefits and would have struggled to cover the bus fare (£4.60 for an all-day ticket). Without the travel tokens, it is doubtful the participants would have been able to attend.

Working with the participants in real-life situations and physically being on the bus with them allowed us to use language in an authentic, practical way. It allowed me to understand first-hand how people cope in such situations and this informed the content of the learning sessions. It took the learning beyond language into more practical life skills. Participants decided they wanted to focus on such practical topics to help them with their daily lives. Via interpreters I asked participants whether this approach was useful, and they confirmed that these were topics they needed. U told me in the group interview: “Yes, it’s very practical.” The Tamil interpreter continued: “They’re going on the bus and they don’t know how to buy a ticket or how to talk to the driver... for example, I’m going to this place. I need a ticket to... which type of ticket?” Cultural differences were also highlighted as the participants told me in Sri Lanka return tickets do not exist and thus they expected to buy one ticket for each single journey.

Van Lier describes the classroom as a ‘niche’ and recognises that although this can be a safe environment, it can create a “barrier between education and the rest of living” (Little, 1991, in Kramsch, Levine & Phipps, 2010, p. 38). This is a two-way process, “an ecological approach is where what happens in the classroom responds to aspects of the context and the context is also created out of learning, teaching and language use” (Kramsch, Levine, & Phipps, 2010, p. 8). Such practical topics may be covered in community ESOL classes and by incorporating multilingual approaches the learning can be made more



accessible at the early stages. Teachers may not see the connection between recognising heritage languages and how to bring this into the classroom in an active way.

### **Mapping Single Lexical Items across Languages to Build Confidence**

I incorporated learners' own languages in simple ways to enhance meta-linguistic awareness and make the learning accessible at this early stage. This included establishing learners' interests and building multilingual activities around the topics they suggested. Food and cooking proved to be a topic of universal interest and one that, we agreed, would help in their daily lives. This topic gave us plenty of material to work with. We began by introducing vocabulary for individual food items using images, relating each item back to learners' own languages and bearing in mind the ideas about language comparisons noted earlier. We made a note of vocabulary, sorting pictures into piles of 'I like' and 'I don't like.' Subsequent sessions allowed us scope to work on shopping, money, and prices with roleplays with the children taking roles such as shopkeepers.

Connecting new words in English to lexical items in learners' own languages helped to provide clarity and make the learning inclusive. I created simple worksheets with images of each item and space for the participants to record vocabulary in both English and their own language. As these worksheets were simple, they were also suitable for the children in the group. At first, I questioned the use of such materials as I wanted to ensure the sessions were fun and interactive rather than having everyone sit and write but I noticed that participants made notes in class and I wanted to support this. Participants told me that having a written record gave them a chance to take their learning away with them and as they were working with their family members they could also practise together at home. Identifying the equivalent word for each item and recording it in a structured way allowed us to slow the pace to suit everyone in the group. In the interviews, I asked if this was helpful and L told me "Yes, it's kind of like a dictionary," U agreed, "It's very practical." Incorporating all the learners' languages took participants a few sessions to get used to. When we managed to get something right in each other's language everyone seemed pleased and although progress was slow, setting up activities in this way from the start laid a solid foundation for subsequent sessions.

## Learning to Facilitate Translanguaging in Languages I Do Not Speak

One of the main questions I encountered in conversation with other teachers concerned how we can use a multilingual approach if we do not speak the same languages as the learners. ESOL classes in Scotland are typically diverse and multilingual. This is a key point to address if teachers are to become confident using translanguaging regardless of how many different languages are spoken in class and regardless of our knowledge of these languages. The pilot saw me teach using Tamil, Tigrinya, and Arabic when I do not know more than a few words in each of these languages and with a few adjustments I found this to be possible and productive. As García states, “A teacher who uses translanguaging as pedagogy participates as learner” (García & Wei, 2014, p. 92). I became a learner within the group, facilitating and guiding the sessions but relying on the participants for input in their own languages, working with family members to complete tasks. I could not always understand what was being said, it gave me less control and although this felt strange at the start, we all adapted and committed to this way of working. Participants had a more equal and active role within the learning process as a result, it shifted the balance of power away from English and away from me.

These multilingual practices drew on the participants full linguistic resources and all of mine as I related each word back to Tamil, Tigrinya, and Arabic with the use of online dictionaries and images on the screen. I relied on the participants to let me know if the definitions were correct, which also gave them a more active role in the sessions. I needed to know a few key words in each language from the very beginning and preparing a few basic phrases and flashcards helped me to facilitate the initial sessions. Despite feeling that my knowledge of Tamil, Tigrinya, and Arabic was severely lacking this also became a leveller, placing us all on a more equal footing as we tried to communicate in bits and pieces of each other’s languages. I asked learners how they felt about this and U told me: “It’s comfortable for us.”

García provides strategies for how to overcome these issues; suggesting that learners support each other with the teacher trying to meet learners halfway: “The teacher makes an effort to make herself understood using Spanish, and the students try to make themselves understood using English. In so doing, more English is being added to the linguistic repertoire of the students, and more Spanish to that of the teacher’ (García, 2014 p. 112). This puts the ‘two-way’ process of New Scots into practice in a very real sense, taking it away from policy and into everyday life as a collaborative process. Monolingual teachers can find ways to incorporate translanguaging into their teaching: “It shows students how to privilege interaction and collaborative dialogue over form and thus develops their voice” (García, 2014, p. 112).

### **‘Linguistic Hospitality’ and Participant ‘Investment’**

Norton’s construct of investment was central to the project. I knew the challenges the participants faced to come to class, particularly as we started the pilot project at the beginning of February when it was already cold and dark at the time when participants needed to travel to the sessions. During the interviews at the end of the pilot I emphasised how well everyone had coped with this. L told me: “Yes, because it’s a good experience for us and we’re hoping to learn more, that’s why we have to do that. I come because this is helping me.” Their attendance and enthusiasm to come to the sessions despite a challenging journey echoes the ‘investment’ that Norton describes (Norton, 2013) and was evidenced further by my observations of their participation in the sessions, their enthusiasm, their patience and respect for each other. In bringing learners’ own languages into the sessions I observed that the participants appeared comfortable and relaxed. They appeared to enjoy taking turns to tell each other words in their languages, we looked for similarities in each other’s languages and when we found something in common everyone exclaimed “oh, same!”

By the third session the women seemed comfortable with the way we were working together. Partway through the session L removed her headscarf and I noticed the contrast between her body language in this session (relaxed, laughing, sitting close to me while we worked together) and the first time we met in the BRC waiting room when she sat alone in the corner, making very little eye contact and looking uncomfortable. She laughed frequently at my poor pronunciation of Tigrinya and corrected me patiently many times. García found the use of learners’ own language “enhanced personal interaction” (García, 2014, p. 81) and I also had a strong sense of this. Hearing how difficult it was for me to get the pronunciation of their languages right provided a direct example of the effort and repetition needed to learn a new language. During the interviews L told me: “You and me we’re the same. You struggle with Tigrinya and I struggle with English.” Although the context and the need for each of us to learn each other’s language was vastly different, I felt it was a real success of the project that a sense of symmetry was evident to the participants and that L felt we faced similar challenges in learning each other’s language.

L’s ‘investment’ in the project was clear to me when she started to initiate interaction with me in Tigrinya. On leaving the second session, she touched my hand and said, “ciao ciao” (‘goodbye’ in Tigrinya), this became our way of saying goodbye at the end of all subsequent meetings. I had the sense that she was trying to remind me of the words she had taught me in Tigrinya, and I was careful to always respond in Tigrinya rather than English.

At the next session L arrived 30 minutes early, to find me setting up the classroom, she smiled widely and greeted me confidently in Tigrinya with

“Selam!”. I was pleased that she seemed comfortable enough to spend an extra half an hour with me before class started with only the few words of Tigrinya and English that we shared. L continued to coach me in Tigrinya as we set up the room together, boiled the kettle, put out snacks, and learnt the words for each item in each other’s language. L’s increased confidence was significant to me as I knew she had had the fewest opportunities to attend formal education and the least opportunities to learn English in the group. During the interview L told me the sessions were important to her, evidenced by her willingness to spend additional time in the learning environment. Our sessions prioritised what she *could* do rather than what she could not. I felt that reaching this level of comfort had happened more quickly than it might have done had we worked solely in English.

L’s role as co-collaborator was highlighted during the interviews when I asked if she thought my Tigrinya was improving and she told me “you’re doing ok” and continued that she thought it would get better one day. We acknowledged the time it takes to learn a new language. Despite our vastly different opportunities to access education, she could see how it was equally difficult for me to learn Tamil, Tigrinya, and Arabic as it was for her to learn English, and I felt this boosted her confidence with coming to our learning sessions. This style of learning suited her, she *invested* in our way of working together and found confidence in her role as co-collaborator and as a teacher of Tigrinya.

### **Learning Language Together to Support the BRC Aim of ‘Rebuilding the Family Unit’**

Once families are reunited in the host community, children are more likely to have opportunities to integrate, make friends, and learn the language through school but their mothers may be left at home with limited opportunities to socialise. Families also need time to reconnect with each other and repair familial bonds after separation. Therefore, by creating learning sessions to include both mothers and children I hoped to create a space in which they could learn together and interact away from the family home, supporting each other with language learning. Having learning sessions together also removed the need for additional childcare as the children could attend the sessions as an after-school activity.

The families appeared to enjoy the time spent together in the sessions. In the interviews U told me that she found it helpful that her daughter could help her in class when she did not understand something. I also observed that some mothers lacked confidence with written activities, waiting to see what their children had written, then copying their work. Children also translated

for their mothers in class, which the participants explained happens in their daily lives and I questioned the effect of this on the mothers' confidence and whether this reaffirms this dynamic.

In the interviews, participants felt "fine" or "ok," as they admitted, to work with people of different ages in the sessions. L told me that she "doesn't have strong feelings either way." The family who attended most regularly felt it was good for them to learn as a family but that they preferred to learn with older children: "This age groups will be fine compared to kids." U told me this was because "Older age group people they will talk more so they would like to improve their communications, that's their priority and this age groups people she is thinking will be helpful." U continued, "They can grasp quickly compared to younger age groups so they can pick up what you're teaching very easily." U also told me she appreciated her daughter being in the class with her: "My daughter is picking up very quickly and I can learn from her."

Support from family members outside the class was also vital. On the first day I met U's and K's husbands at the BRC as they helped them to travel to the BRC offices and I also received text messages and phone calls from them during the pilot study to check meeting times and arrangements. This support enabled us to work together to support everyone to come to the sessions and countered the barrier of lack of support from family members highlighted in New Scots (Scottish Government, 2018, p. 17).

### **Identity, Power, and Voice**

The BRC provided interpreters for the first session which proved essential to explain the research and to ensure that participants understood how the data would be used so they could give informed consent. Interpreters also assisted with the interviews at the end of the pilot but were never present during the learning sessions. Working with interpreters for the interviews allowed me to ask participants about their views of the research in their own language which, I felt, underpinned a multilingual approach and enabled more detailed discussion. I questioned how I could authentically capture the voices of the people I was working with if their words were always spoken and interpreted by a third party. The dynamics were also altered when the interpreters returned for the fourth session. I felt we (the participants and I) became very comfortable with each other and had got used to our limited ways of communicating across languages. When the interpreters returned for the interviews it felt slightly intrusive to have a third party through whom we needed to communicate, and it made me question the balance of power during the interaction.

During the interviews, the participants told me how important language learning was in their lives, and how the ability to speak English gave them power and more control. L told me: “The most important thing is to learn the language because in this country we can’t communicate if we don’t have the language. This class is really useful for us.” The participants told me the sessions were helping them with their daily lives. L told me “This is all useful today learning the names for food, for everyday items and cultural things.” Everyone seemed keen to participate in the activities and it seemed that this was enhanced by using learners’ own languages. U told me “Tamil and English together is better.” I was encouraged that despite my lack of knowledge of Tamil, this was still helpful: “We prefer to have Tamil as well in the class because if you just use English, we don’t understand what you’re speaking so we are not able to follow you, it’s better if you use Tamil.” Participants also felt that having more participants in the class would help them to work together in their own languages outside the family group. U told me: “If there are more Tamil speakers we can work together.” L stated: “From the beginning the class is good. It’s helping me like a dictionary between Tigrinya and English,” adding that she liked the approach and the way of teaching. U also said: “Yes, it’s comfortable for us to use our language, it’s useful for us to use Tamil in the class because that helps us to learn quickly, what are you telling us in English. It is useful for us to know the exact definition.” L also found this helpful: “It’s very useful to explain things in our language... it’s very good for explanation it’s really good to use my language and English here.”

As part of the group interview, we revisited the aims of the research and the reasons for working multilingually. I asked learners how they felt about this and they told me “It’s very useful, it’s a bit like having a dictionary.” None of the participants have started other English classes yet and it will be helpful if they do, as I think this will allow them to see the differences between other classes and our multilingual sessions.

## Conclusions

The pilot study consisted of only four sessions, yet it highlighted some of the benefits of an ecological, multilingual approach to language learning for reunited families. The data evidences that this was welcomed by the participants. By incorporating learners’ own languages into our own instructional practices and supporting families to learn together we can ensure language learning classrooms reflect the multilingual realities of Scotland’s communities. Such

an approach enables better connections between academic literature, policy, and practice, allowing a more holistic approach and bringing learners into the centre of the collaborative learning process.

Support is needed to enable people to gain confidence in their own abilities to function within the new community, including practical support with getting to know the city and local travel. This could be supported by orientation style language classes in the first few weeks which allow scope for taking the learning outside the classroom to practise in real world situations such as travelling on the bus, buying a ticket and shopping in the supermarket. Building these essential survival skills at this crucial part of the integration process builds confidence and reduces the risk of isolation at the point when it is needed most. It is challenging to meet these needs quickly within current ESOL provision due to demand outstripping what is available.

By harnessing existing skills and recognising the significance of identity in language learning we can create an improved sense of balance and power in the language learning process which brings learners into the heart of co-collaboration in line with the New Scots strategy. Facilitating such multilingual learning sessions can bridge the gap to connect reunited families with the local context, supporting these New Scots to feel part of the community from day one through a two-way approach which also allows further skills development for those working in language teaching.

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Sarah Cox

**Wird uns ein ökologischer, mehrsprachiger Ansatz dabei helfen,  
das Sprachenlernen von zusammengeführten Flüchtlingsfamilien  
in Schottland zu unterstützen?**

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel wird die Beziehung zwischen akademischer Literatur, Sprachpolitik und Sprachlernpraxis im spezifischen Kontext von Familien untersucht, die durch den Familienzusammenführungsdienst des Britischen Roten Kreuzes in Glasgow zusammengeführt

wurden. Dargestellt werden die Ergebnisse der Studien zum Lehrprozess, der in Zusammenarbeit mit Teilnehmern in den ersten Wochen nach ihrer Ankunft in Schottland stattfand. Ziel der Untersuchung war es herauszufinden, ob ein mehrsprachiger, ökologischer Ansatz beim Sprachenlernen in diesem Kontext effizient ist. In Anlehnung an die Prinzipien der Translingualität und unter Berücksichtigung der Nutzung des gesamten „sprachlichen Repertoires“ durch die Probanden (vgl. Garcia, 2010) ergründet der Artikel, in Bezug auf den von Norton (2013) vorgeschlagenen Begriff der „Investition“, die Schlüsselfragen des Selbstständigmachens und der Identität in der Klasse. Die gewonnenen Ergebnisse ermöglichen es, Schlussfolgerungen hinsichtlich der Gestaltung des Gleichgewichts der Einflüsse in der Klasse und der Bedeutung der Akzeptanz der ersten Flüchtlingsprache, die als ein wichtiges Element des Lernprozesses gilt, zu formulieren.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Zweitspracherwerb, Mehrsprachigkeit, Translingualität, Familienzusammenführung