

Exploring ESOL teachers' perspectives on the language learning experiences, challenges, and motivations of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the perspectives of ESOL teachers on the language learning experiences, challenges, and motivations that refugees and asylum seekers have when they learn the language of the host country. This information was collected using an online questionnaire, which was completed by 72 teachers from different institutions throughout the UK teaching English to refugees and asylum seekers. The results revealed teachers' perspectives on the main language learning challenges (e.g. lack of first language literacy) and motivations (e.g. accessing education/jobs) experienced by these learners, as well as the main challenges faced (e.g. lack of equipment) and techniques used (e.g. tailored materials/methods) by our respondents. The present paper presents these findings and any correlations found between the teachers' responses and their background or their students' profile, and discusses some implications for language teachers, teacher educators, and policy makers to support refugee students' language learning more successfully.

Keywords: refugees and asylum seekers; language learning; motivation; ESOL; teachers' perspectives

1. Introduction

Our society is experiencing the highest indexes of asylum-seeking ever: armed conflicts, natural disasters, famine, or human rights violations are some of the causes urging the fleeing of millions of people worldwide. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR 2020), the number of forcibly displaced individuals worldwide increased from 41.1 million in 2010 to 79.5 million in 2019, which implies a rise of almost 50% in just ten years. Twenty-six million of them were people seeking refuge across borders, with over half coming from Afghanistan, South Sudan and, above all, Syria.

Asylum seekers —not ‘refugees’ until their claim for asylum is accepted by the government of the host country— are forced to flee confrontations or persecutions and may never be able to return to their country of origin. In the EU, 676,300 people applied for asylum in 2019, 11.2% higher than 2018, and 297,000 were granted protection or refugee status, with the main destination countries being Germany (23.3%), France (19.6%), and Spain (18.8%) (Eurostat, 2020). In the UK, 35,566 applications for asylum were recorded in 2019, 21% more compared with 2018, with 3,651 from unaccompanied minors —individuals under 18 who arrive in the destination country unaccompanied by adults—, 19% higher than 2018 (British Refugee Council, 2020). According to UNHCR (2020), at the end of 2019, there were 133,094 refugees in the country and 61,968 pending asylum cases.

These figures show the need to support the restructuration of these individuals. In order for refugees to integrate into the host country, it is vital for them to learn the new language upon arrival. Consequently, it is crucial for teachers and policy makers to understand the specific needs and difficulties of this group of learners, as their background and experiences distinguish them from other groups of migrants and make

their second language (L2) learning process different (Buchanan et al., 2018). Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore the perspectives of language teachers working with refugees and asylum seekers in order to understand more about the experiences, challenges, and motivations that these learners have when learning the language of the host country.

2. Factors affecting the resettlement of refugees and asylum seekers

2.1. Socio-emotional factors

Refugees often face precarious psychological and/or physical conditions, as they are forced to abandon their places of origin for dangerous circumstances, and their motivation to live in a new country is lower than that of those who voluntarily do it (Chiswick & Miller, 2001; Wehrle et al., 2018). They face stages of instability as they transition through pre- and post-resettlement periods (Martin, 1994; Thommessen & Todd, 2018).

Upon arrival in the host country, apart from having to apply for safety and resettlement, refugees face the challenge of having to develop new skills, learn rapidly the language of the host country, and adjust to its culture (Constant et al., 2009; Yakushko et al., 2008). Re-establishing themselves in a new setting may aggravate their pre-migratory traumas (Newman et al., 2018), particularly if the new circumstances are challenging: they may face family separation, limited resources, accommodation issues, racism, abuse, and violence (Baynham, 2006; Baranik et al., 2018; Phillips, 2006). A large body of research (Adkins et al., 1999; Baran et al., 2018; Baranik et al., 2018; Baynham, 2006; Benseman, 2014; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Eisenbruch, 1991; Fazel et al., 2012; Mollica et al., 1987; Montgomery & Foldspang, 2008; Newman et al., 2018; Porter & Haslam, 2003; Yakushko et al., 2008) reveal that these

psychological aspects lead to high levels of anxiety, depression and maladaptive outcomes, which affect the integration of refugees.

The psychological issues created by resettlement may be progressively overcome if the refugee is able to develop feelings of being part of the host community. In order to surpass the “acculturative stress”, Adkins et al. (1999) suggest that they need to be able to communicate in the L2. In fact, among the factors affecting the integration of refugees and asylum seekers are linguistic proficiency, education, housing issues, and reception from the host community (Cebulla et al., 2010; Mesch, 2003; Sorgen, 2015). Therefore, limited L2 proficiency is a major barrier to effective integration (Benseman, 2014; Fennelly & Palasz, 2003) and may act as a signal of foreignness, which can lead to discrimination and differentiation (Esser, 2006).

Language has been regarded as the main motivation for the economic and social integration of immigrants in their host country (Bleakley & Chin, 2004; Carliner, 1981; Chiswick & Miller, 1995; Dustmann & Van Soest, 2002; Esser, 2006; McManus et al., 1983). Linguistic proficiency provides the displaced person with the feeling of dignity and self-sufficiency necessary not only for day-to-day interactions, but also for dealing with official and legal issues, as having to rely on translators for these procedures may increase their feeling of vulnerability and isolation and inhibit their independence (Lindsay & Seredyńska-Abou-Eid, 2019). Other motivations to improve their L2 are employment prospects, engaging in everyday life activities, and accessing services and benefits (Higton et al., 2019).

2.2. Language learning and teaching

English stands as an indispensable tool for refugees to integrate, access full-time formal education, and work in English-speaking countries (Stevenson, 2020). However,

language acquisition not only is lengthy and difficult, causes tension, and requires time and effort, but for asylum seekers is often also subjected to the following factors:

- *Age*: L2 proficiency often declines with age at migration (e.g. AlHammadi, 2016; Hakuta et al., 2003).
- *Literacy level*: learning the L2 is easier when refugees are literate in their first language (L1). Being unable to read or write in their L1 will have significant implications for their L2 literacy skills (Benseman, 2014; Windle & Miller, 2012; Woods, 2009), as for refugees without a solid L1 education, it may be extremely difficult to learn how to read in English and study subject content (Lee, 2017).
- *Educational background*: the heterogeneity of refugee students and their diverse educational background and experiences imply a challenge both for themselves and their teachers (Benseman, 2014; Woods, 2009), as many asylum seekers have been exposed to limited or no education prior to their arrival.
- *L1 distance*: acquiring the L2 tends to be easier when it is similar or “linguistically closer” to the migrant’s L1 (AlHammadi, 2016; Chiswick & Miller, 2001, 2005; Isphording & Otten, 2014).

In order for refugees to have better prospects to overcome these barriers and achieve proficiency in English, access to language classes is a core component in their L2 learning process (Foster & Mackley, 2017; Morrissey et al., 1991). ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) is the term used for the English language courses offered for students whose first language is not English and who need this language to communicate in their daily life (Foster & Mackley, 2017). ESOL programmes aim to effectively foster language provision in the resettlement of this vulnerable and highly diverse group of people in need of protection.

Nevertheless, refugees also face challenges with regards to accessing ESOL courses. The cost of lessons and travel, the eligibility for subsidized provision, the lack of time to attend classes, and the limited number of hours offered per week (Morrice et al., 2019) are other factors that may hinder the process of acquisition (Abou-Khalil et al., 2019).

In addition, their language learning necessities might be extremely diverse. In some cases, refugees are skilled professionals eager to acquire prompt communicative competence to be able to work in the host country. More often than not, however, ESOL learners are pre-literate in their mother tongue and have had their schooling experience disrupted, so they need time and assistance to develop basic oracy and literacy skills to progress adequately (Stevenson, 2020). On the other hand, while some studies specifically highlight the importance of oral skills in the refugee settlement experience (Blake et al., 2019), others suggest that both oral skills and reading comprehension abilities are critical for their full integration into society (Al Janaideh et al., 2020).

This diversity makes the task of ESOL educators a challenging one, as they need to assess their learners' needs with the ultimate purpose of enabling them to be autonomous, which entails helping them take control of their learning not only in class, but also in ordinary situations (Benson, 2001; Bozkurt & Arslan, 2018; Lee, 2014; Little, 1996, 2007). Hence, teachers would benefit from specific professional training to be able to adapt their teaching to the profile and needs of refugees and design tailored courses to teach the new language and boost the acquisition of skills (Kersten, 2020). Instructors can find it difficult to use tasks which satisfy mixed necessities, particularly because of the constant arrival of new students who may enrol in their classes at any time, but few programmes actually train teacher applicants to deal with these situations

and meet the needs of these students (Baecher et al., 2019; Cummins, 2015; Miles & Bailey-MacKenna, 2016; Miller et al., 2005).

Teachers are also expected to adapt their course content to manage the socio-emotional factors mentioned in the previous section and consider learners' prior experiences to understand them better and know what kind of language they may need in each context (Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2016). Graham-Brown (2020) suggests “bringing the outside to the classroom” to help students develop linguistic tools for discussion and critical thinking. For this author, ESOL teachers should not be conceived as mere language teachers, but as facilitators echoing and managing real everyday situations in the lives of refugees in the UK.

Therefore, ideal ESOL programmes should embrace ethnically inclusive practices that include a social and emotional respect for the mother language and culture (Baecher et al., 2019). More inclusive resources and courses—which could include anti-racist aspects and problematic social realities about these communities—might promote experiential learning and equality and accompany learners in their inclusion in the target community (Lee, 2016). Sometimes, the use of the mother tongue in the classroom in a selective and responsive way might also be helpful: after all, language is one of the crucial components of ethnic identity (Kang, 2006; Mogli & Papadopoulou, 2018) and, when used along the additional language, may empower the learner to shape his “own dual identity” (Tadayon & Khodi, 2016, p. 131). Teaching of and through the L1, in addition to the host language, could enhance the minorities' integration (Gezer, 2019).

This section has presented the main factors that affect the resettlement of refugees and asylum seekers in the host country, which heavily depends on them being able to learn the new language. Thus, it is crucial to listen to the perspectives of ESOL

teachers about the language learning experiences, challenges, and motivations of refugee students to understand their needs better and be able to provide an appropriate support to make their language learning process and, ultimately, their integration, more successful. With this in mind, the present study aims to address the following research questions:

- (1) What are the perspectives of teachers with regards to the main language learning challenges that RAS face when learning English?
- (2) What are the perspectives of teachers with regards to the main motivations for RAS to learn English? What are the main reasons why they lose motivation?
- (3) What are the main challenges that ESOL teachers experience when teaching RAS students? What are the most successful techniques they use to teach them?

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

A questionnaire was used to explore the research questions mentioned in the previous section. A large number of studies (e.g. Campbell et al., 2018; Chung et al., 2018; Kazoura et al., 2017; Obschonka et al., 2018) have made use of original or existing questionnaires and surveys to investigate refugees' socio-emotional issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorders or factors contributing to emotional wellbeing, but not their language learning experiences and challenges upon arrival in the host country. Therefore, we decided to design our own questionnaire and, in order to do so, we first conducted a series of informal interviews with 20 teachers working with RAS at different charities and colleges. We asked them about their experiences, challenges, and concerns when teaching this specific group of learners. Following the information gathered and previous literature on approaches to needs analysis in language learning

(e.g. Brindley, 1989; Richards, 2001; Seedhouse, 1995; Tudor, 1996; Tzotzou, 2014), we created a 20-item survey with very simple multiple-choice questions to pilot with a group of 20 RAS attending a local charity. However, we found that these participants were unable to answer the questions, even with help from their teachers and translations, as they were unfamiliar with concepts such as grammar or pronunciation and not aware of learning strategies or teaching techniques due to their lack of exposure to educational and language learning contexts.

Consequently, we decided to gather this information directly from teachers working with RAS, as they would be able to comment on the language learning challenges of their students as well as their own experiences and teaching techniques with this specific group of learners, which we were also interested in. With this purpose in mind, we created an online questionnaire and sent it to the three main institutions that offer language learning support for RAS in the UK: Further Education (i.e. colleges), local authorities (i.e. councils) and third sector providers (i.e. charities). We sent it to 100 of these institutions throughout the UK and received responses from 72 teachers.

The survey contained 40 questions: 35 closed-ended questions (including multiple-choice, multiple-answer, and rating questions), and 5 follow-up open-ended questions allowing respondents to add any information that may have not been covered in the options provided in the previous question. These items were organised in sections aimed at answering the aforementioned research questions, as follows:

(1) The first section was aimed at understanding the background of our teachers (age, gender, type of institution they work for, type of contract, teaching qualifications, years of overall teaching experience, years teaching RAS) and the profile of their RAS students (age, gender, nationality, proficiency level).

(2) The second section included questions about the language learning difficulties of their RAS students.

(3) The third section asked teachers about aspects of RAS students' motivation.

(4) The last section focused on the challenges that teachers face with RAS students and the most successful techniques used to teach them.

3.2. Data Analysis

The information derived from the questionnaire provided three types of data, so different statistical analyses had to be used to suit the different data types. Some questions provided data measured on a continuous scale (e.g. age, years of teaching experience), which were analysed as binary variables using *t*-tests. Other questions provided categorical data, mostly binary (e.g. gender: M/F, Yes/No questions), including multiple answer questions, which were also treated as binary items (i.e. box checked or not checked). These questions were analysed using χ^2 -tests. Multiple-choice items, where respondents had to select one answer from several alternatives, were also treated as ordinal scales, with the top choice given the top rating value. These questions were analysed using Mann-Whitney *Z*-tests for independent groups and Wilcoxon *Z*-tests for dependent groups (i.e. same respondents in each group).

For each question, potential correlations between the responses and specific teacher or student characteristics were analysed. Due to the high number of correlations that could be calculated for each question, especially those that contained several items, results are only reported if they are significant with a *p*-value of 0.01 or less. This *p*-value was set to reduce the chances of finding correlations or differences that do not exist in the population from which the sample was drawn, but are merely the result of the random sampling of a large amount of data. This strategy worked with the present

data since the majority of tests conducted produced p -values well above 0.01 (i.e. non-significant with a low likelihood of a real effect going undetected), while the significant results were often at a level well below the specified p -value (e.g. $p = 0.001$), increasing confidence that substantial effects were being detected.

3.3. Participants

The sample consisted of 72 teachers (54 females, 18 males) from different UK institutions that teach English to RAS: 15 teachers from charities, 18 teachers from councils, and 39 teachers from colleges. The teachers' age ranged from 20 to 80 years (mean = 45.89; SD = 13.46).

Respondents' overall teaching experience ranged from 1 to 58 years (mean = 16.13; SD = 11.39), with 80% of the sample having 25 years of experience or less and 20 years being the most frequently reported teaching experience ($n = 10$) followed by 1 year of experience ($n = 8$). The individual reporting of 58 years of experience can be considered an outlier. Regarding their teaching experience with RAS, the respondents' experience ranged from 1 to 34 years (mean = 6.86; SD = 7.36), with 60% of the sample having taught RAS for fewer than 6 years.

With regards to respondents' qualifications, 78% of the sample had a higher/further education language teaching qualification. The proportion of respondents with a further/higher education qualification did not vary across type of institution, but these teachers were significantly older and had more overall teaching experience and more experience with RAS than those with no further/higher education qualification. The majority of the sample were under contract (78%), with the remaining 22% reporting being volunteers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was a larger number of volunteers in charities (56%) than in colleges (10%) or councils (12%).

Finally, the number of RAS students in the teachers' classes ranged from 1 to 24 (mean = 9.17; SD = 5.58), with a total of 660 students over the 72 classes (see Figure 1 for the distribution of student numbers over the 72 classes). Class size in our sample did not vary with type of institution. However, teachers on paid contracts had, on average, larger classes than volunteers ($t = 4.21$, $df = 70$, $p < 0.001$), with contracted teachers having 10.5 students in class on average (SD = 5.27) and volunteers having 4.5 students on average (SD = 3.97).

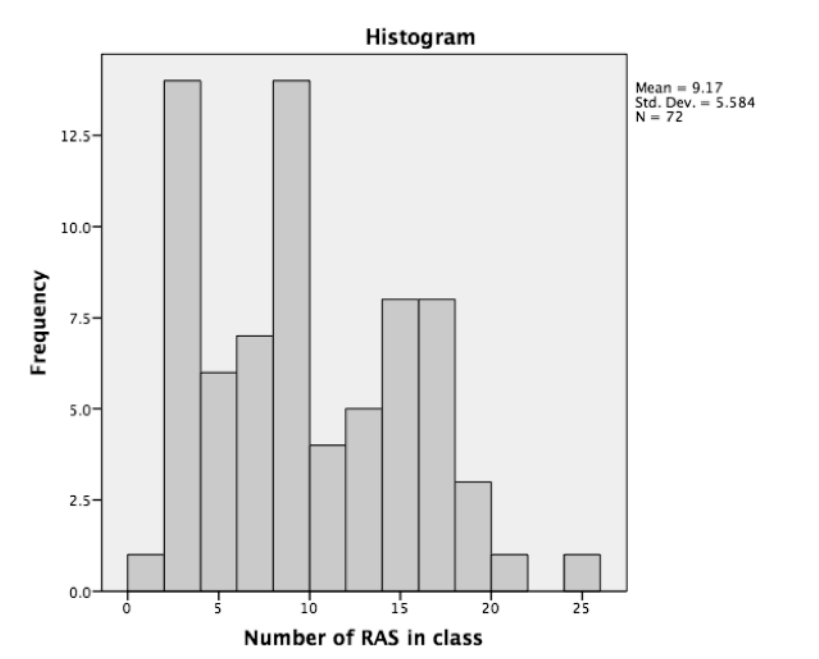


Figure 1. Distribution of student numbers over the 72 classes.

3.3.1. Profile of RAS students

To be able to interpret the information collected, it was important to understand the profile of the RAS students represented in our sample, so teachers were asked to provide information about their students. Regarding the age of the students, 44.45% of the teachers ($n = 32$) reported teaching young RAS (up to 18 years old) and 55.55% ($n = 40$) reported teaching adult RAS (18 years of age or older). The majority of adult RAS in our sample attended charities and councils (57%), whereas most young RAS attended

colleges (81%) ($\chi^2 = 11.14$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.004$). In terms of gender, 65.9% of the students taught by our teachers were male, with 31.94% of the teachers ($n = 23$) having exclusively male students in class, compared to 5.55% ($n = 4$) having exclusively female students. The percentage of males in the classes varied by type of institution, with colleges having classes with the highest proportion of males (77% of males in colleges, 52% of males in charities, 47% of males in councils). Regarding their proficiency level, 76.39% of the teachers ($n = 55$) reported teaching students with an A1- or A1 level and 23.61% ($n = 17$) reported teaching students with an A2 or B1 level.

With regards to nationality, all the respondents reported having students from different nationalities in their class, except for 16 of them, who reported having exclusively students from Syria. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the students' nationalities in the 72 classes in our sample, with Syria being the most representative nationality (57 teachers reported having students from this country in their class), and Ghana and Angola the least common nationalities (only 2 teachers reported having learners from each of these countries in their class).

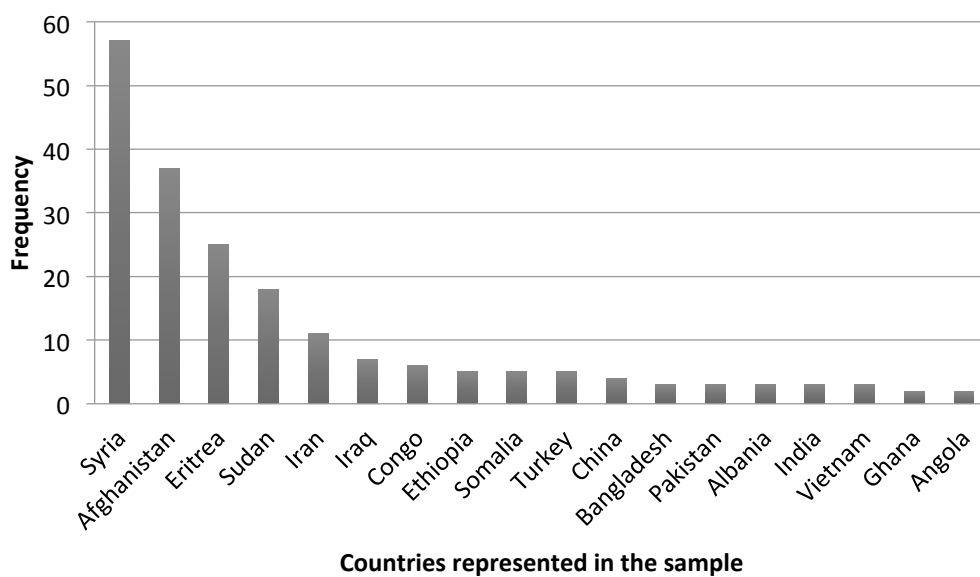


Figure 2. Representation of RAS students' nationalities in the 72 classes of the sample.

4. Results

This section presents the main findings obtained from the questionnaire, organised in three different subsections based on our research questions: (1) questions that enquired about the teachers' perspectives on the language learning difficulties of the students; (2) questions related to the motivation of the students; and (3) questions that enquired about the challenges that teachers face with RAS and the most successful techniques to support them.

4.1. Language learning challenges of RAS students

The first set of questions was aimed at finding out the teachers' perspectives on the main language learning difficulties that RAS face when they learn English. We first asked the respondents to rate the main reasons why RAS students struggle in their language learning process from three options provided: Low level of English, Lack of literacy in their L1, Cross-cultural differences. 80% of the respondents rated *Low English level* as the most important reason for their learning difficulties, with 66.7% of them choosing *Cross-cultural differences* as the least important reason. *Lack of L1 literacy* was rated as intermediate in importance, with 47% of respondents giving this reason the middle rating of 2. The differences in mean ratings (see Table 1) were highly significant ($\chi^2 = 77.8$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$). The comparative analyses conducted showed that there was no correlation between the ratings and student or teacher characteristics, which reveals a high degree of consensus in our respondents' ratings, independently of their background or teaching setting.

Table 1. Rating means and standard deviations of the main reasons why RAS struggle in their language learning process.

	Mean	SD
Low English level	2.75	0.55
Lack of L1 literacy	2.08	0.73
Cross-cultural differences	1.35	0.51

To investigate further their learning difficulties, respondents were asked to rate the language areas (grammar, spelling, vocabulary, pronunciation) and the language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) that RAS students generally struggle the most with. Regarding language areas, a clear majority of respondents (65%) rated *Grammar* as the most difficult for RAS, with *Spelling* receiving the next highest rating of difficulty, followed by *Pronunciation* and *Vocabulary* with identical mean ratings (see Table 2). *Grammar* was rated as significantly more difficult than *Spelling* ($Z = 3.0$, $p = 0.003$) and *Spelling* as significantly more difficult than *Vocabulary* and *Pronunciation* ($Z = 3.25$, $p = 0.001$; $Z = 3.46$, $p = 0.001$, respectively). There were no correlations between the ratings and student or teacher characteristics.

Table 2. Rating means and standard deviations of the most difficult language areas for RAS.

	Mean	SD
Grammar	3.47	0.89
Spelling	3.04	0.86
Vocabulary	2.46	1.03
Pronunciation	2.46	1.07

A similar analysis was applied to the ratings of difficulty of the language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking). Again, there was consensus about the skill that RAS struggle the most with, with 70% of respondents giving *Writing* the highest rating of difficulty, followed by *Reading*, *Listening*, and *Speaking* (see Table 3 for mean

ratings). *Reading* was rated as significantly less difficult than *Writing* ($Z = 4.55, p < 0.001$), but as significantly more difficult than *Listening* and *Speaking* ($Z = 2.90, p = 0.004; Z = 3.73, p < 0.001$, respectively). The lowest ratings of difficulty were given to *Listening* and *Speaking*, which did not differ significantly. As with the language areas, ratings of the language skills were unrelated to student or teacher characteristics, which suggests that the instructors in our sample, independently of their background or teaching context, are in agreement with regards to the most and least difficult language areas and skills for their RAS students.

Table 3. Rating means and standard deviations of the most difficult language skills for RAS.

	Mean	SD
Writing	3.61	0.70
Reading	2.86	0.91
Listening	2.37	0.93
Speaking	2.11	1.09

4.2. Motivation of RAS students

The survey also included questions enquiring about the teachers' perspectives on the main reasons why RAS are motivated to learn English, why they lose motivation, and how teachers motivate them. Regarding the main motivations for RAS to learn English, respondents rated the importance of the three options provided: Education/jobs, Life in the community (e.g. going to the doctor, shopping, using public transport), Communication (e.g. socialising, making new friends, maintaining relationships). *Life in the community* and *Education/jobs* were rated as the most important reasons by similar proportions of respondents (56.9% and 55.6%, respectively), and

Communication received significantly lower ratings than *Life in the community* or *Education/jobs* ($Z = 3.67, p < 0.001$; $Z = 3.38, p = 0.001$, respectively; see Table 4 for mean ratings). The comparative analyses conducted showed that *Life in the community* was rated as a significantly more important motivation by teachers of adult RAS than by teachers of young RAS ($Z = 3.44, p = 0.001$), but no other correlations between the ratings and student or teacher characteristics were found.

Table 4. Rating means and standard deviations of the main motivations for RAS to learn English.

	Mean	SD
Education/jobs	2.42	0.73
Life in the community	2.46	0.69
Communication	1.94	0.80

A follow-up open-ended question was included to allow teachers to add other important reasons for RAS to learn English, and 8 of them mentioned being able to support their children at school as a main motivation (100% of these respondents teach adult RAS), with a further 8 mentioning applying for citizenship.

Respondents were also asked to rate the main reasons why RAS students lose their motivation from the four options provided: They get tired, They struggle to understand something, They have other issues related to their current situation (e.g. education/work, health, living arrangements, immigration status), They are affected by traumatic experiences that have occurred in their lives. *Their current situation* was rated as the most important reason why RAS lose motivation by 71% of respondents and had a significantly higher mean rating than the other three reasons ($Z = 4.79, p < 0.001$), which did not differ significantly from each other (see Table 5 for mean ratings). The comparative analyses conducted showed that *Their current situation* was rated as the

most important reason for motivation loss by significantly more teachers of adult RAS than teachers of young RAS ($Z = 3.5, p < 0.001$). In addition, respondents working for councils were significantly more likely to rate *Past traumatic experiences* as an important reason for motivation loss ($p = 0.007$).

Table 5. Rating means and standard deviations of the main reasons why RAS lose motivation.

	Mean	SD
Their current situation	3.49	0.90
Traumatic experiences	2.71	1.08
Struggling to understand	2.51	1.06
Getting tired	2.35	1.05

A follow-up open-ended question allowed teachers to include other important reasons why RAS lose motivation in their language learning: 10 mentioned the lack of educational background and academic skills, 5 mentioned family and childcare demands, and 4 mentioned the lack of progress students feel they make.

The next question asked respondents to rate the most effective techniques they use to keep RAS students' motivation from the options provided: Using a variety of materials/activities, Creating a good rapport, Taking a break when they struggle with something, Moving on to something else when they struggle with something, Encouraging them to keep trying. The results revealed that 75% of the respondents chose *Good rapport* as the most effective way of maintaining students' motivation, followed by *Variety of materials/activities* (39%). The mean ratings of the effectiveness of the five methods were significantly different (all $p_s < 0.009$; see Table 6). Student and teacher characteristics were unrelated to the ratings.

Table 6. Rating means and standard deviations of the most effective techniques to keep RAS students' motivation.

	Mean	SD
Good rapport	4.58	0.88
Variety of materials/activities	3.99	1.09
Encouragement	3.51	1.14
Taking breaks	3.01	1.32
Moving on to something else	2.46	1.37

4.3. Teachers' challenges and successful techniques with RAS students

The final set of questions in the survey was aimed at finding out how prepared the respondents were to teach this specific group of learners and the most successful techniques to support them. The first item asked the teachers how aware they were about the cultural background and language differences of their RAS students. Equal numbers of respondents indicated that they were either *Very aware* (45.8%) or *Somewhat aware* (45.8%) of their cultural background, with 8.4% of them indicating being *Not very aware*. A similar pattern of responses was observed for their awareness of the language differences of RAS in their class, with 50% of the respondents reporting being *Very aware*, 40.28% reporting being *Somewhat aware*, and 9.72% reporting being *Not very aware*. From the comparison analyses conducted, it was revealed that teachers with more overall teaching experience and more experience teaching RAS reported being more aware of the cultural background and language differences of their students.

Respondents were also asked how prepared (in terms of training and professional experience) and equipped (in terms of the resources and support available from their institution and the government) they were to meet the specific needs of RAS students. With regards to how prepared they were, 19.44% of the respondents reported being *Very prepared*, 65.28% reported being *Somewhat prepared*, and 15.28% reported

being *Not very prepared* to meet the needs of RAS students. In terms of how equipped they were, respondents were less positive in their answers, with 15.28% of the respondents reporting being *Very equipped*, 59.72% reporting being *Somewhat equipped*, and 25% reporting being *Not very equipped* to meet the needs of RAS students. The comparison analyses showed that teachers working for charities, mostly volunteers, were proportionately more likely to choose *Not very equipped* than teachers in councils or colleges ($\chi^2 = 11.82$, $p = 0.02$).

Respondents were also asked about the techniques they use to teach RAS more efficiently. The most commonly reported technique was the use of visual aids (97% of respondents), followed by simplifying language (93%), using gestures and body language (89%), repetition and paraphrasing (86%), slowing down speech rate (79%), pronouncing words clearly (64%), using written aids to support oral explanations (60%), and using a translator or interpreter (29%). Therefore, the only technique not reported by the majority of respondents was the use of a translator or interpreter. The popularity of the mentioned techniques was unrelated to student or teacher characteristics.

We were also interested in finding out how ESOL teachers think that RAS students could learn English more successfully, so respondents were asked to rate the following procedures: More exposure to English, L1 support (e.g. translated materials, teaching assistants/interpreters), One-to-one support, Materials/methods tailored to their specific needs. 63% of the respondents chose *Tailored materials/methods* as the most useful procedure to help RAS learn English more successfully, followed by *More English exposure* (51%). Both of these methods were considered significantly more helpful than *One-to-one-support* and *L1 support* ($\chi^2 = 60.60$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$; see Table 7 for mean ratings). The comparative analyses showed that those teachers with

more teaching experience with RAS were more likely to rate *More English exposure* as a helpful procedure ($p = 0.003$). With regards to student characteristics, *More English exposure* was rated as a more helpful procedure by teachers of adult RAS than by teachers of young RAS ($Z = 3.13, p = 0.003$). No other correlations between responses and teacher or student characteristics were found.

Table 7. Rating means and standard deviations of the most helpful procedures for RAS to learn English more successfully.

	Mean	SD
Tailored materials/methods	3.37	0.94
More English exposure	3.15	1.04
One-to-one support	2.92	0.93
L1 support	1.97	1.01

In addition, a follow-up open-ended question was included to allow respondents to add other procedures they considered helpful, and 15 respondents (20.83%) indicated that interacting with native speakers and socialising/doing activities in the community would help RAS learn English more successfully. This response is related to the second most popular choice of the previous question (i.e. *More English exposure*), which reiterates the importance of language exposure for successful language acquisition.

We also wanted to find out whether teachers actually use materials adapted to the specific needs of RAS students. Interestingly, when respondents were asked about this, 75% of them reported using teaching materials adapted for RAS students, but 91% of them stated that they had to create or adapt these materials themselves. Those teachers reporting using adapted materials had more teaching experience ($t = 3.66, p < 0.001$), were more likely to be under contract than volunteering ($\chi^2 = 15.43, p < 0.001$), and were more likely to have a further/higher education teaching qualification ($\chi^2 = 6.86$

$p = 0.009$) than those reporting not using materials adapted to the needs of RAS students.

A final open-ended question asked the respondents to mention other problems they found when teaching RAS students. The main issue raised by 45% of the teachers was students' lack of L1 literacy and limited/no exposure to education prior to arriving in the UK, which makes these learners particularly hard to reach. Respondents also mentioned cultural differences (25%), which sometimes lead to miscommunication and misbehaviour in class, and the lack of attendance of some of the students (20%). There was no correlation between these responses and specific teacher or student characteristics.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study was conducted to explore the perspectives of ESOL teachers in the UK on the language learning experiences, challenges, and motivations that RAS have when they learn English. More specifically, it was aimed at investigating (1) their perspectives on RAS students' language learning challenges, (2) their perspectives on the students' motivations to learn English and the reasons why they lose motivation, and (3) the challenges teachers face with RAS students and the most successful techniques they use to support them.

We used an online questionnaire to collect data on the aforementioned issues from teachers working at the main types of institutions that provide language support for RAS in the UK: Further Education (i.e. colleges), local authorities (i.e. councils), and third sector providers (i.e. charities), so as to have a representative sample of their experiences and perspectives. The 72 responses received revealed a great diversity with regards to the teachers' background as well as the profile of their RAS students.

However, despite this diversity, there was a consensus among our respondents in most questions, independently of their background or that of their students. In relation to language learning difficulties, teachers were in agreement that the two main reasons why RAS struggle in their language learning were related to the students' prior language background: their low level of English and the lack of literacy in their L1. The former is not surprising if we consider the low level of English of the students represented in our sample (i.e. 76.39% of the teachers reported teaching students with an A1- or A1 proficiency level, with the remaining 23.61% teaching students with a B1 proficiency level at the most). To overcome learning difficulties in this scenario, several authors suggest that the use of the L1 might prove helpful (Kang, 2006; Mogli & Papadopoulou, 2018; Gezer, 2019). Interestingly, when respondents were asked about successful techniques and procedures to support students' learning, only 29% of the teachers thought that the use of a translator or an interpreter would be helpful, and using L1 support in class was rated as the least helpful procedure to learn English more successfully. This may be due to a lack of awareness or training of the teachers with regards to what research reveals to be helpful for this profile of language learners, or may be related to the fact that 77.78% of the teachers reported having students from different nationalities in their class, in which case using the L1 may seem like an impractical resource. Instead, the teachers reported using several techniques that involve adapting their language use to the learners' proficiency level (i.e. simplifying language, repetition and paraphrasing, slowing down speech rate, and pronouncing words clearly) and helping with their comprehension (i.e. using gestures and body language, and using visual and written aids to support oral explanations).

On the other hand, the lack of L1 literacy issues reported by the teachers are connected with the language skills they rated as the most difficult for their students:

reading and writing. This is consistent with the findings from other studies that suggest that being unable to read or write in the learners' L1 has significant implications for their literacy skills in the L2 and academic success (e.g. Benseman, 2014; Lee, 2017; Windle & Miller, 2012; Woods, 2009), and that young readers of an L2 use skills from their L1 to solve problems they may encounter (Gottardo et al., 2020). Specific obstacles to non-literate students include the use of complex written materials that regularly do not reflect their cultural experiences, the use of homework and independent work, or the excessively fast rhythm of some classes, which, inevitably, leave them behind (Morrice et al., 2019). Nonetheless, further research is needed in this area, as very few studies have investigated the levels of language and literacy achieved by refugees in the host country (Al Janaideh et al., 2020). Bigelow and Tarone (2004) highlight the importance of research on L2 learners who are not literate in their L1 in order to fully understand the way this variable affects L2 acquisition.

With regards to the language areas that RAS students struggle the most with, our respondents rated grammar and spelling as the most difficult for these learners, which is not surprising if we consider the lack of literacy and prior education of RAS, as these areas involve the learning of rule-governed aspects of language (Cummins, 2008). This finding can also be related to the issue of linguistic distance between the learners' mother tongue and the target language, as acquiring an L2 is easier when it is linguistically similar to the migrants' L1 (AlHammadi, 2016; Chiswick & Miller, 2001, 2005; Isphording & Otten, 2014). However, as it can be seen in Figure 2 above, the main L1s represented in our student sample have grammars and alphabets that are not linguistically close to English.

Our results on the issue of language learning difficulties, which reveal that the language areas that RAS students struggle the most with are grammar and spelling (in

comparison with vocabulary and pronunciation) and the most difficult language skills are writing and reading (in comparison with listening and speaking), can also be explained by Cummins (2008). This author suggests that, while L2 conversational fluency (which mostly depends on vocabulary and pronunciation, and speaking and listening skills) develops more quickly, learners will need at least five years to develop academic language proficiency (which requires the knowledge of grammar and spelling and the use of reading and writing skills).

Turning now to our results on motivation, the responses of the teachers were consistent in revealing that the main motivations for RAS to learn English were related to fulfilling basic/practical needs to integrate into the receiving country, such as securing education or work and being part of the community (e.g. going to the doctor, shopping, using public transport), with the latter being significantly more important for adult refugees than for young refugees. Similar results have been found by Cebulla et al. (2010), Sorgen (2015), and Warriner (2007), who also stress the importance of factors such as education or employment for the successful integration of RAS in the host country, and by Ivlevs and Veliziotis (2017), who found that asylum seekers, especially young people, are more willing to receive education and training to counteract their labour market disadvantage.

Despite these important motivations, teachers mentioned that the current situation of their students (e.g. issues related to education/work, health, living arrangements, immigration status) impacted negatively in their motivation to learn the L2, especially for adult refugees, possibly because of the responsibility of family demands and the fact that refugee minors receive more financial and personal support from the government than adult refugees. Benseman (2014) also found that factors such as family care and employment responsibilities, or even gender barriers, impact their

ability to learn the language and adapt to the culture of the host country. In addition, respondents in our sample working for councils also associated students' motivation loss with previous traumatic experiences, probably as a result of the type of relationship they establish with refugees as part of their job. Other studies (Adkins et al., 1999; Baran et al., 2018; Baranik et al., 2018; Baynham, 2006; Benseman, 2014; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Eisenbruch, 1991; Mollica et al., 1987; Montgomery & Foldspang, 2008; Newman et al., 2018; Porter & Haslam, 2003; Yakushko et al., 2008) also support the finding that traumatic situations have a negative impact in the ability of refugees to learn the new language and communicate successfully. In relation to the role of the teachers in this aspect, the majority of the respondents mentioned that creating a good rapport in the classroom is the most effective way of maintaining the motivation of these learners. Therefore, although RAS face many language-related and socio-emotional difficulties to learn the L2, it was revealed that they have strong motivations to acquire it and improve their quality of life, and the help and encouragement from their teachers is an essential support to enable them to succeed and overcome these barriers.

With regards to the challenges faced by teachers and successful techniques to support RAS, a finding that deserves attention was their rating of the use of materials and methods tailored to the students' needs as the most useful procedure to help RAS learn English more successfully. Kersten (2020) also emphasises the importance of tailored courses to teach the target language and boost the acquisition of skills. Nevertheless, even though 75% of the respondents reported using materials adapted for the needs of RAS, 91% of them stated that they had to create or adapt these materials themselves as the materials available have not been created with the specific needs of

these students in mind. This reveals the need for open access language learning resources that are specifically designed to meet the needs of RAS.

Receiving more English exposure was also ranked as an important procedure to help RAS students learn the language more successfully. Previous research highlights the importance of quantity and quality of language input for successful L2 acquisition in migrants and refugees (Lindner et al., 2020; Paradis, 2011; Paradis et al., 2017). Yet, ESOL provision in the UK does not seem to be coping with the demands of many refugees: the drastic cuts in the funding for ESOL in England during the last decade cannot guarantee linguistic proficiency among refugees (Refugee Action, 2019). This, as well as economic or familiar motives —particularly in the case of women with childcare responsibilities—, have led many of them to seek charity provision classes for further L2 exposure, which can be an important complement, but should not be regarded as a replacement for accredited ESOL courses (Refugee Action, 2019). This picture is reflected in our sample, as 46% of our teachers were from councils and charities, institutions that offer free ESOL courses, and have a larger number of volunteers (56% of our teachers working at charities reported being volunteers).

However, attending courses at these organisations can provide these students with informal opportunities to practise conversational skills and put them in contact with members of the L2 (Mogli & Papadopoulou, 2018; Stevenson, 2020). Relatedly, 21% of our teachers specifically raised interacting with native speakers and socialising/doing activities in the community as a helpful procedure for RAS to learn English more successfully. This would also help them to develop cultural awareness, which was mentioned as an issue when teaching RAS by 25% of our teachers, as it sometimes leads to miscommunication and misbehaviour in class. Being aware of cultural differences is a key factor for the successful integration of RAS in the host

country (e.g. AlHammadi, 2016; Baranik et al., 2018), so an important part of their education and acculturation process should be intercultural understanding, and not just language learning.

This should also apply to teachers, some of our respondents indicated not being very aware of the cultural backgrounds and language differences of their students, especially those teachers with less overall teaching experience and less experience teaching RAS. Moreover, some of them also reported not being well prepared (in terms of training and professional experience) nor well equipped (in terms of the resources and support available from their institution and the government) to meet the specific needs of RAS students, especially volunteer teachers and teachers working for charities, which is not surprising considering the limited funding and resources that charities generally have. Previous literature emphasises the importance of teachers' awareness of the backgrounds and needs of RAS to appropriately support their education and integration (e.g. Humpage, 2009; MacNevin, 2012; Matthews, 2008; McBrien 2005; Theilheimer 2001), but several studies confirm the scarcity of training programmes that qualify teacher applicants to meet the needs of refugee students (Baecher et al., 2019; Cummins, 2015; Miles & Bailey-MacKenna, 2016; Miller et al., 2005). Tailored training would not only prepare ESOL teachers and volunteers to meet the specific needs of RAS students, but would also raise awareness about their linguistic and cultural differences to provide an inclusive language learning experience, including teaching non-, pre- and semi-literate students, as well as literate students.

To conclude, the language learning experiences and challenges of RAS revealed in the present study calls for L2 learning theories and teaching approaches that are specifically proposed for this group of learners, as their background and needs are different from other migrants (Buchanan et al., 2018), so the theories and approaches

that have been established for them may not necessarily apply to RAS. L2 research needs to recognise the multiple contexts in which language learning occurs and the multiple characteristics of language learners (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004). Future research is needed to address this issue, as it is outside of the scope of this study.

In addition, the heterogeneity of RAS students and their diverse educational backgrounds and experiences entail a challenge for teachers and policy makers. This highlights the importance of their awareness of the language learning needs of RAS, as appropriate support cannot be offered without the understanding of their specific profile and needs. The present study has contributed to the understanding of the language learning experiences, challenges, and motivations of RAS in the UK, as revealed by the perspectives of the ESOL teachers in our sample. Further research in this area, which also considers the perspectives of the students, is needed so that RAS are offered tailored support to develop their language skills more effectively and can access education and jobs and integrate into the community successfully, which will ultimately benefit the host country.

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