Transnational Education Review
January-June 2026
Volume: 4, No: 1, pp. 33 - 446
ISSN: 2753-8656 (Print) | ISSN: 2753-8664 (Online)
journals.tplondon.com/ter

Received: 7 August 2025 Accepted: 27 October 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/ter.v4i1.3265

Stories of ESOL in Suffolk, England

Amna Smith[1]

Abstract

This study explores the stories and learning journeys of learners of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) experiencing forced displacement. Suffolk is a region often overlooked in migration research but resettled over 4,000 refugees in 2022 (Suffolk Refugee Support, 2023). Refugee ESOL learners encounter significant challenges due to limited ESOL provision and the absence of a national ESOL strategy. Employing narrative inquiry, the research foregrounds personal accounts from learners of ESOL. Participants span a wide educational spectrum yet share a desire for integration and improved life opportunities. This study alerts us to Suffolk's rural geography as a barrier to effective ESOL access, limiting opportunities for language practice and social connection. These intermediary findings, drawn from the first phase of a two-year data collection process, underscore the urgent need for responsive ESOL strategies and inclusive support systems tailored to the realities of rural resettlement. The findings signify how individual characteristics of those experiencing displacement influence the different barriers they encounter.

Keywords: *ESOL, refugee, migration, narrative, England*

Introduction

This article presents excerpts from the lived experiences of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) learners, ESOL tutors, and staff working for a refugee assistance charity. ESOL refers to English language instruction for individuals residing in English-speaking countries who are learning English as an additional language (Hann et al., 2021), and it frequently serves refugee, asylum-seeking, and migrant populations. In UK discourse, the terms "refugee" and "asylum seeker" are often conflated, despite critical legal distinctions.

However, not all ESOL learners are refugees or asylum seekers. A refugee is someone who has fled their country due to conflict or a well-founded fear of persecution and has been granted protection in another state. In contrast, an asylum seeker is an individual whose application for refugee status remains under review (UNHCR, 2023). Sadly, media rhetoric can distort public understanding and policy responses to displaced persons, contributing to negative perceptions and, in some cases, hostility toward displaced populations (Tong & Zuo, 2019). Such misperceptions have tangible consequences for safety, wellbeing, and access to support services for refugees and asylum seekers (Rosen & Young, 2016). Mead et al. (2023) state that the world-wide refugee problem has a long history, which will continue into the foreseeable future. Within this context, refugees and asylum seekers in England face multiple barriers to accessing ESOL provision. "Barriers" are defined as any factor that obscures, restricts, or undermines meaningful learning opportunities (Choudhry, 2022). In this study, these barriers are explored through the personal narratives of those navigating the ESOL system in Suffolk, offering insight into the structural and interpersonal challenges that shape their educational journeys.

[1] Amna Smith, University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom. Email: a.b.c.smith@soton.ac.uk

NATECLA (National Association for Teaching English and other Community Languages to Adults), founded in 1978, has long advocated for improved ESOL provision in England (Hann et al., 2021). Yet, despite a campaign for a unified strategy in 2016, there remains no comprehensive national ESOL policy in England. Responsibility for provision in England is fragmented across departments such as the Home Office, Ministry for Housing and Communities, and Department for Work and Pensions, each operating through separate and uncoordinated funding streams (Graham-Brown, 2018). This disjointed approach to ESOL has led to inconsistent provision, conflicting priorities, and unclear entitlements for both learners and educators (Allsopp, Sigona & Phillimore, 2014). At the time of writing, in early 2026, ESOL has significant implications for migration and employment outcomes in the UK. Policy changes to skilled worker language requirements (Gov.UK, n.d.) and language requirements for citizenship have highlighted the substantial impact ESOL has on migration and the globalised workforce in the UK.

Programmes like Step Ahead and Step Ukraine, funded by the Home Office take steps to foster inclusion of migrants who need vital language skills (Smith, 2025), with an aim of attendees gaining employment at the end of the course. However, in the absence of a national strategy, this focus risks excluding learners with caregiving responsibilities, health conditions, or non-employment goals (Brown, 2021). While language skills are key to integration (Ager & Strang, 2008), employment-driven curricula often fail to reflect the diverse needs of refugee and asylum-seeking populations (The Bell Foundation, 2021). The rationale for this study comes from Suffolk resettling over 4,000 refugees between 2022 and 2023 (Suffolk Refugee Support, 2023), yet there is a notable lack of research on ESOL learners in the region. National studies, such as Higton et al. (2019), have largely overlooked East Anglia, and widely only 16.2% of England's estimated 1,000 ESOL providers were represented, raising concerns about the generalisability of findings. Much existing research remains short-term or government-led, with limited engagement with learner experiences (Choudhry, 2022). Further research is needed to understand the implications for refugee integration, education and employment in the UK.

Access to ESOL in England is shaped by complex eligibility criteria tied to age, immigration status, and benefit entitlement (Allsopp et al., 2014). This stands in contrast to Scotland and Wales, where national strategies have fostered more equitable provision to ESOL (Parker, 2021; Slade & Dickson, 2021; Dunkerly Scourfield et al., 2006). Since February 2022, the arrival of Ukrainian refugees has further broadened entitlements. Government schemes such as Homes for Ukraine and Step Ahead introduced targeted support not extended to other asylum-seeking groups, deepening inconsistencies in access (Rural Refugee Network, 2022). Between 2022 and 2023, approximately 1,000 Ukrainians arrived in Suffolk (Suffolk Refugee Support, 2023), yet research continues to prioritise northern regions, leaving East Anglia notably underrepresented (Higton et al. 2019, Sidaway, 2022). Previously, ESOL studies have concentrated on urban areas, namely London and the midlands, traditional refugee settlement areas, while Suffolk's expanding ESOL population remains largely overlooked. This geographic disparity underscores the urgent need for a coordinated national ESOL strategy that centres learner agency and reflects the realities of diverse, often rural, communities. In addition, robust longitudinal studies that engage with learners and offer partnerships are essential.

Theoretical Framework

This section introduces the theoretical frameworks guiding the study. The first framework is Brown's adapted (2021) *Emancipation Continuum*, which examines ESOL provision as a pathway to societal inclusion. The Emancipation continuum highlights systemic barriers that limit learners' agency, agency defined as their ability to reflect on and act within their circumstances (Schwandt, 2001). Brown outlines three models of integration: assimilation, integration, and inclusion, showing how each shapes social structures that either empower or constrain immigrants. The second framework is Choudhry's (2022) sociological concepts framework, used to explore barriers at the individual level. This considers how personal histories, circumstances, and migration pathways influence learners' access to and experience of ESOL provision. The framework highlights how barriers often intersect and may be overarched by a broad concept, for example patriarchy (Choudhry, 2022).

Research questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions.

1. How do ESOL learners from a refugee or asylum-seeking background, living in Suffolk, encounter barriers to learning at an individual level? What are the stories surrounding these barriers?

2. How do ESOL teachers and refugee support staff narrate the barriers that their learners encounter? What cannot be mitigated at a societal level?

3. What are the goals and aspirations of the learners, and which factors at the societal and individual level facilitate the learners' goals and aspirations?

Methodology

This study adopts a constructivist approach, recognising multiple realities shaped by lived experience. Narrative inquiry, specifically, narrative interviews, were used as the primary method of data collection. Polkinghorne (1988) states that interviews are effective for narrative inquiry, as narratives are context-sensitive and their form and content are responsive to aims and conditions of the interview situation (p.164). As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) emphasise, the interviewer's presence and responses shape how stories are told. Moreover, narrative inquiry has been used by researchers working in migratory contexts (Pérez-Milans & Patino-Santos, 2013). Given my dual role as ESOL practitioner and researcher, my own experiences potentially influenced its direction. Years of teaching refugees and observing learners from a refugee background afforded me insight and knowledge of the significant challenges faced in and out of the ESOL classroom.

All participants in the study were recruited through purposive and convenience sampling. Staff participants were selected based on job role, and learners were selected based on their English proficiency and willingness to participate. While the study aimed to include learners with very low English and literacy levels, this was beyond its scope. An exclusion criterion of E1 was applied. This is equivalent to the Common European Framework of Reference for

languages level A1 or basic user of a language (Cambridge English, n.d.). Recruitment occurred through the researcher's professional network, with additional learners identified via snowball sampling, e.g. tutors sharing the study with their students. All participants were asked to complete a short survey on Microsoft forms prior to participating.

Interviews were conducted with five ESOL tutors. All tutors were female, based in England, and most were aged over 55. All had graduate-level education and prior teaching experience, including primary, secondary, ESL, and ESOL. Four tutors had worked with the charity organisation for 4 to 5 years; two had broader experience spanning over five or ten years. The sample was relatively homogenous in terms of gender, ethnicity, and educational background, representative of this employment sector, but a noted limitation. Moreover, Patino-Santos (2018) states that investigating teachers in a formal interview might be received by the teacher as an assessment of their work. The researcher was mindful of this throughout the interview process.

Ten support staff from a charity were interviewed, all female, aged 18 to over 55. All were based in England, though several were originally from Brazil, Switzerland, Germany, and Afghanistan, contributing cultural and linguistic diversity. Educational backgrounds of the staff participants were strong, with most holding degrees or master's qualifications. Their roles spanned charity management, resettlement support, advice services, and coordination. Some had formal ESOL or education training (e.g. CELTA, PGCE), while others came from non-teaching backgrounds. This diversity enriched the study by highlighting non-academic factors shaping ESOL engagement.

Seven ESOL learners participated, four female, three male, aged 18 to 54. They originated from Ukraine, Kosovo, Iran, and Afghanistan, with national identities including Ukrainian, British, Albanian, Iranian, Kurdish, and Afghan. Languages spoken included Kurdish, Albanian, Dari, Pashto, Polish, Russian, and English. Five participants were married with children, and education levels ranged from disrupted education to university degrees. This diverse group offered rich insight into the linguistic, cultural, and educational dimensions of ESOL learning in Suffolk.

This study used thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012, 2022), to identify and interpret patterns within interview data. This approach involves ongoing reflection and revision of codes as understanding evolves (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Widely used across disciplines and not tied to a specific theoretical framework, thematic analysis has faced critique but is valued for its flexibility and rigour when applied systematically (Howitt, 2016). An experiential, reflexive thematic analysis was used to interpret participant meaning, following Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2022) guidelines. This included the following steps: 1) data familiarisation, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, 6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Due to the researcher's experience as an ESOL practitioner, reflexive thematic analysis was used, as Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest that the researchers' observations and interpretation of patterns influence how the research generates themes. Moreover, with this method of analysis, the researcher's subjectivity can be seen as a resource rather than a bias (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Reflexive notes and regular discussions with a research assistant were used to examine how my practitioner experience shaped questioning, rapport, and theme development.

Coding was conducted in Nvivo and then manually in Excel, with interview excerpts used to generate codes and themes. Marshall, Rossman and Blanco (2021) suggest that codes could come from varied sources, including the literature review, the actual words and behaviours in the data and the researcher's own creative insights. This was the logic used to inform the thematic analysis. Codes were created by the content of the interview, for example 'asylum claim', the literature review, for codes such as 'cultural expectations', which may be implied during interview, and the researcher's insights for example the code of 'factor's outside of the learner's control' such as length of time to process and asylum claim. Codes were grouped into broader themes, signifying the overarching barriers to ESOL learning, such as "Life circumstances." Fig 1 illustrates the themes presented during the interviews with learner and tutor participants. This chapter mainly focuses on findings from the learner and tutor interviews.

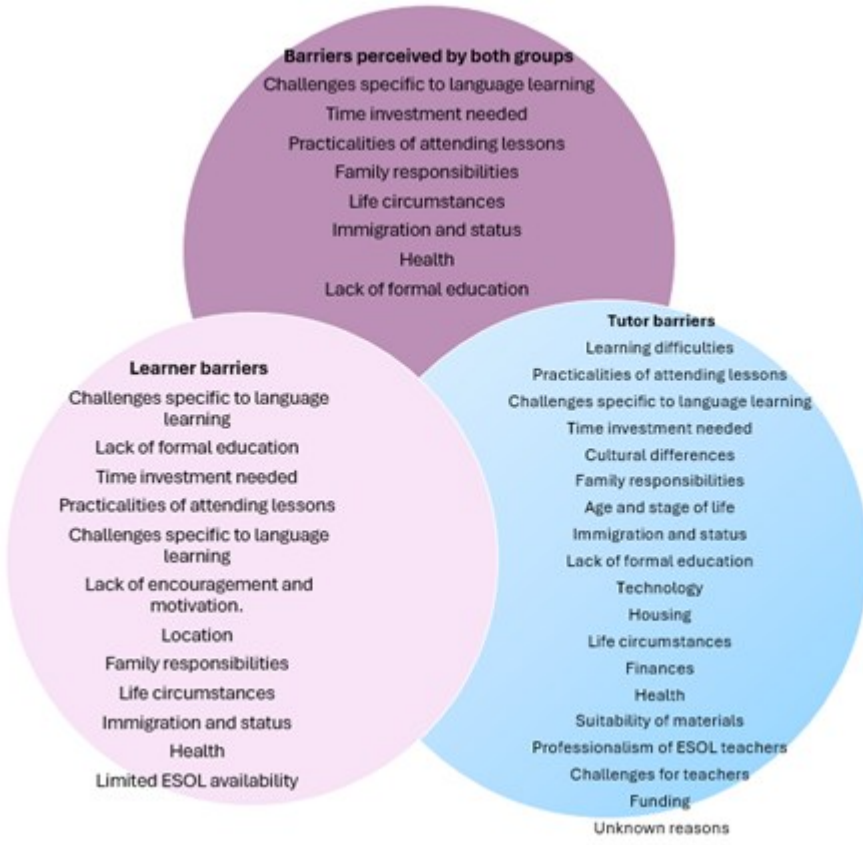
Although multiple coders are not required in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), a research assistant reviewed selected transcripts to 'sense-check' the coding logic (as in Byrne, 2022), revealing close alignment with minor semantic differences. This collaborative approach supported the rigour and reflexivity of the analysis. The researcher used NVivo's auto code function to analyse transcripts, but this function missed many participant nuances. To address this, manual coding was conducted within NVivo, allowing for more accurate theme identification. Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest that manual, handwritten coding is just as effective as using software, as many of their early thematic analyses were handwritten. This researcher adopted this approach, in addition to digital coding, to enhance the coding process. However, such a methodology may not be accessible to everyone. Final themes from tutors, support staff, and learners were grouped into static sets, each representing a key barrier to ESOL learning based on participant perceptions and researcher interpretation. From this, word clouds and thematic maps were generated to illustrate overarching themes and results.

Findings

To address Research Question 1, this section presents novel findings from learner data. Below is a thematic map detailing the themes produced by participants during interviews.

The thematic map reveals substantial convergence between the barriers identified by ESOL learners and tutors. These findings corroborate existing literature, notably Higton et al. (2019) and Pennacchia et al. (2019), which highlight transport, housing, financial constraints, family responsibilities, immigration status, and the availability and quality of ESOL provision as persistent obstacles to engagement in language learning. Further analytical depth will be pursued through the final phase of data collection at the end of 2025.

Fig 1. Thematic map



In this section, excerpts of learner interview will be presented. 29 codes were identified during learner interviews. These codes were developed into the following themes, location, challenges specific to language learning, lack of formal education, limited ESOL availability, family responsibilities (e.g. childcare, caregiving), time investment needed for sustained learning, life circumstances (e.g. trauma, instability, competing priorities), immigration and legal status, health issues (physical and mental), practicalities of attending lessons (e.g. transport, scheduling), lack of encouragement and motivation, racism and discrimination, housing insecurity or poor living conditions.

A key barrier identified was "location and living in Suffolk" highlighted in ESOL Learner 1's account as limiting opportunities to speak and practise English. Following Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidance, findings and analysis are integrated to contextualise the data.

ESOL Learner 1: *You know what I notice when I used to live in Essex? There are only English people, and my English was better then, and...here we have in [name redacted] for example, we have more different*

people from other countries, and they speak their languages and English. I use only maybe in school, but it's not often... and I'm I'm not happy with this so I need to be with the English people. I need to absorb all this.

The learner reflected on their experience living in Essex, noting that being surrounded primarily by English speakers significantly improved their language skills. In contrast, their current environment, described as more linguistically diverse, limits opportunities for English immersion. They reported using English mainly in school, and infrequently elsewhere, expressing dissatisfaction with this limited exposure. This narrative underscores the importance of social context in language acquisition. The learner's desire to "be with the English people" and "absorb all this" reflects a strong motivation to improve their English through everyday interaction. It also highlights a key barrier for ESOL learners in linguistically diverse or socially fragmented communities, where opportunities for authentic language practice may be scarce.

Living in Suffolk was identified as a barrier to ESOL learning by ESOL Learner 1 and support staff participants, who cited ruralisation schemes and lack of local service information as contributing factors. ESOL Learner 1, a degree-educated Ukrainian refugee who arrived via the resettlement scheme with family, accessed strong ESOL provision and arrived with the right to work. While arriving with family may offer emotional support and resilience (Corbin and Hall, 2018; Zecchinato, 2025), this assumption requires further investigation. The participant's education level also supports the researcher's hypothesis that educational background influences the barriers ESOL learners face.

ESOL Learner 1 accessed a free 12-week online English course, Step Ukraine, available exclusively to Ukrainian refugees before October 2024. Flexible scheduling made the course accessible for those with family or work commitments. While rural location was identified as a key barrier, this may lessen as the learner settles. Having children also created opportunities to use English in daily interactions. While Learner 1 benefited from strong ESOL provision and family support, Learners 4 and 5 faced very different challenges as unaccompanied minors. Learners 4 and 5, who arrived as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children from Kurdistan and Iran, lacked family support, and were housed in hostels with limited resources. Learner 5 and Learner 4 were notably reluctant to discuss family.

Researcher: *Tell me about your family.*

ESOL learner 5: *Not really* [participant didn't want to talk about family].

Researcher: *Tell me about your family.*

ESOL learner 4: *Like, how many brothers do I have? How is my family?*

Researcher: *Yeah.*

ESOL learner 4: *I have like, uh, two brother and two sisters, and they (are) younger than me.*

ESOL learner 4*: Yeah, I haven't seen them for like three years.*

Researcher: *Ok. Are they in Iran?*

ESOL learner 4: *They are in back home, yeah.*

When asked about family, ESOL Learner 5 declined to respond, indicating discomfort or unwillingness to engage with the topic. This silence may reflect emotional vulnerability, trauma, or a protective coping strategy, common among unaccompanied refugee young people. In contrast, ESOL Learner 4 shared brief details about their family, noting they have two brothers and two sisters, all younger and currently living in Iran. Learner 4 revealed they had not seen their siblings in three years, suggesting a prolonged separation and emotional strain. These responses underscore the emotional complexity surrounding family for refugee learners. While some may be willing to share, others may avoid the topic entirely. The absence or distance of family support is a recurring theme in this study's data, shaping learners' resilience, vulnerability, and capacity to engage with education.

Learners 4 and 5 arrived in the UK alone, without family support or formal education, and had limited access to public funds after age 19. They relied on ESOL and college education for stability, though escaping the trajectory of poverty may take years. Even with refugee status, they must achieve sufficient English proficiency and gain recognised qualifications, an extended process, especially given their current ESOL provision of just 5–6 hours per week during term time. Learner 1's proactive approach and access to online courses contrast sharply with Learner 5's limited resources and vulnerability. This disparity underscores how prior education and family support shape ESOL outcomes.

Researcher: *Why are you learning English?*

ESOL learner 5: *Because, if you don't, this country, all speak English, if you don't speak English, it's like you're deaf, you don't know nothing.*

ESOL Learner 5 described English as essential for survival and inclusion in the UK. They stated, "If you don't speak English, it's like you're deaf, you don't know nothing," highlighting the profound sense of disconnection experienced without language proficiency. This metaphor reflects the learner's awareness of English as a gateway to understanding, agency, and participation in society. The response suggests high motivation to learn, driven by a desire to overcome isolation and navigate everyday life independently. It also underscores the emotional weight of language barriers, especially for learners without family support or prior education. Learner 5's perspective aligns with broader themes in the study, including language as a tool for empowerment and the urgent need for accessible, sustained ESOL provision.

Learner investment in English is shaped by future aspirations (Newman et al., 2013). ESOL Learner 5 recognised the value of English for improving life chances and employment. There are clear, stark disparities exist between Learners 1, 4, and 5 in terms of support and opportunity. Unaccompanied minors like Learners 4 and 5 remain vulnerable to poor educational outcomes (Aleghfeli & Hunt, 2022), reflecting broader policy and societal inequities. While this research cannot resolve these issues, it aims to raise awareness among policymakers and educators of ESOL in England. Learners 4 and 5 had minimal prior education, which influenced their English proficiency and the depth of their responses, contrasting greatly with Learner 1's experience.

Another difference between Learners 1 and 5 was willingness to be recorded; Learner 1 was comfortable with video recording, while Learner 4 declined voice recording but allowed notetaking. This could relate to their self-concept of national identity and public perception. Ukrainian refugees, often women (Grabowska et al., 2023), with higher education, have received a positive reception in the UK, unlike male asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kurdistan, who face prejudice and media-driven mistrust, (Tong & Zuo, 2019) particularly following high profile cases of crime in the news in Autumn 2025, fuelling racial hatred and tensions. These experiences could cause reluctance in engaging with authority or other formal processes. These learners often have disrupted education and require patient, informed support (Aleghfeli & Hunt, 2022). Gender dynamics also influence participation, given the researcher's identity as a female. These accounts illustrate how individual life circumstances, such as family separation and prior education, act as barriers to ESOL learning, directly addressing Research Question 1.

These assumptions will be explored during the follow-up data collection phase of this study. In response to Research Question 1, ESOL Learner 1 identified living in Suffolk as a barrier to learning, contrasting it with her more supportive experience in Essex, where she had greater opportunities to speak English. This perception may evolve as she settles and builds connections in Suffolk and will be revisited in follow-up data collection. As narrative inquiry captures evolving experiences, further data is needed to deepen and refine these findings.

In this section, ESOL tutor insights are presented to inform Research Question 2.

How do ESOL teachers narrate the barriers that their learners encounter, and how do their stories give suggestions to mitigate these barriers? What cannot be mitigated?

Findings from Phase 2 closely mirrored those from Phase 1, with additional depth. Using an open-coded, predominantly inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013), 145 codes were identified across five ESOL tutor interviews, generating 19 themes. These included barriers such as inappropriate materials, learning difficulties, cultural differences, practical constraints, family responsibilities, immigration status, lack of formal education, technology, financial hardship, housing, health, and life circumstances. A degree of deductive analysis ensured alignment with the research questions (Byrne, 2022), and both semantic and latent coding were employed to capture explicit content and underlying assumptions.

Tutors' narratives largely aligned with existing literature (Higton et al., 2019; Pennacchia et al., 2019; Choudhry, 2022), identifying barriers rooted in personal, structural, and cultural factors. However, two novel codes emerged in ESOL TUTOR 2's interview, Male students being derogatory to female students and Afghani females being targeted by Afghani male students.

ESOL TUTOR 2: *I have 3 girls in one class, one's Bangladeshi, one is an Afghani and one is a Kurd and they were all talking about how grateful they are to be in England because they said in their countries they might not have the educational. Sort of opportunities that we get here.*

In a reflective account, ESOL Tutor 2 describes a moment in class with three female learners, one Bangladeshi, one Afghani, and one Kurdish, who shared their gratitude for being in England. They spoke about how, in their countries of origin, they might not have had access to the kinds of educational opportunities now available to them. This exchange highlights the

transformative potential of migration for women, particularly in terms of access to education, and underscores the importance of inclusive ESOL provision in fostering empowerment and social mobility.

These gendered dynamics suggest that cultural expectations may present unmitigable barriers for some learners, particularly young Afghani women. ESOL TUTOR 2 described how these learners face heightened challenges due to gender norms, both in their home countries and within the classroom. While other female learners (e.g., Bangladeshi and Kurdish) expressed gratitude for educational opportunities in the UK, the Afghani learner was perceived to face more acute restrictions. This aligns with White (2021), Choudhry (2022), and Sidaway (2022), who highlight gendered barriers such as childcare, finances, and transport and specifically Choudhry's (2022) study on barriers for married Muslim women. However, the researcher acknowledges that these tutor perceptions may reflect specific classroom contexts and should not be generalised across all ESOL learners. Moreover, cultural expectations may also affect male learners, a point warranting further investigation.

In summary, tutors identified both mitigable barriers (e.g., materials, scheduling, finances) and potentially unmitigable ones (e.g., entrenched cultural norms). Follow-up data collection will explore how learners themselves narrate these experiences, particularly around gender and cultural expectations.

In this section, the support staff interview findings will be used to inform Research Question 3.

Research Question 3: What are the goals and aspirations of the learners, as narrated by themselves and the teachers and support workers who assist them?

Support staff interviews generated 94 codes and 23 themes, including health, immigration status, housing, trauma, isolation, finances, discrimination, and limited ESOL availability. A novel barrier, ruralisation, was identified, referring to the relocation of refugee families to remote areas in Suffolk with poor transport links. This shift, driven by post-Ukraine conflict resettlement policies (Suffolk County Council, n.d.), has created new challenges for ESOL access, particularly for Afghan and Ukrainian groups. While transport barriers are well-documented (Higton et al., 2019; Choudhry, 2022), the impact of ruralisation remains underexplored and warrants further investigation. Support staff also reflected on learner goals and aspirations, consistently identifying English proficiency as the central ambition. This was linked to employment, independence, and community integration. Learners themselves expressed aspirations ranging from becoming teaching assistants to engaging in political life, all contingent on improving their English.

Some support staff emphasised learner responsibility and motivation, while others acknowledged systemic constraints, such as limited time, funding, and structural inequalities, that hinder progress.

I think we should be strict with regards to strongly encourage attendance of ESOL lessons and of IT courses and kind of really pushing and independence and that is quite hard because of the limit of time we have. SUPPORT STAFF 7

I know it's very hard and I usually tell them that it's very, very hard to do everything on your own, but at least you guys can try to do something on your own. SUPPORT STAFF 9

I wish they would have a bit of motivation for their lives here. SUPPORT STAFF 4.

These excerpts reflect a broader theme in the data: the push for learner agency often collides with structural barriers such as trauma, poverty, and limited access to resources. While staff advocate for independence, they also recognise the emotional and practical weight learners carry, underscoring the need for empathetic, flexible support systems. These tensions between personal agency and external barriers will be explored further in follow-up data collection.

Across interviews with ESOL learners, tutors, and support staff, a shared aspiration emerged: achieving English language proficiency. Participants consistently described English as a vital tool for integration, independence, and improved quality of life in Suffolk. Learners linked language skills to employment and ambition, whether aiming to become a teaching assistant, succeed in their job, or even speak confidently in Parliament. Tutors and volunteers echoed these hopes, expressing a desire for learners to enjoy the language, progress at their own pace, and eventually reach fluency. These collective goals underscore the central role of ESOL in shaping future opportunities and will be revisited during follow-up data collection.

I wanna be like a teacher assistant and I need to know English. ESOL LEARNER 1

(I) hope that too be success in my job. And my aspiration also to enhance my language as much, as well as I can. ESOL LEARNER 6

I would like go to the Parliament. I would like to do it if I can improve my English so perfect because I saw a Parliament in here. They are knowledgeable people. They speak so good. ESOL LEARNER 7

Really, my goal would be that they can. Enjoy the language.

ESOL TUTOR 1

Across learner and tutor interviews, English was consistently framed as a pathway to personal growth, professional ambition, and social inclusion. Learner 1 expressed a clear vocational goal: becoming a teaching assistant, which requires strong English proficiency. Learner 6 hoped to succeed in their job and aspired to continually improve their language skills. Learner 7 articulated a bold ambition, to speak "so perfect" English that they could one day work in Parliament, inspired by the eloquence and knowledge of UK politicians.

These aspirations reflect high levels of learner motivation and a belief in English as a tool for upward mobility and civic participation. Tutor 1 echoed this sentiment, stating that their goal was for learners to "enjoy the language," suggesting that emotional engagement and confidence are as important as technical proficiency. Together, these reflections highlight the transformative potential of ESOL when learners are supported to connect language learning with personal and professional aspirations. From this, the interview findings confirm that ESOL learning is the primary goal and aspiration of the learners. Tutors and support staff hope that the people they help reach proficiency so that their lives in England will become

easier. From the learner's perspective ESOL is seen as the facilitator of employment. The goals and aspirations expressed here by the participants will be revisited during follow-up data collection in Winter 2025.

Conclusion

This study offers a nuanced exploration of the lived experiences of refugee ESOL learners in Suffolk, a region often overlooked in English/ British national migration and education research. Through narrative inquiry and reflexive thematic analysis, the findings reveal a complex interplay of personal, structural, and geographic barriers that shape learners' access to and engagement with ESOL provision.

Key challenges identified include limited ESOL availability, rural isolation, family separation, immigration status, and inconsistent support systems. Learners' educational backgrounds and social contexts, particularly whether they arrived with family or as unaccompanied minors, significantly influenced their ESOL trajectories. The contrast between Learners 1, 4, and 5 illustrates how prior education, digital access, and emotional support can either facilitate or hinder progress.

Tutors and support staff echoed these concerns, identifying both mitigable barriers (e.g. materials, scheduling, transport) and more entrenched ones (e.g. cultural norms, gendered dynamics, systemic inequities). The emergence of novel themes, such as ruralisation and intra-community gender tensions, underscores the need for locally responsive and culturally sensitive ESOL strategies. Despite these challenges, learners consistently expressed strong motivation and aspirational goals, viewing English proficiency as a gateway to employment, independence, and civic participation. These aspirations were supported by tutors and staff, who emphasised the transformative potential of language learning.

Ultimately, this study highlights the urgent need for a coordinated national ESOL strategy that reflects the realities of diverse communities, particularly in underrepresented regions like Suffolk. It calls for more inclusive, flexible, and trauma-informed approaches to ESOL provision, ones that centre learner agency and address both individual and systemic barriers. Follow-up data collection will further examine these themes, deepen understanding and inform policy and practice. This study is timely post-Brexit and post-Ukraine, aligning with the Home Office's Step Ahead program to support refugee ESOL learning. Suitable ESOL provision offers strong returns, often repaying public costs within five months (Hann et al., 2021). This study showcases a unique, feminised Ukrainian refugee group and aims to amplify underrepresented voices, informing integration, ESOL planning, and support services. Enhanced ESOL provision reduces isolation and risk for refugees, improves access to education and work, and supports autonomy (Sidaway, 2022). With many ESOL learners being women (Choudhry, 2022), it also advances SDGs 4 and 5 ahead of the 2030 deadline.

The next phase of data collection, scheduled for late 2025 – early 2026, will build on these interim findings by examining how learners' experiences evolve over time and how barriers shift as resettlement progresses. This phase will revisit key learner cases to explore longitudinal trajectories in ESOL progression, wellbeing, and integration. Particular attention will be given to the emerging themes of ruralisation, gendered dynamics, and intra community relations:

this will enable a deeper understanding of how structural and interpersonal factors intersect across different learner groups. Follow up interviews will further clarify which barriers remain resistant to mitigation and which may be addressed through targeted interventions. The second phase aims to refine the thematic framework, strengthen the explanatory power of the analysis, and generate evidence-based recommendations for a more coherent and equitable national ESOL strategy.

References

Aleghfeli, Y. K., & Hunt, L. (2022). Education of unaccompanied refugee minors in high-income countries: Risk and resilience factors. *Educational Research Review, 35*, 100433. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2022.100433

Ager, A., & Strang, A. (2008). Understanding integration: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Refugee Studies, 21*(2), 166–191. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen016

Allsopp, J., Sigona, N., & Phillimore, J. (2014). *Poverty among refugees and asylum seekers in the UK: An evidence and policy review* (IRIS Working Paper Series No. 1/2014). University of Birmingham, Institute for Research into Superdiversity.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper (Ed.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.

Brown, S. (2021). The emancipation continuum: Analysing the role of ESOL in the settlement of immigrants. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 42*(5), 864–880. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2021.1937054

Byrne, D. (2022). A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Quality & Quantity, 56*, 1391–1412. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y

Cambridge English. (n.d.). *International language standards (CEFR)*. https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams-and-tests/cefr/

Choudhry, F. (2022). *An investigation of the barriers experienced by female Muslim ESOL learners whilst being in education* [Doctoral dissertation, Staffordshire University]. https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/7380/9/Choudhry%2C%20Fouzia%20Final%20Thesis.pdf

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.

Corbin, J., & Hall, J. (2018). Resettlement post conflict: Risk and protective factors and resilience among women in northern Uganda. *International Social Work, 62*(2), 918–932. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872818755863

Dunkerly Scourfield, J., Slade, B., & Dickson, J. (2006). *ESOL provision in Wales: A review*. Welsh Assembly Government.

European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. (2024). *Forced displacement*. https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/humanitarian-aid/forced-displacement_en

Graham-Brown, N. (2018). *Fragmented provision: ESOL policy in England*. Migration Yorkshire.

Grabowska, I., Jastrzebowska, A., & Kyliushyk, I. (2023). Resilience embedded in psychological capital of Ukrainian refugees in Poland. *Migration Letters, 20*(3), 421–430. https://doi.org/10.47059/ml.v20i3.2887

Hann, N., Willott, J., Graham-Brown, N., Roden, J., & Tremayne, D. (2021). *What is suitable and effective ESOL for refugees?* Migration Yorkshire.

Highton, J., Sandhu, J., Stutz, A., Patel, R., Choudhory, A & Richards, S. (2019) *English for speakers of other languages: Access and progression Research report June 2019*, available at - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/811750/English_for_speakers_of_other_languages.pdf [accessed on 16/05/2022]

Howitt, D. (2016). *Introduction to qualitative research methods in psychology* (3rd ed.). Pearson Education.

Marshall, C., Rossman, G. B., & Blanco, G. L. (2021). *Designing qualitative research* (7th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Mead, E., Maleki, M., Arani, M., & Agarwal, N. (2023). Proposing location-based predictive features for modelling refugee counts. *Transnational Education Review*, 1(1).

Parker, S. (2021). *Inhibiting integration and strengthening inequality? The effects of UK policy making on refugees and asylum seekers in Wales. People, Place and Policy*, Early View, 1–13.

Patiño-Santos, A. (2018). "No-one told me it would all be in Catalan!" Narratives and language ideologies in the Latin American community at school. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language,* (250), 59–86.

Pennacchia, J., Jones, E., & Aldridge, F. (2019). *Barriers to learning for disadvantaged adult learners*. Learning and Work Institute.

Pérez-Milans, M., & Patiño-Santos, A. (2013). *Language education and institutional change in a Madrid multilingual school* (Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies No. 85). Tilburg University.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. State University of New York Press.

Rosen, M., & Young, A. (2016). *Who are refugees and migrants? What makes people leave their homes?* Wayland Publishing.

Rural Refugee Network. (2022, August). *An evaluation of the Rural Refugee Network's ESOL support for Ukrainian refugees.* https://www.ruralrefugeenetwork.org

Schwandt, T. A. (2001). *Dictionary of qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Sidaway, K. (2022). Exploring the motivation of women studying in a multilevel ESOL class in England. *TESOL Journal, 13*(4), e61518. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.615

Slade, B. L., & Dickson, N. (2021). *Adult education and migration in Scotland: Policies and practices for inclusion. Journal of Adult & Continuing Education, 27*(1), 100–120.

Smith, A. B. C. (2025). *Stories of ESOL in Suffolk*. In *The Migration Conference 2025: Selected Papers* (pp. 373-380). Transnational Press London.

Suffolk County Council. (n.d.) *Refugee resettlement schemes* [Unpublished internal report]. https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/community-and-safety/communities/community-engagement/support-for-refugees/refugee-resettlement-schemes [Accessed 6th January 2026]

Suffolk Refugee Support. (2023). *Annual General Meeting proceedings*. Suffolk, England. https://suffolkrefugee.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/SRS-Annual-Report-2023-24.pdf [Accessed 4th October 2025]

The Bell Foundation. (2021). *ESOL framework learning review*. https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/app/uploads/2025/02/The-Bell-Foundation-ESOL-Framework-Learning-Review_FINAL.pdf [Accessed 4th October 2025]

Tong, J., & Zuo, L. (2019). Othering the European Union through constructing moral panics over "immigrants" in the coverage of migration in three British newspapers, 2011–2016. *The International Communication Gazette, 81*(5), 445–469. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048518802237

UK Visas and Immigration. (n.d.). *Skilled Worker visa: Knowledge of English*. GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/skilled-worker-visa/knowledge-of-english

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2023). *Refugee definition*. https://emergency.unhcr.org/protection/legal-framework/refugee-definition

Zecchinato, F., Iusmen, I., Walker, D. M., Riggirozzi, P., & Brackstone, K. (2025). Resilience among refugee mothers: Scoping review of promotion and hindrance factors. *BJPsych Open, 11*, e172. https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2025.10781