



A. S. Hornby Educational Trust

REPORT ON A.S. HORNBY DICTIONARY RESEARCH AWARD PROJECT

Title: A Welcome Dictionary: refugee families using dictionary resources to support English Language Learning

Country: Northern Ireland

Dates: 2019 – 2021

Lead researcher: Aisling O’Boyle

1 BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

“...the refugee, in trying to cope with his [sic] language problems...nearly always feels that what he [sic] needs most is a dictionary...if not to solve all his [sic] language problems at once, at least to give him [sic] something to hold while he [sic] is solving them in some other way” Center for Applied Linguistics, A. V. (1975). *A Selected Bibliography of Dictionaries. General Information Series, No. 9. Indochinese Refugee Education Guides*

The quotation above is from a point in history over 45 years ago. The refugee and language education issues this quotation signals are shockingly just as relevant and pressing today in many locations around the world. Of the 89.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide (UNHCR, 2021) less than a third come under the protection of the UN mandate as having ‘refugee status’. Despite the relative safety of refugee status, families fleeing conflict and persecution are characterized by their vulnerabilities and need support in many ways (Sheikh and Anderson, 2018). A lack of proficiency in the language(s) used in the host countries predicts distress among refugees (e.g. Salvo and Williams, 2017). Those with low or no host country language skills are most at risk of long-term social exclusion and dependency (Collyer et al. 2018). Providing access to language learning and skills development counters these cumulative disadvantages and increases participation in social and community processes

(Carson 2008); increases access to information, education, and employment; and contributes to individual learners' and their families' sense of personal well-being, dignity and autonomy (Ćatibušića, Gallagher and Karazi, 2021). It is well-evidenced that refugees to the UK for example, consistently rate the importance of learning English very highly (Cheung and Phillimore, 2013; Morrice et al., 2019). Therefore, from whatever perspective we might like to take, the development of in-country language skills avoids compounding levels of vulnerability in refugee-background populations.

Despite the scale across the globe and the significance for families, research on refugee language education has remained, over the course of the last 45 years, rare. This research redresses some of this gap. Situated in a refugee resettlement volunteer-led language education project in Northern Ireland, this dictionary-focused research had the following specific objectives:

- to investigate how refugee-background families use a bilingual dictionary and associated digital lexicographic resources as they move into local communities
- to gather survey and interview data on the preferences, practices, and problems of dictionary use for refugee-background families

The overall goal of this research project was to advance knowledge on “how the dictionary can best serve its users’ needs and how people can be made better dictionary users” (Hulstijn and Atkins, 1998). As a researcher and as a member of a community of volunteers, this scientific goal could not be separated from my personal experiences engaging with refugee families and my reflections thereupon. Reasons why people volunteer and reasons why a ‘refugee crisis’ in particular evokes acts of compassion and solidarity are many. But beyond the immediacy of emergency support in a ‘crisis’, positions on volunteering over sustained periods of time can result in shifting perspectives. In my case, one shift was the rejection of emotional distance which would allow me to stop asking, but what happens when these families leave the English class? Recalling the quotation of the refugee from 1975 in the US, I came to wonder what this book with pictures, colours, words, and phrases would do for families, beyond being a little something to hold on to.

Notwithstanding the specificity of this research context (described in more detail below), this project challenged two universal and problematic assumptions identified early in the history of dictionary research by Bogaards (1995): a dictionary contains a wealth of information about English which is useful for learners; and learners know how to (and will) use a dictionary.

Knowledge gained from dictionary research presents a much more complex picture than these two assumptions portray. For example, not all dictionaries are concerned with tailoring their information for language learners; and learners have preferences for certain types of dictionaries available in different media (Nesi, 2014). Dictionary use is, as Hulstijn and Atkins (1998:11) point out, “a subtle problem-solving activity”. There is an array of cognitive, social, and cultural processes involved in dictionary use. Therefore, we ought not to assume that any language user or learner will know how to use a dictionary. As many language teachers know well, having a dictionary or having access to a dictionary is not the same thing as effective use of a dictionary (Liu, 2014).

In the context of this study, for those volunteers and professionals working with refugee families, a dictionary was certainly considered an esteemed textual artefact which would support families with their essential language learning. Given the positive public regard, it is surprising that dictionaries seem to have fewer resources devoted to supporting the integration or training of dictionary strategy use in, for example, basic English class. As Chi (2003) notes, dictionary users are often required to “take the initiative” to search dictionary products and *work out for themselves* how to make best use of these resources to suit their needs. To consider that good dictionary practices come about spontaneously, particularly in very difficult circumstances surrounding refugee resettlement, seems just a stretch too far.

However, the good news is that research on explicit dictionary training evidences a positive impact on both learners and teachers by increasing their understandings of the educational potential of dictionary and lexicographic resources, (e.g. Bae, 2015; Bishop, 2001; Carduner, 2003; Ranalli, 2013; Quinn, 2015; Baskin and Mumcu, 2018). Dictionary training for teachers or community volunteers can provide an opportunity to raise awareness of the riches of several types of dictionaries. Learner training in dictionary strategies can increase familiarity with and build confidence in using diverse lexicographic resources, which can meet an individual’s particular learning or language needs. It has been argued that the effectiveness of dictionary practices and strategy use depends upon a range of factors e.g.

- i) the user (i.e. age, level of proficiency)
- ii) the user and the task at hand (i.e. the purpose and context of use, e.g. reading, a translation)
- iii) the dictionary materials (i.e. specialized mini-dictionary, monolingual reference)

(Hulstijn and Atkins, 1998; Nesi, 2014).

We wanted to understand the types of problem-solving activities for which dictionary resources were being used and how they were being used by Syrian refugee families resettled in Northern Ireland.

In this research, we focused on investigating the practices of dictionary users and the task at hand (point (ii) in the list above). That is, we wanted to understand the types of problem-solving activities for *which dictionary resources were being used* and *how they were being used* by Syrian refugee families resettled in Northern Ireland. As we identify later in this report, examples of use are not only in direct support for English language learning activities, but also include seeking translations of unknown words in either language, using dictionary resources as visual aids in transactional (e.g. medical, legal, employment) contexts and social activities, using images and texts as representations of contexts and objects to learn more about a ‘new’ culture.

2 DESCRIPTION OF THE CONTEXT

The context in which this dictionary research was conducted had emerged from a very specific situation. In Northern Ireland from 2015-2020, Syrian refugee families were resettled via the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS). The VPRS was established by the 2015 UK government in collaboration with the UNHCR to resettle refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war. In Northern Ireland this scheme was operated by a consortium of statutory, NGO, and community organizations via a *Welcome Centre* reception model of services delivery and integration (see Bolt, 2018). Groups of between 40-80 people arrived in Northern Ireland once every 6-8 weeks directly from refugee camps or refuge offering countries neighbouring Syria. Each group was made up of a number of family units (Dept. for Communities, 2019; 2020). This Northern Ireland Welcome Centre model was somewhat distinct from approaches to resettlement elsewhere in the UK. Included in the Welcome Centre programme were “Welcome Centre English Classes” offered by community and voluntary groups. A non-formal approach to initial language learning in-country was designed and delivered by volunteers as a first step to new language learning experiences (see *Initial English Language Support for Refugee Families* available: O’Boyle et al., 2017; 2021). The programme focused on immediate oral language functions (e.g. conversational routines; making emergency telephone calls).

MSc TESOL Students Apply their Skills to Voluntary Work



Although policy and statutory responses were available to provide formal English language classes in further education colleges, these Welcome Centre English Classes offered newly arrived families an immediate opportunity to engage with groups of local volunteers to learn and practise English. They were considered as initial opportunities for language practice through social connections with the in-country community. In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, community and voluntary sectors have a long tradition of responding swiftly and flexibly to language needs through more non-formal 'on the ground' measures (UNHCR, 2017; McNulty, 2016-2021; Piarizzi and McKeown, 2019; Simpson and Whiteside, 2015)



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Emma Tolland
16 April 2018 · 🌐



That's a wrap on another busy weekend of English classes for our newest Syrian refugees. Wonderful families and awesome volunteers xx

The Welcome Centre English Classes were an entirely voluntary initiative, from the design of the materials to the volunteers who delivered classes every weekend of a 6–8-week cycle of arrivals. Volunteers were keen to resource families with as much support for language learning as soon possible once they moved into their homes. Although local community groups and colleges offered non-formal, informal and formal English classes, volunteers considered that one of the most immediate language supports for families was to gift each family their own bilingual dictionary (with associated digital resources) at the end of the Welcome Centre English class.

3 DICTIONARY SELECTION

From monolingual tomes of lexical description to bilingual illustrative picture books, contemporary dictionary creation takes a greater interest in dictionary users and their practices. The growth of learner dictionaries which combine lexicographic research and insights from language pedagogy are increasingly available. In relation to the selection of a dictionary for families, the volunteers in the context of this research, considered the following features as essential:

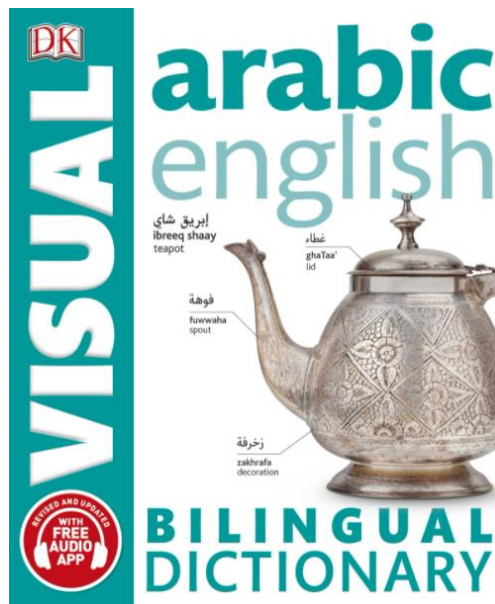
- 1) bilingual (English and Arabic): it was considered essential that families should have a dual language resource.
- 2) include pictures: this was primarily considered in relation to the need to understand word meaning (beginner level vocabulary related to everyday language use).
- 3) price sensitive: volunteers were initially purchasing the dictionaries, so cost was a significant factor.
- 4) readily and easily available to buy: this was a key consideration for volunteers given that logistical information on the number of families and dates of arrival were not available to volunteers with advance notice.

It was also important to take into account that those using the dictionaries would be doing so in a family context, i.e. the dictionary would be used by children and adults. Selection also had to take into consideration that the dictionary users may have a range of no, low, and mixed levels of English and that some adult family members may have no or low levels of literacy. In terms of what the dictionary offered as a product, it was important that there was coverage of ‘everyday English’ (non-specialized) and that there was a combination of multimodal resources available.

Taking these considerations as criteria, two dictionaries were considered to meet the requirements and were recommended:

1. Oxford Picture Dictionary: English/Arabic by Norma Shapiro and Jayme Adelson-Goldstein. 2nd Edition. Oxford University Press
2. Arabic-English Bilingual Visual Dictionary by Dorling Kindersley DK. Bilingual Visual Dictionary series.

The final outcome on the dictionary selection was to recommend the Arabic-English Bilingual Visual Dictionary by Dorling Kindersley DK. In 2017, the DK dictionary was thirty percent cheaper than the OUP dictionary from an online retailer. On balance, therefore, cost became the determining factor given that volunteers themselves were initially purchasing the dictionaries for the families.



Arabic-English Bilingual Visual Dictionary by Dorling Kindersley DK (dictionary cover and extract from pp 74-75; 106): images reproduced with permission

In terms of the satisfaction with the selection, volunteers commented positively on the use of colours, contemporary imagery, and portability. Access to a free audio app was considered useful and volunteers took time at the end of English class to highlight this feature and support with downloading.

Once families left the Welcome Centre and moved into housing accommodation in the local communities, their immediate concerns were securing school places, transport to and from school, and hospital appointments. Statutory and large charitable organizations were engaged with the settlement of families into local areas and there was no further contact between the families and the Welcome Centre volunteer English language teachers. Therefore, there was little opportunity to gather any information on how dictionaries and lexicographic resources were being used or indeed how families were progressing (or not) with using English or with their English language learning.

However, once the Welcome Centre English classes became well-established as part of the resettlement programme, they were followed by information sessions about free community-based and Further Education college ESOL classes which would be available in local areas. In addition, the cost of providing one dictionary per family was then met by the those responsible for the organization of the Welcome Centre.

Having established the value and some of the infrastructure for initial English language support for newly arrived refugee families, it then became feasible to set about investigating some of the key issues surrounding language learning support for these families. Thanks to the funding provided by the AS Hornby Trust Dictionary Research Awards, it was possible to design and conduct a research study which has resulted in a modest amount of empirical evidence on preferences, practices, and problems of dictionary use in this context.

4 DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH: METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

To gather data on how refugee-background families in Northern Ireland use a bilingual dictionary, we designed a short bilingual digital survey and carried out semi-structured interviews with family members.

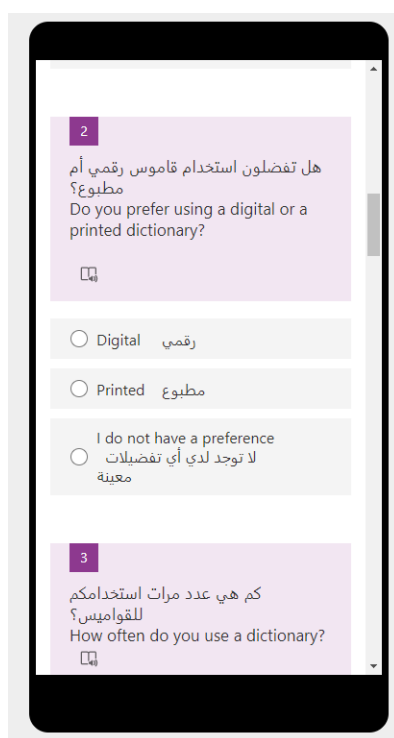
METHODS: Survey items and interview questions were based on Nesi's (2014) review of dictionary research and focused on i) English language learners' preferences and attitudes regarding dictionary use ii) the role of dictionaries to aid language learning and iii) dictionary consultation behaviour. In addition, we also conducted a review of published dictionary

research post-2012 (as relevant articles pre-2012 were already covered in the Nesi (2014) paper) in order to incorporate up-to-date findings. Based on this review and our research objective to evidence the preferences, practices, and problems of dictionary use for refugee-background families, we developed the following list of 12 questions which formed the basis of the survey items and interviews:

Original Questions from which survey and interview items were produced	Related dictionary research (post-2012)
Do you prefer using an electrical or a written dictionary?	Zheng, H., & Wang, X. (2016). The use of electronic dictionaries in EFL classroom. <i>Studies in English language teaching</i> , 4(1), 144-156. Jin, L., & Deifell, E. (2013). Foreign language learners' use and perception of online dictionaries: A survey study. <i>Journal of Online Learning and Teaching</i> , 9(4), 515.
Do you think you would be distracted by a digital dictionary or a device that could have access to the internet while learning English?	Zheng, H., & Wang, X. (2016). The use of electronic dictionaries in EFL classroom. <i>Studies in English language teaching</i> , 4(1), 144-156.
In which contexts would you most commonly use a dictionary?	Rahimi, M., & Miri, S. S. (2014). The impact of mobile dictionary use on language learning. <i>Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences</i> , 98, 1469-1474.
When you are learning English when reading or writing, do you think you should have access to a dictionary?	Zheng, H., & Wang, X. (2016). The use of electronic dictionaries in EFL classroom. <i>Studies in English language teaching</i> , 4(1), 144-156.
Do you find it easier to find easier to read and write English with a dictionary next to you?	Ding, J. (2015). A study of English majors in a Chinese university as dictionary users. <i>Lexicography</i> , 2(1), 5-34.
Do you find it difficult to use a dictionary?	Hamouda, A. (2013). A study of dictionary use by Saudi EFL students at Qassim University. <i>Study in English Language Teaching</i> , 1(1), 228-257.
How useful do you find the examples in a dictionary?	Kim, S. (2018). EFL learners' dictionary consultation behaviour during the revision process to correct collocation errors. <i>International Journal of Lexicography</i> , 31(3), 312-326.
Are there problems with the examples used in bilingual dictionaries that you have used?	Kim, S. (2018). EFL learners' dictionary consultation behaviour during the revision process to correct collocation

	errors. <i>International Journal of Lexicography</i> , 31(3), 312-326
Do you think you would benefit from having access to additional dictionary resources (e.g. more dictionaries or more types of dictionaries)	Liu, T. C., Fan, M. H. M., & Paas, F. (2014). Effects of digital dictionary format on incidental acquisition of spelling knowledge and cognitive load during second language learning: Click-on vs. key-in dictionaries. <i>Computers & Education</i> , 70, 9-20.
How difficult have you found it to get access to a dictionary of your language to English?	Ding, J. (2015). A study of English majors in a Chinese university as dictionary users. <i>Lexicography</i> , 2(1), 5-34.
Would you like to have someone you could ask for help when there is something you are finding difficult to understand in the dictionary?	Liang, P., & Xu, D. (2018). An empirical study of EFL learners' dictionary use in Chinese–English translation. <i>Lexikos</i> , 28, 221-244.
Would you like to be given a dictionary to keep at all times, even outside of the classroom, how often would you use a dictionary at home?	Ding, J. (2015). A study of English majors in a Chinese university as dictionary users. <i>Lexicography</i> , 2(1), 5-34.

For the bilingual digital survey, we wanted to keep the number of items as low as possible, so as not to take up too much of the participants' time and mobile data, but sufficient in number to cover the areas of most importance.



We also wanted to capture as much as possible that was relevant to this particular context of refugee-background families learning and using English in-country. For example, in relation to the use of dictionaries and consultation practices, we understood from the series of Welcome Centre English classes that families sometimes brought their dictionaries to school meetings or appointments. Therefore, we designed one survey item to capture this potential variety: “In which situations would you usually use a dictionary?” with multiple responses (see below):

ما هي المواقف التي تستخدمون فيه القواميس عادةً؟
In which situations would you usually use a dictionary?

- At the doctor عند زيارة الطبيب
- While shopping أثناء التسوق
- In English class في محاضرات تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية
- At school في المدرسة
- For homework عند أداء الفروض المنزلية
- On the phone عند التحدث عبر الهاتف
- Writing emails or text messages عند كتابة رسائل البريد الإلكتروني أو الرسائل النصية
- In conversations أثناء المحادثة
- Studying English on my own عند دراسة اللغة الإنجليزية بشكل مستقل
- Other غير ذلك

The survey was presented in English and Arabic to ensure that those with no or low levels of English proficiency were not excluded. The quantitative data from the survey was analysed in order to produce descriptive statistics only, such as frequency and percentages, as discussed below.

In relation to the family interviews, these were semi-structured supported by the schedule of questions outlined below:

- 1) How long have you been learning English?
- 2) Who do you speak to using English? How often do you use English? Daily? Weekly? When? Which contexts?
- 3) When you think about learning English, do you like learning English? Why not? Why? Why do you want/not want to learn English? What do you like/dislike about speaking in English? Listening? Reading? Writing?
- 4) What do you think helps you to learn/ use English?
- 5) What stops you from learning/using English?
- 6) Where is the best place for you to learn English? Why? Do you attend any English classes? Where? When? What do you think of them?
- 7) Have you ever used a dictionary to help you learn/use English? What kind? Do you own a dictionary? Can you tell me about the first time you used a dictionary?
- 8) Can you tell me about the last time that you used a dictionary? What was it for? Do other people in your house use a dictionary? What do they use it for? Was it useful?
- 9) Can you think of a time when you used a dictionary and it was helpful/unhelpful?
- 10) How easy/difficult do you think it is to use a dictionary? Why/why not? What makes a dictionary easy/difficult to use?
- 11) Are there other issues or comments which you consider relevant which we have not yet discussed?

The interviews were originally conceived as being conducted face-to-face and would have taken place in community organizations with which the families were familiar. However, due to COVID-19 it was necessary to move these interviews to an online platform. This procedure of online interviews was piloted with individual adults from refugee or asylum-seeking backgrounds and was considered a possible and satisfactory alternative. For the interviews, participants were free to speak in whichever language(s) they wished and professional interpreters attended the interview. The interviews were recorded and transcriptions in English were then produced to facilitate content analysis, which was used to exemplify the practices, preference and problems of dictionary use by family members, both in classroom contexts and outside formal learning environments.

PARTICIPANTS: The participants in this study were drawn from refugee-background family members (aged 18 and over) who had been resettled in Northern Ireland under the VPRS from 2017-2020. This three-year period covers the time in which the gifted dictionary had been part of the Welcome Centre English classes. In this period, a total of 1455 people (approximately half of whom are adults and half of whom are children and young people aged under 18) had been resettled in Northern Ireland under the VPRS (Dept. for Communities, 2020; 2019). This figure is made up of over 400 family units. For the purposes of this study, families received an email communication prepared by the researchers and translators, in both Arabic and English. The email invited them to participate in an anonymous online survey

and/or an interview with the researcher on the topic of using dictionaries for English language learning. To ensure privacy of families, the email invitation was sent via local NGO and community and voluntary organizations who had been involved in the Welcome Centre English Classes over the three-year period. It was important to bear in mind that families resettled under this scheme are only supported by NGO for the first three months of resettlement (Robinson, 2020). After that period, specific individual family support was much reduced and any that was and is now available takes the form of NGO drop-in clinics, for example. Local community and voluntary organizations have been providing support and offer language learning, education, and social integration initiatives (e.g. BURC, STEP) and these often provide steps to courses in local FE colleges (e.g. see ESOL NI). The point here is that invitations to families to participate in research, even when communication was via trusted contacts NGO and community groups, did not always result in uptake. For example, phone numbers and contact details can change over the period of three years, and those met during an initial period of resettlement may not always be remembered.

In response to the invitations to participate in the study five family units agreed to take part in an interview. Unfortunately, response rate for the completion of the survey was very low. Less than 20 respondents completed the survey, which corresponds to approximately 2% of the whole population relevant to this study. Male and female participants took part in the survey and interviews. All surveys were completed in full. The age range of participants was from 18-58 years of age. Each interview had more than one adult family member present (e.g. mother and young adult daughter(s); mother and adult son). An interpreter was requested and present for interviews. Participants used English and Arabic in the interviews. The interviewer asked questions in English which were interpreted. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. In all cases, participants concluded the interview by asking about how to find free English classes in their area. The interviewer was able to provide information contact information for nearby college provision and contact details for nearest community groups offering free English classes using the resources established via ESOL NI.

5 RESULTS, EVALUATION AND DISSEMINATION

The interviews were able to provide rich and detailed evidence on how families use dictionaries and their attitudes towards dictionary use. They were also able to provide specific examples of learner practices and problems encountered using dictionaries for language learning and language use. With less than 20 responses, the survey results must be read in the light of limited number of responses. However, the available survey data affords us some indication of preferences and practices of dictionary use for this particular population. To

broaden our understanding of the diversity of learner populations and dictionary use, the survey can be freely accessed and used for further research and teaching purposes.

Dictionary Practices

Most significantly in terms of frequency of dictionary use, 100% of survey respondents report that they use a dictionary once or multiple times a day. All interview respondents reported that they have a dictionary, though use it with varying frequencies.

“My son and my daughter and my younger daughter use it. They use it a lot and it is really helpful for them” (Interview E: Mother)

In relation to where participants use their dictionary, survey responses indicated that learners take their dictionaries to the English classes that they attend, but dictionaries are used most often by both interview and survey participants to learn English on their own at home.

“When I came to NI I was zero English so the first thing I tried to learn was A B C from the dictionary so I learn this from the dictionary and after this I was thinking that I have to read the word.” (Interview B: Father)

The extract below illustrates how dictionaries are being used at home for explicit vocabulary learning. This is from an interview with a mother who is discussing how her young adult children are using their dictionary at home:

Mother: They would see the words and pictures in the dictionary and learn new words from it. They would see the word and learn the translation of it and keep using that word until they learn it. That’s how they use it

Interviewer: How would they use the word? Would they read the word, say it out loud, or repeat the word in a sentence?

Mother: They would write it a couple of times and remember how it is written and say it and that is how they would memorize the words. (Interview F: Mother)

When using their dictionary to learn English either in class or at home, both survey and interview participants report that they rarely ask anyone for help with using a dictionary. In family settings dictionaries are shared. From the survey, half of those who responded share a dictionary with 1-2 people. From the interviews, we find that all participants share a dictionary

with 2-4 people in a family setting. This is also reflected in how participants report using the dictionary together:

“First time we use it we try to find out the names of fruits and vegetable and afterwards we used to find out what about the doctor and hospital and all this kind of thing.” (Interview E: Daughter)

From the interviews, it is clear that learners do use the dictionaries on their own at home too, sometimes for individual non-study purposes. This example illustrates how dictionary use is part of the preparation for participation in specific everyday activities in English:

“most of the time I was looking for words if there is something I need to buy from the market or something about transport or something about body because I go to the doctor I try to explain to him the problem I have” (Interview A: Mother)

What we also found from the interviews is that the dictionary use can change over time for some respondents:

“They (son and daughter) would take it around with them just when they arrived in the first period of time when they were going to college. They don’t take it as much or as many times as they did before.” (Translated Interview M: Mother)

This is also reflected in how learners perceive their language needs shifting over time and how they perceive that the dictionary does or does not correspond to their changing needs and language development:

“Because of the English dictionary I know the word ‘sandwich’. I can read ‘sandwich’ and say ‘sandwich’. But I need someone to help me put it in a sentence. The dictionary was helping us, but we need people to tell us if we say it right or say it wrong” (Translated Interview M: Mother)

Dictionary Preferences

From the survey data, equal numbers of respondents preferred a digital dictionary or a printed dictionary. From the interviews, all families commented that they liked to use both printed and electronic dictionaries. Interview participants liked having a printed dictionary the most. They liked being able to look through the book with words and pictures, although some interviewees

felt that having an electronic version could better help them with their pronunciation. 100% of survey respondents reported that it would be very useful to always have a dictionary with them and that they would be likely to use additional online resources. It is important to note on this issue that there is a contrast between survey and interview respondents. Most interviewees reported that they are not very likely to use digital/online resources. Although interview participants had reported being made aware of the online resources when they received the dictionary, they reported that they had not used any of the associated online resources for the dictionary.

“when they gave us the dictionary they explained to us how to use it but I’m afraid it is only used by our own way” (Interview M: Mother)

It may be useful to note that recent research in local community groups has indicated increasing digital poverty in some groups of learners, who are prioritising data credit on mobile phones for communication with family rather than for language learning activities or completing online surveys.

Further in relation to learner preferences and dictionary use, all survey respondents reported that they found it easier to write in English when they had a dictionary beside them. For reading, speaking, and listening in English, there were mixed survey responses in relation to perceptions of the usefulness of dictionaries for these purposes. This is perhaps surprising given previous research on dictionary use and reading (e.g. Ding, 2015). This may indicate that the particular self-identified focus for this group is on performative skills in English rather than receptive ones. For example, participants spoke at length in interviews about their desire to be able to produce English, to express themselves with neighbours, at the doctors and at school, with little reference made to comprehension difficulties or receptive skills.

Dictionary Problems

Over 80% of respondents to the survey noted that the dictionary was not difficult to use, with the remainder reporting that the dictionary was somewhat difficult to use. Some interview participants report that the dictionary is not difficult to use. However, some also pointed out examples of difficulties with using the dictionary which they related to their perceived low or no levels of English language proficiency;

“I don’t use it very often as it is kind of confusing for me as I don’t know a lot about the language yet.” (Interview E: Mother)

“The dictionary itself doesn’t have any difficulties but I am struggling with pronunciation of words and that is difficult.” (Interview M: Mother)

Discussing the problems that they have in using the printed dictionary, interviewees expressed concern at not knowing how to pronounce the words they see and not having enough examples of the words in sentences. From all the interviews, participants reported that they wanted support with using and learning from their dictionary, in addition to wanting support and practice opportunities to put new words they see in the dictionary into a sentence.

Interviewer: If there was a workshop about dictionary resources, how likely would it be for you to attend? Do you think it would be useful for you?

Daughter: Absolutely. It would be very helpful. I feel ...I have been here for 2 years and I still struggle with language so I think it would really help.” (Interview E: Daughter)

Throughout the interviews very positive responses were received to the suggestions of dictionary training workshops and indeed language learning support of any kind. However, given some of the complex and unpredictable circumstances that families may find themselves in with regard to their health conditions, caring responsibilities, or changes in housing arrangements, participation at scheduled learning events/workshops/classes may not always be possible, and attendance at regular classes may be variable.

To summarise, for this group of dictionary users a printed dictionary is:

- a valued and used resource
- used outside the classroom mainly at home where multiple users share one dictionary
- used to prepare for participation in everyday activities (e.g. shopping, doctors) in which they have to use English
- used to become familiar with ‘new’ cultural practices and places represented through the images and photos in the dictionary
- used for self-initiated language learning purposes such as explicit vocabulary learning
- considered essential to support writing in English

Importance of a range of diverse language learning resources and opportunities in resettlement contexts

Listening to families talking about their challenges and successes in learning and using a language that is new to them, it becomes apparent how important it is to have diverse opportunities and resources for language learning in resettlement contexts. It may be assumed that statutory education provision for children in schools will lead to successful language learning and that adult family members will learn English for social integration and employment in their local further education colleges. However, when we listen to families, we hear much more of the complexities and challenges that paint a much more detailed and nuanced picture. When we listen, we can learn much more about the role that language learning plays in trying to survive and thrive in a resettlement context.

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To illustrate some of these lived experiences, we discuss the perspectives of two women, *Aisha* and *Hana*, as they emerged in the interaction during the family interviews. Pseudonyms are used in place of given names. Both women are from different families and are from different age groups. Background information is restricted to ensure their anonymity.

Aisha

Aisha arrived in Northern Ireland as a refugee with her adult son and younger children. At the time of the interview Aisha had been living in Northern Ireland for three years. She started to learn English 18 months after she arrived and attended classes at a local college two days a week. For Aisha, the focus during the initial period of resettlement was on her children; for the younger children to be at school and for her adult son to learn English. Exclusive parental focus on children, even adult ones, has been observed in a range of refugee contexts. It is

suggested that putting the needs of children above all else in the parenting role can be a powerful driver in overcoming adversity (Vasthagen et al. 2022; Merry et al, 2017).

During the interview, Aisha gave examples of how she now relies on her adult son to communicate with others on her behalf. She describes herself as only knowing simple words and having no conversation skills: *‘[My son] would be the one to have a conversation with [people] and go to places’*. Aisha referred to her age, as an older woman, and discussed how this seemed incompatible with not yet being able to speak English. Discussing what opportunities that are available to her to practise English, Aisha noted that when she goes out of her home, she doesn’t use English that often, and that she has no one to talk to in English. This experience runs contrary to some widely held beliefs that there are abundant ‘natural’ opportunities to learn and use the dominant language of the resettled country.

Aisha is very aware that her own language learning has not developed in the way that she had anticipated it would in an English-dominant country. She is aware that her adult son may get married or leave the family home, so she wants to become more proficient and independent:

“...if it wasn’t for my son I wouldn’t be able to book appointments at the GP and important stuff like that...I want to get independent I don’t want to keep relying on my son... just in case he moves out... I want to do my own thing and be able to make my own appointments”

She was very keen to discuss her language learning goals: to speak to her neighbours, make shopping experiences less difficult, and develop social relationships:

“I would love to develop and learn more English as its important to speak to people, especially here. I would love to speak to my neighbours and have conversations with them”

“I have children who are still at school and I’d like to take them to the shops to buy their school stuff and make it an easy experience but it’s still kind of hard because I don’t know a lot about the language”

“When I see my neighbours talking, they look very sweet and nice and I’d love to have that kind of conversation with them, with people who are like that, easy-going”

Aisha notes that she has a number of health conditions which can affect attendance at in-person formal language classes, but she has taken part in online language classes and found

them useful. Even for highly motivated language learners like Aisha, finding the 'right' language learning opportunity for them and their circumstances can be a challenge. In refugee-background contexts, Morrice, Tip, Collyer, and Brown (2019) suggest that some of the most impactful language learning happens in programmes which are tailored to the diverse needs of refugees, ranging from informal language support to accelerated educational opportunities.

Hana

Hana is a young woman who arrived in Northern Ireland as a teenager with her mother, father, and siblings and is now in her twenties. One of the very few longitudinal studies on refugee resettlement in UK context finds that young people from refugee backgrounds aged 13-24 face the most problems of any other age category as they struggle to re-engage with academic content, school language and literacy practices, and find the transition most difficult due to levels of host language proficiency (Collyer et al, 2018). For those of school-age, there is an expectation that compulsory education will be there to support young people from refugee backgrounds. However, when Hana arrived in Northern Ireland: *"there was no school for me to go to because of my age"*. Hana saw her younger siblings being placed in schools, coming home with books and homework, and beginning to learn English. She saw her mother attempting to use English to communicate with teachers at school and in shops when they were buying food. Hana says that she had no experience of using English before she came to Northern Ireland. She enrolled in a local college and had been attending English classes 2-3 days per week, but she says: *"College is okay but sometimes I do not understand"*. She also noted that the family had moved house which meant that she could no longer walk to college. It became clear during the interview that Hana had a great desire to learn English but expressed frustration at her attempts to learn through college classes and online via YouTube videos. Hana described some of the occasions that she would use English outside the home:

"When I go to Belfast I use the train or bus and I have to speak to the train conductor or bus driver. Sometimes when I go to the shop people speak to me. Sometimes I am embarrassed because sometimes I don't understand"

Hana repeatedly described her feelings about these situations; she describes being embarrassed at not being able to understand spoken English and of being upset because she could not communicate with people. During the family interview, Hana's mother described looking after her ill husband and the difficulties she has communicating at healthcare appointments. Her mother also expressed feeling a lack of privacy when having to use interpreters for her medical appointments. The sense of the impact of these current situations,

and the disruption to her own education on Hana's perceptions of herself and her language skills are captured in her comment:

"I wish they had school for my age ...I can't even help my family with translating".

Learning any language at any time evokes a gamut of emotions - joy, fear, shame, pride. The challenges of learning a language in the context of forced migration and resettlement cannot be underestimated (e.g. Salvo and Williams, 2017). Researchers are re-examining the decades-long dominance of a strong cognitive perspective on language learning (e.g. Plonsky et al., 2022) and are recognising that research on emotions and language learning goes beyond notions of 'language anxiety'.

From a refugee education perspective in resettlement contexts, Gladwell (2019) notes, as Hana had hoped for, that it is good practice to offer full-time provision of college ESOL integrated with IT, Maths, and other subjects which can offer clear progression routes for young people.

Furthermore, knowledge and experience of trauma-informed practice in language pedagogy could contribute to a wider range of opportunities for language learners which may be considered more empowering and appropriate for individual circumstances.

6 CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Taking the collective evidence from the family interviews and limited survey data enables us to construct a picture of language learning and dictionary use by refugee-background families as they attempt to live and settle in a new community with another language. The primary purpose in having developed this picture is to better understand the needs and practices of this group of learners/language users so that tailored support for families with their language learning can be provided. This evidence of practices, preferences and problems, which comes directly from the families themselves, allows us to develop a much more informed approach to learner training and volunteer/teacher training. It has also provided insight into the lived experiences of families trying to learn English in a resettlement context. These insights challenge the assumptions that living in a 'host' country alone will enable the development of language proficiency and that the provision of formal language classes will be insufficient to enable families to live, work, and integrate with the communities where they have been placed. The evidence in this report offers a very plain 'reality check' which questions the soundness of those assumptions, but it also offers a number of very clear paths as to how the desired

outcomes of the development of language skills to support integration in communities can be achieved differently.

On the basis of this study, we make the following recommendations:

- Make a free printed bilingual (where possible) picture dictionary available to all newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers
- Develop free (in-person and online) workshops to support learners with their dictionary use
- Focus these workshops on i) basic dictionary consultation skills, ii) pronunciation awareness iii) explicit vocabulary learning strategies
- Develop free (in-person and online) workshops to support teachers/volunteers to strengthen development of dictionary skills in class context so that more targeted use can be made of dictionaries at home
- Support the resourcing, development and use of associated digital resources in the context of digital/data poverty
- Develop a wider range and greater accessibility to formal, non-formal, and informal language learning opportunities for migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers
- Develop programmes which focus on language learner training and language learning strategies

7 OVERALL REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

The results from this study offer the field of dictionary research evidence of dictionary use in a specific context, by a group of learners/users. We observed from our literature review search that refugee-background learners are not typically represented in dictionary research studies. As a practitioner who has worked across different geopolitical and educational contexts supporting English language learners aged 2-82, this is particularly striking. Of all the learners I have seen use, misuse, complain about, try, and buy dictionaries, none have held more tightly to their dictionaries than this group.

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From a broader social perspective, the evidence from this study begins to shine a light on the role of dictionary resources as tools for capacity and confidence-building in the lives of newly resettled refugee families.

There are a number of limitations of this study, both anticipated and unanticipated. We are very aware that the textual basis of the survey meant that we were not engaging with people with low or no levels of literacy. Given that the dictionary was in colour and provided pictures it may well be the case that those with low or no levels of literacy may have been equally likely to be using this dictionary, but we do not have their voices represented in the survey data.

The survey data has been much more difficult to gather than anticipated. Due to the pandemic, all data collection had to be moved online. While we conducted a pilot to test the interview and survey completion, this was with a related population (migrants) and not the target population (refugees). The impacts of COVID-19 on volunteer language programmes are likely to be substantial (e.g. lack of online engagement due to digital/data poverty; health conditions which impact willingness/ability to engage in classes) and longer-term impacts will continue to emerge. In addition, over the course of this research, the particular scheme this project was focused on ceased to operate during the pandemic and regular contacts were no longer available. Moreover, the protracted negative political/public discourse on refugees/asylum seekers can result in families being very reluctant to identify as 'refugee' background and therefore unresponsive to requests explicitly labelled or directed as such.

To broaden our understanding of the diversity of learner populations and dictionary use, the survey data collection of this study can be re-used with adult migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Northern Ireland and comparatively across different geopolitical locations. Workshop materials have been prepared and can be delivered online or in-person, and we have been invited to deliver workshops and presentations in a number of contexts.

In relation to future plans, as noted above, I intend to extend the survey to a wider population. I also intend to collect evaluations of the workshops with the teachers/volunteers in order to assess their perceived usefulness and to provide feedback on any suggestions /amendments.

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Organizations

Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre: <https://www.burc.org/>

ESOL NI. <https://esolwebapp.azurewebsites.net/AboutUs>

STEP: <https://www.strongertogetherni.org/step-south-tyrone-empowerment-programme/>