



Refugee Education UK

ESOL Framework Learning Review

Refugee Education UK, Dec 2024

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1. Introduction

Refugee Education UK (REUK) is a national charity equipping young refugees to build positive futures by thriving in education. This work is structured around three core goals:

- **Education access:** all refugee children and young people can access the level of education that's right for them, from primary to tertiary education
- **Education thriving:** refugee children and young people are able to thrive in education, reach their academic potential and experience better social, emotional and mental health
- **Education change:** refugee and asylum seeking young people have opportunities to use their education to create meaningful futures.

Within the education thriving pillar, REUK runs an established 1:1 educational mentoring programme providing bespoke weekly educational mentoring to 16-25 year old refugees and asylum seekers in Birmingham, London and Oxford. Mentoring consists of a unique blend of ESOL and academic tutoring and wellbeing support. Currently, around 200 mentoring pairs meet weekly over the course of a year, representing over 5,600 hours of personalised support.

In 2021, REUK received funding from The Bell Foundation to develop and integrate new ESOL components into its educational mentoring programme. This included the development of a new ESOL framework, tailored to young refugees, for use by mentors, alongside additional training.

This briefing shares learning and reflections from the development and use of this framework within the REUK educational mentoring programme. The aim of the briefing (and one of the aims of the wider project) is to contribute to shared learning and building the evidence base about refugee ESOL learners' language acquisition and educational progression.

2. Context: the importance of quality ESOL provision

Young refugees and asylum seekers arrive in the UK highly motivated to learn and to progress in their education, but, for many, English language acquisition poses a major barrier to progression (Gladwell and Chetwynd, 2018; Ashlee and Gladwell, 2020; Lambrechts, 2020). Young people who have been displaced often describe language barriers as being amongst the most challenging aspects of their lives in the UK, making it difficult to make friends and access services (ONS, 2023). Pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL) who arrive late in the English school system, with limited time to gain English proficiency, face a severe attainment penalty (EPI, 2024). Timely access to quality English for Speakers of Other

Languages (ESOL) provision is crucial, enabling young refugees to move forwards in their lives, to succeed in education and employment and to overcome isolation (Refugee Action, 2017).

Barriers to language acquisition include long waiting lists for places on full time ESOL courses, the limited number of hours of ESOL provision available, large class sizes encompassing learners with a wide range of abilities, and limited time and capacity to provide learners with tailored support. Asylum seekers must also generally wait six months from the date of their asylum claim before they can access a funded ESOL place. ESOL provision is severely under-resourced: funding for ESOL provision in England was reduced from £212.3 million in 2008 to £105 million in 2018, a cut of almost 60%, despite rising demand for courses (Refugee Action, 2019). Refugees in England routinely wait months to access ESOL classes (Refugee Action, 2017).

3. The framework

Need and development

In 2021, through a series of consultations with refugee young people and those supporting their English language acquisition in various capacities (ESOL teachers, REUK educational mentors, REUK mentoring coordinators), it became clear that the available ESOL curriculum was not meeting all of the language learning needs of forcibly displaced young people. The ESOL curriculum used by 16-19 providers (at Key Stage 5) is 20 years old, and is no longer in line with evidenced best practice in language acquisition. In addition, the particular circumstances of refugee and asylum seeking young people mean that they regularly need to utilise language and vocabulary not routinely included within the curriculum.

In recognition of this REUK conducted:

- A literature review of resources that highlight refugee students' language needs
- An ESOL lens analysis of REUK's educational mentoring programme
- A consultation with 13 young refugees and asylum seekers from REUK's Youth Advisory Board - in which they identified the areas of language most needed for their particular circumstances and daily lives but which they did not feel prepared for through their ESOL studies.

The findings from the literature review, ESOL lens analysis of the REUK educational mentoring programme and the findings from the refugee youth consultation were triangulated and consolidated to identify the seven most critical thematic language areas to be included in the new ESOL framework.

The framework covers seven topics: education, social services, emotions and wellbeing, healthcare, employment, digital literacy, and the asylum system, as follows:

| Topic | Sub-topics | Refugee youth rationale for inclusion |
|-------|------------|---------------------------------------|
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| | | |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key education vocabulary • Applying to university or college • Enrolling in college or university • Advocating for rights and entitlements linked to immigration status • Requesting additional support • Financial support • Future goals | Education is repeatedly identified as a priority by refugee children and young people. Young refugees in our consultation reported frequently finding themselves in situations (particularly in their late teens) where they were expected to plan, apply and negotiate their education transitions and support, but without having the specific language skills to have the confidence to self-advocate and navigate an appropriate pathway. |
| Social services | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key social services actors • Interacting with social services • Self-advocating when problems arise | Amongst the young refugees consulted, 100% of those who were or who had been unaccompanied asylum seeking children felt linguistically ill-equipped to navigate the dynamics of their essential relationships with local authority staff. Young people identified situations where unwitting and unintentional use of language perceived to be inappropriate or impolite had negatively impacted their attempts to share challenges or raise problems. |
| Emotions and wellbeing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking about feelings • Promoting positive mental health | The majority of young people consulted identified as coming from a background or culture where mental health was not routinely discussed. As a result, many of them reported not having an existing and active mother tongue framework to link English language acquisition to - meaning that structured linguistic input on the language of emotion and wellbeing (as opposed to informal, 'playground only' input) was perceived by the respondents to be needed. |
| Healthcare | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthcare people and places • Making and attending appointments | Just under half of the youth respondents identified having delayed seeking healthcare or medical support due to |

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|-------------------|---|---|
| | | nervousness about understanding or being understood by healthcare professionals in the practical process of making an appointment. |
| Employment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment vocabulary • Applying for and attending a job interview • Employment and wages | The young refugees consulted identified that one of the many barriers to employment was a lack of familiarity with the default language and expressions customarily used in the course of applying for work in the UK. They reported feeling disadvantaged/underconfident from the outset as a result. |
| Digital literacy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of technology • Digital scams | In addition to a reported need for greater exposure to the vocabulary used to describe specific and newer forms of technology (see reference above on the ESOL curriculum being more than 20 years old), one third of the young refugee respondents had experienced either themselves or someone they knew falling victim to a digital scam - and then discovering that their mother tongue English peers had noticed linguistic red flags that had alerted them to risk. |
| The asylum system | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The asylum system • Statuses | Navigating the UK asylum system was described as a particular challenge by all of the young asylum seekers consulted. Without exception, young people had received critical letters from solicitors and the Home Office without understanding key terminology, and the majority had at least once been accorded an immigration status and not understood its meaning. |

Each section covers one topic and includes an introduction, anticipated outcomes, sensitivities and considerations, sub-topics, examples and activities.

Critically, the activities within each section are mapped to the standards of the ESOL Core Curriculum - meaning that the framework acts as a complement and enhancement to the existing resources used across the country.

Safeguarding and sensitive topics

Three of the topics included in the framework (emotional wellbeing, healthcare and the asylum system) are recognised as having potential to trigger feelings of distress, and as such - in addition to completing REUK's regular safeguarding, child protection and mentor induction programme as standard, all educational mentors are asked to speak to, and gain specific approval from, their REUK Educational Mentoring Coordinator (MC) before proceeding with these topics. This enables the MC to ensure that the mentor is equipped not only with the framework but with other appropriate resources, and that an internal referral to a specialist within REUK (or externally to one of our partners) can be made for the young person if issues needing support beyond the scope of educational mentoring arise.

The ESOL framework is hosted on REUK's Articulate Rise and is available [here](#).

4. Methods

The data presented in this learning review is gathered from a range of sources, including:

- Quantitative pre-training baseline data, and a post training comparison, as well as qualitative training evaluation data
- Educational mentoring monitoring data (each week, REUK educational mentors complete an online form after their mentoring session, providing feedback and monitoring the progress of their mentee),
- Feedback forms from educational mentors
- 3 in-depth semi-structured key informant interviews with educational mentors

5. Findings and reflections:

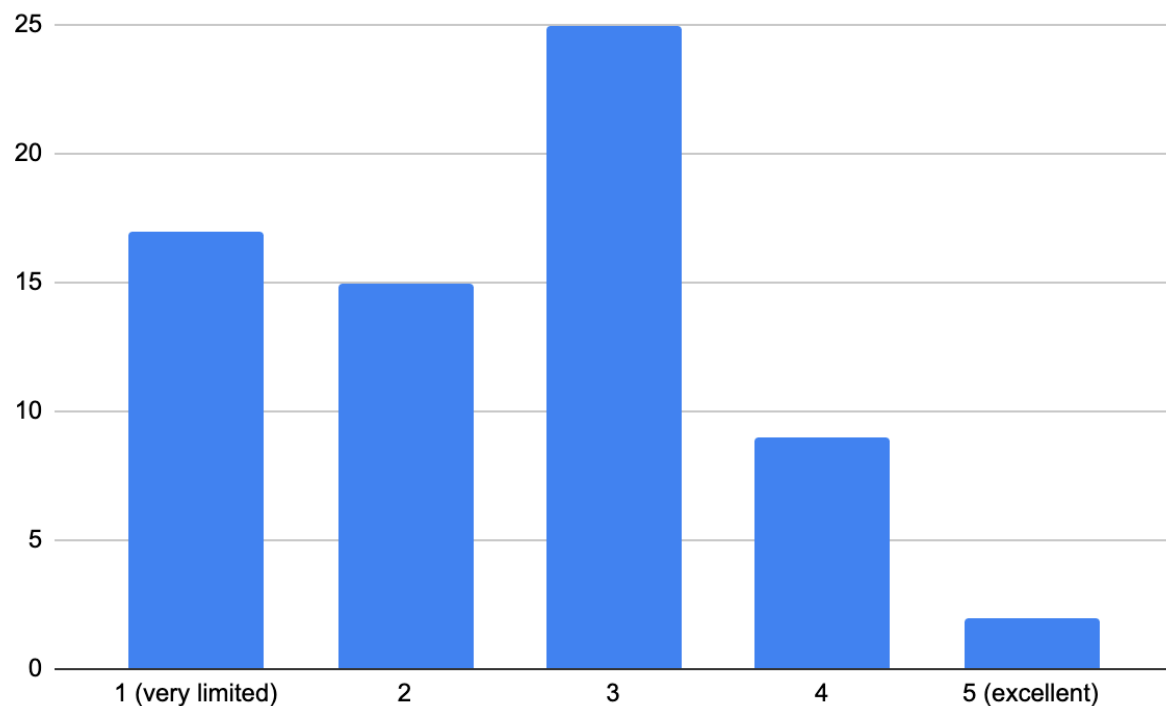
5.1 ESOL-literacy and confidence of educational mentors

To date, REUK has trained 71 educational mentors in use of the framework.

The training in Part one is delivered online and completed asynchronously. Parts two and three of the training are delivered live, by an REUK team member and an experienced former Head of 16-19 ESOL at a major London FE college.

Of the 71 trainees, 26 had no prior experience of teaching, and only 10 had specific experience of teaching ESOL or EFL (or informal English language teaching). As a result, despite ESOL and English language improvement being a priority for the majority of young refugees participating in the REUK Educational Mentoring programme, mentor confidence levels with ESOL were low (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Pre-training knowledge and confidence levels



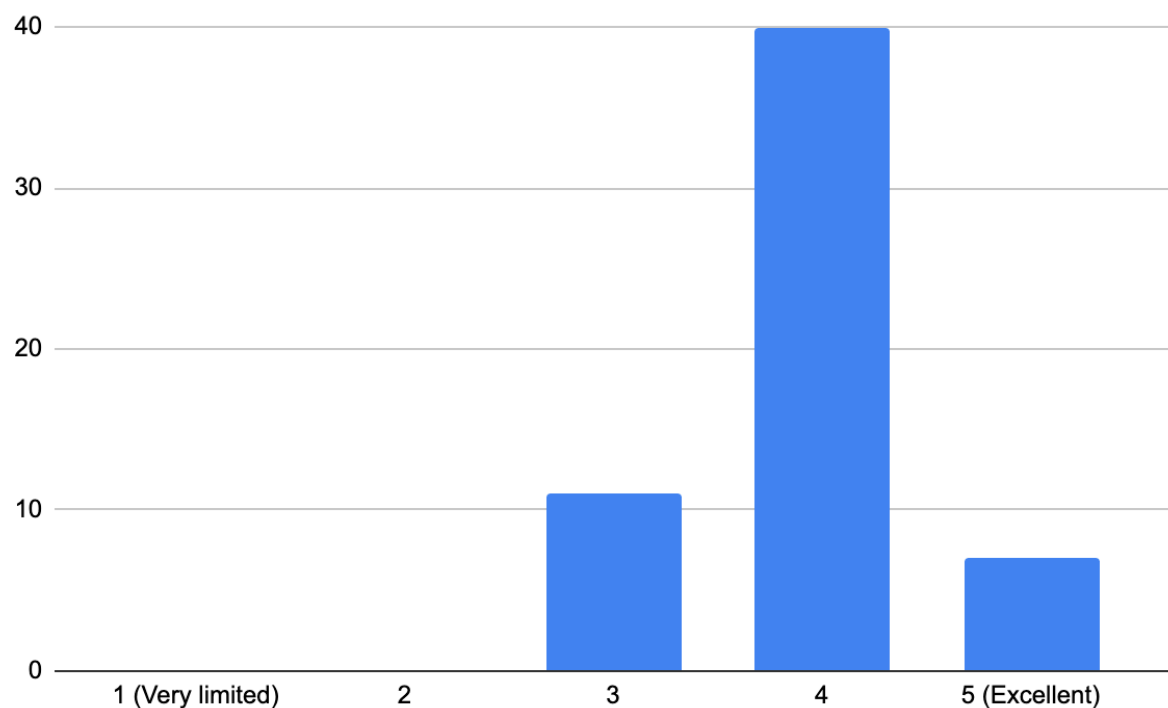
One of the primary goals of this project was, in the framework, to create a tool that enabled educational mentors with limited pre-existing ESOL knowledge or experience to confidently support displaced young people with the acquisition of key language - complementary to the areas being covered in the majority of 16-19 ESOL courses within FE colleges.

As a result, the training was developed to be an intensive deep dive into equipping young people with English language skills, as well as enabling them to use the framework and associated resources in particular.

Training was very well received by mentors. Role play activities, in which participants practiced using the framework with other mentors, were viewed as particularly helpful, as were opportunities to exchange learning and share challenges with other mentors.

Following the training and exploration of the framework, mentor understanding of ESOL and confidence supporting their mentee to develop relevant language skills had grown significantly (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Post-training knowledge and confidence levels:



“The sessions focused on practical suggestions/techniques to use during mentoring sessions, which can be easily put into practice. Lovely meeting other mentors and sharing challenges/experiences.”

“I feel I learned a lot about the ESOL framework and will be more confident using it.”

5.2 Relevance and impact of the framework

How have mentors been using the framework?

“I think this ESOL framework is excellent, congratulations! It gives a great overview, backed up by lots of useful content, ideas, and activities, all well-focussed on, & appropriate for, the practical needs of young asylum seekers (and their mentors). Really appreciated access to info about the asylum system. Thank you.”

Analysis of survey, feedback and interview data from volunteer educational mentors shows that the framework has been well received and is viewed positively.

Educational mentors have used the framework to **create structure for their sessions** with their mentee, particularly in the early stages of mentoring relationships when mentors are new to planning sessions. One mentor recalled thinking, for example, that the framework was

“a good structure for the classes. At the start, when we were kind of still getting to know each other, it was better to have the classes more planned out, I thought, whereas now he kind of does come to me with, you know, maybe something that he struggled with, or we're working on something together from his classes, but at the start, it was better to have a structure coming into it.” (KI03).

Other mentors have found the framework useful for introducing specialist, subject specific **vocabulary on the critical themes** covered by the framework, noting a need for young people “to be more familiar with vocabulary and terminology” in these areas; and as a **content guide** for themselves, telling that “the framework was useful from the point of view of reminding me of things which might need to be covered. So there are probably things in the framework that maybe I wouldn't have thought of without the framework being there” (KI01).

Mentors also reported finding the **alignment of the framework with competencies and ESOL curriculum standards** helpful. Mapping new areas of language to the ESOL curriculum can be complicated and challenging for educational mentors, and they reported greater understanding of “the different levels and the possibilities for using the levels in creative ways” (KI02). Mentors used the framework to ensure their mentees were using level-appropriate language across the new thematic areas, but were also able to apply to ESOL knowledge the framework had given them to their mentees' preparation for critical college assessments. One mentor reporting that, during a period when her mentee had an exam approaching, she used the framework and

“copied and pasted the criteria for Entry Level 3 for writing, what they have to do. And I printed it out.... that's been really interesting because he's quite taken to that really. ... I think it's been helpful in terms of him seeing, yeah, that's why this test is, that's why I need to do this in this test, why I need to aim to write a complex sentence actually.” (KI02)

What topics have mentors been using?

Across the framework, education has been the most used topic to date, followed by (in order) healthcare, employment, the asylum system and social services.

It is perhaps not surprising that the education section of the framework has been the most used: the young people participating in the REUK educational mentoring programme have already made a commitment to investing in their education, and stated that this is a priority area for them. The educational mentors, too, are also giving up their time on a voluntary basis because they have a specific interest in supporting the education progression of a young refugee or asylum seeker - and so it is to be recognised that there is a likely pre-disposition towards this topic.

Within the other four most frequently used topics, both understanding specialist terminology, and being able to apply language to real life situations was found to be important for mentors. As one mentor told us, when a young person is making use of healthcare facilities or has a health condition “terminology like the difference between an inpatient and an outpatient, what accident and emergency means... simple terminology like

surgery, ward, things like that' becomes of acute importance to their ability to navigate their circumstances. When discussing using the section of the framework on social services, a mentor highlighted that, after achieving the can-do statements *"Express a problem you are facing in your housing and ask for help solving it"*; *"Write an email or text message describing a problem you are facing and requesting help"*; and *"Recognise key vocabulary items such as 'social worker' or 'leaving care personal assistant'"*, the young person was equipped to complete an online application to their local authority for help with finding alternative accommodation" - again emphasizing the relevance of the framework for the daily life situations young refugees and asylum seekers have to navigate.

Although it was not one of the most frequently used topics, one volunteer mentor reported that when they had used the section of the framework on emotions and wellbeing, it had been because they had "sort of felt that he needed a little bit of that, he had sort of reached out to me, like he was feeling a bit like, yeah, lonely and things and I thought that maybe to have some more vocabulary was kind of a good class to do at that time". Again, this underscores the importance of the framework in giving young refugees language that they need beyond the classroom - and the critical link between language and ability to articulate mental health and emotional needs.

When was the framework not relevant / why was it not being used?

Where the framework had not been used by mentors and mentees, to date it has primarily been because mentoring pairs have been working on something specific. For example, when a mentee is using the sessions with their mentor to prepare for a specific test, or to consolidate a particular area of grammar or skill (e.g. speaking or reading) that they have identified as their primary goal. For some mentees, their language is pre-Entry level, and they are not yet at the level required to access the framework. Despite this, one mentor reflected,

"I definitely think, you know, in six months time, it's going to be more useful because he would have kind of improved a good bit with his English. And he might be able to do more of the stuff that is asked in the framework where it's like can do statements and asking for something yourself and all that."

For other young people, their circumstances have meant that they have not needed to develop language in the framework areas - because they are already proficient in those topics, or because their circumstances mean it is not a priority for them (for example if they are a child in a family with indefinite leave to remain - and so are not interested in learning about the asylum system or social services). Educational mentoring at REUK is designed to be heavily mentee (as opposed to mentor) directed, and so mentors will respect the preferences and choices of the young person as to how the sessions are used.

The primary barrier to using the framework expressed by mentors was caution about some of the more sensitive topics. One mentor reported that, although they had used certain parts of the framework,

“We aren't meant to be nosy in our relationships with the mentee. We're not meant to start probing questions... about things like their immigration status or why they came to this country, how they came here, all of that, their families... that rules out quite a lot of areas where the framework might have come in useful.” (KI01)

Other mentors reported that the support provided around trickier areas in the training sessions, the broader REUK mentor development training and bespoke support from REUK mentoring coordinators had adequately equipped them to use these areas of the framework.

Mentors with substantial pre-existing English language teaching experience reported that in their view, the framework and associated training was most useful for mentors (the majority) with less existing experience.

5.3 Recommendations and next steps

Four key recommendations have been identified in the course of this learning review:

1. Additional topics

Several educational mentors within the REUK community have fed back that additional topics such as leisure activities and hobbies would also be useful for the framework, as well as “things that help young people to build up their cultural capital”. This will be explored going forward, however, it is also recognised that leisure activities and hobbies are amongst the topics more commonly covered within mainstream ESOL classes, particularly in 16-19 provision within FE colleges.

2. Additional support for mentors

Following the feedback from mentors around the more challenging or sensitive topics, additional guidance for mentors on appropriate use of these parts of the framework will be developed and shared with mentors. It was also recognised during this process that mentors themselves frequently produce additional resources for use with their mentees, and that these often relate to an area of the framework (or broader language development and ESOL skills). It was suggested that REUK develop an online space to collate resources that different mentors have developed to enable all mentors to make use of them.

3. Improved accessibility

Two improvements to the accessibility of the framework were also suggested during this review. Firstly, although the framework was viewed positively in terms of its structure on the platform Articulate Rise, a more detailed diagrammatic overview of the framework at the start of the resource was requested as a reference tool. Secondly, a portion of mentors expressed the view that a hard copy of the framework would make it easier to use with their mentee - particularly when meeting in locations such as a public cafe, and when the mentor has not been able to bring their personal laptop to the meeting (for example, when they are travelling to meet their mentee directly from their workplace and do not customarily use a laptop in their sessions).

4. Wider use

Finally, it emerged through this review process that the ESOL framework has been useful beyond the REUK educational mentoring programme. In Oxfordshire, REUK runs an 'orientation programme' - a temporary bridging provision for unaccompanied asylum seeking children waiting for places in mainstream schools. These children receive 4 weeks of intensive English language support, along with cultural orientation, social and emotional learning activities - all within a supportive and nurturing environment. Volunteer teachers within this programme have also reported using the framework on an adhoc basis - and we would like to explore further how the framework might be more fully embedded into this aspect of our work.

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