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Multilingual Manchester student volunteering scheme:

English conversation support sessions at The Chrysalis Centre, Moss Side

A blog post by Katie Warcup, a third-year undergraduate in Politics and Modern History and Robin Archard, a third-year undergraduate in Politics and Philosophy at The University of Manchester. Katie and Robin volunteered for the English conversation support sessions from October 2015. The activity is coordinated by Dr Aoileann Ní Mhurchú, Lecturer in International Politics, as part of The University of Manchester's Multilingual Manchester project.

June 2016

At the beginning of the 2015-2016 academic year, our Politics lecturer, Dr Aoileann Ní Mhurchú, announced to our class that there was an opportunity to take part in English conversation sessions with refugees and migrants. Our last two years at The University of Manchester had been great, but with the growing knowledge that our time in this city was drawing to a close, there was also a feeling that we wanted to make more of the opportunities available to us while we still could. Despite having lived in Manchester for two years, the reality of the city still felt like a distant concept, one far outside our day to day student lives. So when Aoileann announced the opportunity to get involved with a volunteering scheme, in partnership with Multilingual Manchester, that would enable us to take part in a community project, many of us in the room jumped at the opportunity. That was the start of our time at The Chrysalis Centre. For two hours every Wednesday, a selection of students would go to the Centre to participate in and lead conversation sessions with a room full of people from all different walks of life. What started as a bunch of nervous and apprehensive individuals, both the university students and English students alike, and became a friendly and heartening community. As we all settled in, grew to know each other more, and grew more confident in ourselves and our abilities, the conversation sessions became incredibly inspiring and rewarding.



Firstly, it's important to give a brief history of the Centre, as it is a reflection of the motivations and goals of the people who work there. The Chrysalis Centre came into fruition from the idea of a paediatrician, Dr Margaret Clarke, in 1993. Julie Asumu, a woman who has worked at the Centre since its creation, told us how in the 1980/90s the surrounding areas had very high rates of teenage pregnancy. These young mothers were often still in school and had not yet learnt the

skills needed to look after a family. The girls would often go to the clinic and sit there all day with their babies, for lack of any purpose or place to go; there was a constant fear of social services coming to take their babies away. This led to Dr Clarke calling members of the community together in order to create a Centre where these young girls could all come together. From 2-4pm everyday a nursery was established. Whilst the children were being looked after, the young mums had some independent time. They could get specialist support, such as cookery lessons and counselling, as well as the support of each other through the strength of a collective network. Julie told us how a few of the young mums, with the support of the Centre, managed to go to university. However, the set up of the Centre was not easy. Julie explained that Moss Side was a really dangerous area at that time, with little sense of community. She emphasised how there was a real problem with the local gangs, who had been using the abandoned houses that were to become the Centre as a den for drugs. This meant that there were countless attempts to develop the initial idea that were disrupted by the two gangs. The place Julie described is worlds apart from the Centre today, and Moss Side in general. The front door is often unlocked, everyone is friendly to each other, and there is no longer a pressing danger from warring gangs. Chrysalis has been indispensable for the strong sense of community in the area today.

Ideally, the Centre was to become part of the NHS, however unfortunately that was not possible, therefore it began as an entirely voluntary-run establishment. Although the Centre does now employ members of staff – Julie Asumu and Dr Erinma Bell – who deal with the administrative side of things, it is still entirely dependent on private funding. Voluntary schemes such as the English conversation sessions are therefore really vital, as the Centre needs as much voluntary support as possible. Perceptibly, from the Chrysalis Centre's very origins, it has been built around the concept of community and people coming together to help each other, and this ethos continues to flourish today. The Centre is informal and friendly, and the women who work there pride themselves on a welcoming atmosphere. As Julie highlights, a formal approach can scare people away, and the Centre is keen to make sure that anyone and everyone feels comfortable to use its services by ensuring an approachable persona. This is therefore reflected in the non-formal approach of the conversation sessions as well.

Due to the fact that the Centre does not rely on financial support from the government, it has to raise money on its own and therefore they must use the money they have wisely. The services provided have been tailored to what is thought to be the most necessary for the surrounding community's needs. Therefore, the nursery has now been closed and replaced with more pressing focuses. For example, the Centre now provides intermittent support workshops to look after families who are at risk of having their children taken into care. The Centre works closely with social services and health visitors in order to offer parenting courses. County courts and schools are aware of this service provided. Furthermore, on Fridays the Centre holds a food bank to which supermarkets donate surplus food. For many, this is an invaluable service. Ultimately, The Chrysalis Centre offers supportive outreach for many within the local community.

A primary focus of the Centre in recent years however, has been English language classes. We asked Julie about how this new focus came to be. She told us how the surrounding community used to be predominantly Afro-Caribbean, but over time the community became much more multicultural. Refugees and migrants from vastly varying countries and backgrounds were now

living in and around Moss Side. These people were educated, but language barriers were preventing them from reaching their full potential in their new home country. It was from people approaching The Chrysalis Centre that Julie and her colleagues realised this problem and made it their new focus. Not being able to speak English was a real obstacle for many wanting to get employed, and also caused a sense of isolation for the migrants. The Centre decided to make provisions for 'English for Speakers of Other Languages' (ESOL). Every Friday afternoon, an ESOL volunteer provides structured classes for the people who attend Chrysalis. These classes are indispensable in helping people reach a proficient level of English, which can in turn help them with employment, and overall give them a better experience of the UK. Despite how valuable these ESOL classes are, for many people who attend the lessons, it is their only opportunity to practice their English. This is where our conversation sessions come in. Aoileann and Alex Robertson – the project manager of Multilingual Manchester – organised a group of students who were keen to get involved from across The University of Manchester. On Wednesday afternoons, a selection of students from a variety of academic and language backgrounds attend the Chrysalis Centre to provide extra hours for the refugees and migrants to practise their English. Our sessions run against a backdrop of wider ESOL funding cuts in the UK over the past decade; it is interesting to note the role of volunteer schemes in this context. The sessions we led did not aim to replace or replicate professional teaching, nor were they envisaged as a course. They had the distinct aim of providing a supplementary opportunity to practise speaking English, and were run on a drop-in basis with the topics often set by the English learners, to flexibly respond to participants' schedules and needs.

When the activity first began, Aoileann and Alex would both come along and support us in leading the sessions, with the aim of gradually handing this leadership role to the student group. Week by week, we felt more confident and comfortable in guiding the sessions, and soon each session was volunteer-led. Each week, we would work together to plan a session, deciding on what



topic we would cover and how we would structure the two hours. For example, topics such as, jobs, family, directions, sports and culture were often used as the basis of the classes. The infinite array of online activities available on ESOL support sites has been incredibly helpful to influence our ideas for topics. We all fully acknowledge the importance of a plan for the sessions, as if you run out of activities, it is hard to think up ideas on the spot. Our plans would need to include activities for the range of abilities of the English students. For instance, activities including

pictures for which we would discuss the meaning and context are really suitable for those who have lower levels of English. Conversely, activities that included creating a written vocabulary record are really popular amongst the more advanced English speakers as you could see that they give them a real sense of fulfilment to write vocabulary down, and get feedback from the students.

Ultimately though, simple conversations have proved useful for the participants. Their constant emphasis that they want to get better at *speaking* English means that conversing with English students is really helpful. A lot of the participants have excellent written and reading skills but stress that speaking English is harder due to the varying accents in the UK. This really highlights the usefulness of conversation in language development. Whilst some of the topics were more practical, such as directions, many of the other topics allowed us to learn more about each other and people's home countries. For example, topics such as culture or politics would lead to interesting conversations about the social background of the countries that people came from. It was fascinating learning about each other's religious or social festivals, home cuisines and traditions.

Some of the classes also drew on the 'Life in the UK' handbook, and covered harder topics such as history and politics. The 'Life in the UK' book was purchased after we received many requests for help for the migrants' Life in the UK tests, which is essential to securing citizenship in the UK. This was really fascinating as many of the questions included in the test were really hard, even for those of us who had lived in the UK all of our lives! However, it was a good foundation for topics such as history and politics, which would open conversations about politics in the participants' home countries. This was a real eye-opener.

The progression of the participants has been immeasurable. Their vocabulary, pronunciation, and their ability to hold a conversation have all significantly improved. However, it is also many people's growth in confidence which has been incredibly touching. For example, one woman began the classes so shy and barely said a word. Over the course of the sessions, as



her confidence grew, she became louder and louder and would always make us laugh. By the time we have come to leave the project, she is one of the biggest characters in the room. For the last English session that many of us attended, we asked everyone to bring a traditional food from their home. We didn't plan any activities for the lesson as we decided that giving each student a five minute one-to-one conversation would enable us to give them all individual feedback. The session was really warming and bought home just how lovely the project has been. It also really highlighted how far these students have progressed. For example, an Eritrean participant, who was really shy to begin with, has now has advanced levels of English and his confidence has grown

massively! After being desperate for employment, he now has a job working for a restaurant in Rusholme. It has been a pleasure to work with such hardworking students and to see them flourish is incredibly rewarding. The participants have such a strong desire to learn English and requested more conversation time if possible. This indicated to us just how beneficial and necessary the lessons are for these migrants, and with a lack in funding for ESOL and for the Centre, voluntary English conversation sessions really are of high value.

Furthermore, we as students have also matured and progressed due to our participation in the project. In the initial lessons the thought that we would have to take a leadership role was daunting. Now, it is clear that we all really enjoy the role. As part of our training and development, Aoileann and Alex organised sessions where we would come to discuss how the project was going and our ideas for improvement. In these training sessions it was made evident that each of us as students have really developed due to our involvement in the project. With everyone being able to indicate the methods they find useful or limiting, it really shows how engaged with the project we all are. The session that would be the last one for many of us (who were graduating and so would not be around in the summer or next year) was emotional as it highlighted just how touching the project had been for the participants and us. Similarly, many of us are now applying for postgraduate jobs and have found that the skills we have developed from the project have really advanced our competence. Overall, our participation in the conversation classes has been a highlight of our experience in Manchester and exceeded our original expectations.