

Information Needs of Refugees: A Case Study of a Refugee Group Learning English in a Further Education College

Research proposal

Eva Maria de Rio Perez

MODULE BP 101

MA/MSc Information Studies
University of Northumbria – Newcastle
Università degli Studi – Parma

Introduction

A great deal has been discussed among librarians and teaching staff concerning the needs of a group of refugees/immigrants to acquire information skills in a further education college where this group takes ESOL classes. There is no doubt from both parties that the acquisition of these skills is crucial for their integration into society. Nevertheless, the cause of the argument is about how these skills should be delivered and by whom. Traditionally, teachers have taken these groups once a week to the Learning Centre (LC) and deliver a class as part of the curriculum. However, no special treatment has been offered to these groups from librarians. During the last year, this situation has raised concern among librarians, as this may not be the most beneficial way for these students to acquire such skills. It has been observed that most students would go to the LC during that class but would not go back again until the following class. It has been noticed by library staff that these students would approach librarians only if asked to do so by the teacher. Many of them would only go to the library during this lesson to borrow or return books and not at any other time. This situation has led to a debate between the ESOL tutors and the library staff. While the first argue that students benefit more if they have an information skills session with the teacher, librarians disagree by arguing that if the students have this sessions on their own and with the help of the librarians, they are more likely to use the library for their independent study, and therefore, to become independent learners. As a result, a new programme has been launched on a trial basis in which ESOL teachers and library staff will work closely. The workshop will take place in a classroom and will be delivered by the teacher. Then students will be sent in small groups to the LC to complete a part of the research booklet designed for this purpose. Once in the library, they are the responsibility of the librarians.

1. Aims and objectives

The main goal of this project is to identify the information needs of a group of immigrants/refugees learning English as a Second Language as they follow the recently launched information skills programme as part of the curriculum. The findings of this case study will result in a series of recommendations for a new information skills programme for refugee students and also an improvement of the reference stock.

The objectives deriving from this goal are:

- ✓ To explore issues related to refugees-asylum seekers in the UK.
- ✓ To find out the general background of the population studied.
- ✓ To investigate the needs that a group of refugees may have in a Learning Centre of a school of English.
- ✓ To research ways in which the issue has been tackled by other institutions/countries.
- ✓ To increase participation in and awareness of library services by refugees and asylum seekers.
- ✓ To suggest ways to improve/change the service according to those needs.

From the above objectives derives the following research questions that must be taken into account during the data collection:

- How are refugees being integrated into society in terms of linguistic competence and information skills?
- How are multicultural factors taken into account when teaching groups of refugees?
- How can the LC be improved in terms of stock and service provision to meet the needs of refugees?
- Why should information skills be delivered by the librarian instead of the teacher?

2. Background

In order to put this project into context, evidence will be gathered on the following topics through an extensive literature review:

- ♦ Refugees in the UK: issues
- ♦ Integration of refugees into
- ♦ Information skills and ESOL provision

The literature corroborates that “full economic and social participation of refugees in the UK depends partly on familiarity with the English Language. It is crucial therefore for the integration of refugees into local labour markets and communities in the UK that the provision of ESOL is adequate and appropriate” (Griffiths, 2003). Nevertheless, in the information era in which we live there is something that is almost as essential as language, which is the ability to handle and search for information. This ability has been called in many different ways, being the most popular ones information literacy (in America) and information skills (in the UK). For the purpose of this project, the latter will be used as it is carried out in a British institution.

Government policy on the dispersal of refugees and asylum seekers has had a major impact on many educational organisations in terms of language and information skills provision. These institutions find themselves with a new type of students with very different needs in terms of teaching methodology and resources.

Libraries have a central role to play in ensuring that everyone has access to the resources, information and knowledge that they may need. Particularly those groups in society who will otherwise be disadvantaged, including people who are less affluent and people with literacy problems (Framework for the future¹, p.: 6) or people whose linguistic competence is limited.

The debate here is whether information skills should be delivered by teachers or librarians. This argument is already found in the literature. For instance, in her model of instruction for international students, Conteh-Morgan believes that if library instruction is delivered by the ESOL teacher, students can benefit more than if the delivering is carried out by the librarian. She holds that “the students see their

instructors many times a week, and normally develop a friendlier, relaxed relationship with them. These instructors are already familiar with one of the student's perceived 'inadequacies' (that is, their level of communicative competence), so having them, instead of librarians, teach something that all students generally feel overwhelmed by could reduce the ESL student's anxiety" (2001:31). There is no doubt that the ESOL instructor should play a part in the information skills program, however in the delivery of the programme the contribution of the librarian is crucial. Some authors have gone as far as to say that librarians should think carefully about the contribution that the experiences a learner has in their libraries make to that learner's lifelong pursuit of information skills and success with information (Hinchliffe, 2003).

Welcome to your library was a pilot project, set up and co-ordinated by London Libraries Development Agency "that aimed to identify and overcome barriers to use of public library and information services by asylum seekers and refugees". The project ran from May 2003 to June 2004. One of the objectives of the WTYL project was, like in the proposed project, to increase participation in and awareness of library services by refugees and asylum seekers.

Evidence gathered through WTYL shows there are many barriers to the use of public libraries by refugee communities. These include:

- ✓ Lack of awareness and understanding of services on offer
- ✓ Library joining procedures that put asylum seekers in particular at disadvantage
- ✓ Lack of relevant and appropriate stock.

If refugees acquire information skills as part of their ESOL programme, not only will they be acquiring the ability to communicate effectively but also they will be more likely to be confident users of public libraries. Therefore, they will become independent learners and will not have to depend on others for understanding information. This ability is what some researchers call "liberal art" (Shapiro et al., 1996).

3. Methodology

The proposed work is a qualitative project in which the methodology used is a longitudinal deviant case study. Deviant in this case means that the group of customers to be studied are different in terms of information needs to the usual customer of a further education college. A group of refugees is going to be studied over a period of 4 months. In order to put the project into context the dissertation begins with an introduction section to familiarise the reader with the case organization. In addition, an extensive literature review will be carried out.

Case study

Every organisation needs to evaluate the effectiveness of what it has been doing, and to examine what changes should be made in order to improve its capacity to meet the needs of its clients. Both these functions lend themselves to case study work.

(Esterhuizen, 2004:18)

The reason why a case study has been chosen for this project is that this type of research method satisfies the main goals of this research: *evaluating* how the LC has been doing in terms of information skills for refugees, *understanding* the outcomes of the new programme in opposition with the former one, and *examining* the results.

Case studies are particularly useful in offering a holistic picture of experiences and results regarding a programme and as well as offering the opportunity to include the client's opinions and suggestions. Case study is done in a way that incorporates the views of the "actors" in the case under study (Tellis, 1997).

For example, to evaluate the effectiveness of a programme's processes, including its strengths and weaknesses, evaluators might develop cases studies on the programme's successes and failures. Case studies are used to organize a wide range of information about a case and then analyse the contents by seeking patterns and themes in the data, and by further analysis through cross comparison with other cases. A case can be

individuals, programs, or any unit, depending on what the program evaluators want to examine through in-depth analysis and comparison (Tellis, 1997).

Zonabend (1992) stated that case study is done by giving special attention to completeness in observation, reconstruction, and analysis of the cases under study. Case study is known as a triangulated research strategy. The need for this triangulation derives from the ethical need to add the validity of the processes (Tellis, 1997).

The protocol is a major component in adding credibility to the case study research. According to Yin (1994), a typical protocol should have the following sections:

- An overview of the case study project (objectives, issues, topics being investigated)
- Field procedures (access to sites, sources of information)
- Case study questions (specific questions that the investigator must keep in mind during data collection)
- A guide for case study report (outline, format for the narrative)

(Yin, 1994, p. 64).

The Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK (ICAR) has recently (2004) published a case study handbook specialised in the refugee sector. The handbook is part of a project called “Making better use of existing refugee agency data and information” and aims “to increase the research capacity of refugee groups by encouraging and supporting the systematic collection and use of data and information”. This is a valuable resource that offers practical guidelines about how to tackle case studies in the refugee sector.

3.2 Data collection

The data collection method determines the type and quality of the data collected. It is necessary to select methods with care and adopt as wide a range of method as possible to provide the necessary triangulation and reach (Nicholas, 2000:110). The triangulation is crucial to add reliability to the case study. Focus groups, interviews, observations and a diary are the data collection methods that will be used at different stages of the research.

3.2.1 Observation and diary

Observations can prepare the ground for interview or questionnaire study and provide the researcher with an understanding of the circumstances surrounding the objects being studied (Nicholas, 2000). Therefore, time will be dedicated to the observations of these groups when they are in the LC and notes will be taken in a diary. A diary is going to be an essential part of this research as it is a characteristic of case studies and becomes crucial when it comes to information-seeking behaviour in students. The diary will be used to collect information about general behaviour of our population in the Learning Centre, for instance what kind of questions they ask, what resources they use and any other event that may seem of relevant importance to this case study. As Nicholas (2000) points out, one of the attractions of the diary is that a lot of data can be collected over a short period of time and this is essential as time can very often become such a constraint when it comes to research.

3.2.2 Interviews

Interviews have a habit of throwing up the unexpected, things that were not asked about – but with hindsight needed

(Nicholas, 2000:111)

Open-ended in depth interviews will be carried out throughout the investigation. Questionnaires were considered at first as they are usually very useful to collect as much data as possible from a considerably big group. Nevertheless, bearing in mind that the linguistic competence of many of the subjects is considerably poor, they may not understand the questions properly and this could have an impact on the validity of the project. Interviews offer a solution to this problem as the interviewer will be able to explain with easy English the questions and can make the interviewees feel as comfortable as possible. As open-ended in depth interviews have open, wide-ranging questions and flexible and unstructured format, interviewees may get the feeling it is something informal and this is always positive to obtain spontaneous answers from the interviewees. Nicholas calls this kind of interviews a “methodological mine” (2000:114).

3.2.3 Focus groups

Before the starting of the programme, a focus group will be carried out with each of the groups investigated. These groups have already undertaken the former information skills programme and are also going to undertake the present one. This focus group will provide information about how resources in the Learning Centre were used by students when they were not with the teacher and to what extent. In addition, they may provide information about any lacks in the reference stock.

Focus groups are very positive in that they give an opportunity to send a powerful message to customers about the commitment to improve services. In addition, this kind of interviews are highly useful since they provide what sociologies call “triangulation”, that is to say, when one participant is talking, the researcher is able to watch the responses of the other interviewees and to know their opinions by their gestures and expressions.

To capture the data from these interviews (individual interviews and focus groups), a tape recorder will be used. Nicholas advises to take notes even if the interview is being taped “as a back-up in case of poor quality recording and to add a degree of authority to the respondent’s answers” (2000:123). However, I believe that if a comfortable environment for the interviewees is to be created, taken notes can be counterproductive and can take the researcher’s attention away from important details such as gestures.

4. Suggested analysis

Analysing case study information is simply about extracting relevant information in order to retell the story of that case/s in relation to a particular focus or theme

(Esterhuizen, 2004:56)

According to Tellis (1997), analysing case study evidence is the least developed aspect of this kind of research, and therefore the most difficult. As Esterhuizen points out, analysing case study information is simply about extracting relevant information. This is the suggested analysis for this project. An ongoing data analysis will be carried out by extracting information relevant to refugee information needs and by relating this information to other aspects such as multicultural factors.

For this project, the interpretations of the findings will be structured around each of the objectives. In addition, as the research involves the evaluation of a new programme, a description of the new programme’s experiences, strengths and weaknesses will be carried out and will be compared to those of the former programme.

5. Timetable of activities

Because of the nature of the case study, it is not possible to draw a detailed plan of activities for the proposed project. A focus group should take place at the beginning

of the research with each of the groups under study. This focus group is an essential starting point, as it will allow the students to express how they felt about the former programme. In addition, individual interviews will be carried throughout the project with both students and teachers. The frequency will depend on the students. Many of these students have family commitments and it is difficult for them to find time for extra events. If the teachers give their consent, lesson time will be used for focus groups and interviews.

The observations will take place on a regular basis, every week, depending on the workload of the researcher.

6. Anticipated outcomes and reporting of results

This research should result in the design of an information skills programme for ESOL students at all levels as part of the Learning Centre action plan. In addition, the reference stock will be adapted to meet the needs of the refugee customer and to raise awareness about refugee issues among the other customers of the college. “The more the public knows about refugee issues, the easier it is for refugee groups to be accepted and understood” (Mason, 1999).

The research project will take the shape of a research report that will include conclusions and recommendations to improve the service provision, as well as the association of interpretations to justify these conclusions and recommendations. Extracts of the responses, feedback and suggestions from different parties (teachers, students, librarians) should form the basis of the recommendations.

Once all the data and information has been reviewed, a summary of the case study will be carried out. This will become an executive summary that will include “the main parties in the story, what happened, the central point, and recommendations” (Esterhuizen, 2004:46).

The research report will be presented to the Senior Management Team to support an application for an increment in the 2005-2006 budget to purchase the necessary resources to improve the services provided to refugee groups.

Glossary of abbreviations

LC Learning Centre

ESL English as a second language

ESOL	English for speakers of other languages
ICAR	Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees
WTYL	Welcome to your library

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