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Supporting migrants in low-paid, low-skilled employment in London to improve their English

Abstract: This paper describes research carried out in 2013 to identify the barriers to and enablers of English language development for migrants in low-paid, low-skilled employment in London, with a view to making practical recommendations on how to help this group improve their English. Sixty migrants were interviewed about their experiences of and preferences for English language learning. Work emerged as a key location for learning, along with a clear set of requirements to support language development in the workplace.

Résumé : Nous présentons les recherches faites en 2013 pour identifier les barrières et facilitateurs pour le développement de l'anglais pour les migrants ayant des emplois peu rémunérés et peu qualifiés à Londres, l'objectif étant de formuler des recommandations pratiques sur la manière d'aider ce groupe à consolider ses compétences en anglais. Soixante migrants ont été interrogés sur leur expérience de l'apprentissage de l'anglais et leurs préférences en la matière. L'emploi s'est avéré un lieu d'apprentissage essentiel, avec un ensemble clair de besoins pour soutenir le développement de la langue au travail.

1 Introduction

In 2009 the Greater London Authority (GLA), the administrative body for Greater London, published an integration strategy for refugees, migrants and asylum seekers. This strategy made access to “appropriate” English language tuition its primary objective (GLA 2009). Updated in 2013, the strategy reaffirmed that “increasing access to learning English has been, and remains, the key priority” (GLA 2013a: 7). In particular, the strategy prioritised support for “low paid workers to improve their English language skills and move into higher level jobs” and

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advocacy for “innovative English language learning across London to support local integration” (GLA 2013a: 14).

Initial research commissioned to support the strategy noted “huge unmet demand” for English language learning (Gidley and Jayaweera 2010: 6), despite significant government investment from 2001 on (Gidley and Jayaweera 2010: 44); it also noted that low-paid workers were among the groups “disproportionately” affected by subsequent cuts to funding for English language provision (Gidley and Jayaweera 2010: 45) and identified a need “to more closely engage business and employers in the [English language learning] field, both in terms of investment and in terms of creating opportunities for learners” (Gidley and Jayaweera 2010: 47).

The GLA commissioned two further studies on English language learning by migrants. The first (NIACE 2012) investigated ways to support learners unable to access free provision, including migrants in low-paid work, who were often unable to attend college classes due to long work hours or high course fees and who rarely had access to workplace provision (NIACE 2012: 7–8). The study proposed three additional models of provision: family learning, on-line learning and volunteer befriending (NIACE 2012: 10–18).

The second study focused specifically on the needs of migrants in low-paid, low-skilled work. Prompted by the GLA’s concern that this group be able to access and progress within the labour market, it aimed to identify enablers and barriers to English language learning and suggest what approaches might help these migrants improve their English. This paper is based on research undertaken for that second study (GLA 2013b).

2 Research

The research remit was to identify a sample of migrants with no or low levels of English, in low-paid, low-skilled work, where the migrant’s level of English was a barrier to increasing hours/pay, vocational training or applying for higher skilled or preferred jobs. The sample was to include both migrants who were not managing to learn or improve their English and those who had found ways to do so. Low-paid work was defined as work paid at or below the London Living Wage (then £8.55 per hour). Low-skilled work was defined as work requiring educational attainment at no more than level 2 of the UK national credit and qualification framework (European Qualification Framework level 3) (GLA 2013b).

Between March and May 2013, the research team conducted one-to-one, face-to-face interviews with 60 migrants, recruited via employers, trade unions and migrant support organisations. A semi-structured discussion guide was

used to elicit information about informants' work arrangements, their experiences of and preferences for English language learning. Following each interview the researchers assigned an estimate of the informant's spoken English ability, using the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001). These ranged from A1 to C2, but the majority fell between A1 and B1. Fifteen individuals required full interpretation, two required part interpretation.

Fifty informants (31 females, 19 males) were in low-paid, low-skilled jobs (cleaners, care workers, kitchen assistants, admin assistants, bar tenders, builders, nannies, nursery nurse assistants, sales assistants and shop assistants). Just over half worked full time. Average hourly pay was £6.89. The other ten informants (7 females, 3 males), having found ways to improve their English, had progressed to jobs requiring intermediate level skills (HR assistants, business administrators, community workers). Female informants were aged between 17 and 65; males between 25 and 40. Some had left school without qualifications; others had post-graduate and professional qualifications. Many informants reported speaking two or more languages other than English. Only one reported using English at home with their family. Individuals had been resident in England for between three months and 40 years and collectively originated from 30 countries. Just over two-thirds hoped to live permanently in the UK with the remainder either unsure or planning to move to another country one day.

3 Findings

All informants reported that their level of English was a significantly limiting factor in their lives, particularly in relation to work. This included the ten informants in jobs requiring intermediate-level skills, several of whom had a high level of spoken English.

Likewise, informants uniformly reported that they saw value in improving their level of English, particularly in relation to work, both to help them better cope and/or progress in their current employment and to secure preferred jobs (e.g. via vocational education and training).

Most informants had attended at least one English course, often on arrival in the UK. Few, however, had persisted with such courses after finding work and only a small minority of the 60 informants were attending formal English classes at the time of interview. These classes were outside of colleges, e.g. a volunteer-run Saturday class for trade union members.

Informants identified ten barriers to English language learning: difficulty finding suitable courses; cost of courses; inconvenient location/timing of courses

es; lack of time/energy (i. e. for courses/self-directed learning); lack of childcare; lack of support at work; lack of communicative opportunity at work; lack of support at home; lack of effective personal learning strategies; lack of confidence (to interact in English).

Collectively, these factors undermined informants' motivation to persist with formal English courses and, though the majority said that they intended to resume English classes at some future point, they could give no indication of how they might address the barriers they identified.

While most informants reported some informal self-directed learning, e. g. reading free newspapers, or watching English-language programmes with the English subtitles switched on, some reported little or none. Informants who had managed to improve their English sufficiently to escape low-paid employment typically reported the more active and varied personal learning strategies to support informal self-directed learning, together with a determination to interact in English in daily life.

Nine out of ten informants made frequent (in many cases daily) use of the internet, including using e-mail, Skype, Facebook, shopping online, reading the news. Most had a personal computer and those who did not, typically said they used a friend's laptop. Over two-thirds had a smartphone and many reported habitually using Google Translate and online dictionaries in daily activity. Most had access to the internet at work, including via personal smartphone, although some (e. g. residential care workers) were not meant to use personal devices on duty.

A number reported valuable ad hoc support for their learning from colleagues/managers at work and, outside work, family and friends. Those who felt they did not receive such support identified this as a barrier to their learning.

The majority of informants reported that work was where they used English the most. This was the case even for those in jobs that reportedly involved minimal communication (e. g. restaurant dishwashing).

Regarding learning priorities, informants with lower levels of English identified spoken communication, including pronunciation. Informants with higher levels of English prioritised written communication and pronunciation.

Regarding learning support, informants wanted more opportunities for interaction that would extend their English (spoken and written). They wanted personalised guidance and feedback, both to help them learn effectively and also to motivate them to persist with their learning. They wanted this support to be easily accessible, i. e. affordable and available to them at a convenient location and time (i. e. when they were "mentally fresh").

Just as informants identified work as the location where they used English the most, so they identified their workplace as the most convenient location for support.

Informants tended to conceptualise this support in ways consistent with their previous experience of studying English. For most this equated to tutored classroom instruction, though many expressed a strong preference for one-to-one tuition and commented on how group learning had often failed to address their needs (hence the emphasis on personalised guidance and feedback).

4 Conclusions

A number of points emerge from these findings, including what one might call the low-pay, limited-English trap. Arriving with limited financial resources, the migrant needs to find work and build a support network quickly. Their lack of English limits them to low-paid, low-skilled jobs and to friends who share a language. They might, while seeking work, invest in an English course. Once employed, however, they drop out. Working long hours for low pay, they lack the time, money and energy for study. Moreover, they can survive without it. The problem, of course, is that with only limited exposure to English at work and at home, a migrant caught in this trap is left reliant on self-directed learning. Without unusual determination, confidence and effective strategies, they are unlikely to progress.

What, then, can be done to help them?

It is clear that this group of learners needs what any language learner needs: encouragement to engage in and persist with learning English; help to develop effective personal learning strategies; exposure to authentic English; opportunity to interact in English; help to understand the form of the language; and corrective feedback.

It is also clear that work is a key arena. This is where these migrants most use English; it is their preferred location for learning support. It is also an environment that provides structured opportunities to communicate and, in the shape of management systems, structured support.

Management systems already aim to ensure effective workplace communication and employers have a vested interest in making those systems work for migrant employees. Might it be possible to enlist employer support for self-directed learning at work, structured via management systems and peer support? If so, what would such an approach look like in practice?

It might, overall, be conceived of as a digitally-enabled scaffolding programme. In addition to incentives, e.g. reward schemes, for learners and employers to engage and persist in learning, it would help

- employers to support language development with guided learning materials, coaching and mentoring, work organisation, supervisory feedback, peer learning groups etc.;
- staff to form self-directed study groups with curricula and resources for self-directed learning programmes; and
- individuals to develop effective learning strategies with, e.g., apps to help personalise and support learning.

Such a programme would certainly require facilitation – perhaps a new role for learning providers?

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