Integration through participation: The effects of participating in an English Conversation club on refugee and asylum seeker integration

Abstract: The integration of refugees/asylum seekers is a complex process that is affected by factors such as reasons for fleeing one’s home country, linguistic proficiency, education, housing issues, and reception from the host community. While past research has focused on these issues, there is a lack of attention on the development of practical and psychological integration skills through participation in a social space of mutual accommodation (Berry 2005). This article fills this gap by analysing the relationship between mutual accommodation and integration in relation to spaces for language acquisition and the resulting impact of participation. This study illustrates, from the migrant perspective, how language acquisition in terms of resettlement not only focuses on linguistic proficiency but also on how such spaces provide a supportive place of refuge and support. This research underscores a deeper discussion of the migrant new speaker profile, providing evidence for ways in which to broaden an understanding of this key shift away from previously held notions of the native versus non-native individual. Ethnographic research was conducted in two UK-based conversation clubs. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) Thematic Analysis structure.

Keywords: refugee, integration, belonging, mutual accommodation, new speaker

DOI 10.1515/applirev-2015-0012

Aliya Sorgen, University of Sheffield, E-mail: aliya.sorgen@gmail.com

© 2015, Sorgen. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 License.
1 Introduction

In a globalised world, issues of refugee/asylum seeker integration are of critical importance. As the refugee/asylum seeker within a precarious mental and/or physical state, the process of integration is inherently complex. Additionally, negative perceptions and attitudes within the host society (Mestheneso and Ioannidi 2002) alongside political strategies of refugee/asylum seeker deterrence and exclusion (Phillips 2006) have created multiple barriers to integration. Furthermore, such negative perceptions are often intertwined with the very labels of refugee and asylum seeker, which carry significant legal connotations (Korac 2003; Da Lomba 2010) that are embedded in certain host society institutions. These perceptions tend to be manifested as “implicitly voiced negative opinions” (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998: 54), where the anti-immigrant sentiment is couched in an overall ‘positive’ statement; this results in a dangerous linguistic paradigm that subverts the integration efforts of refugees/asylum seekers. Thus, there is a need to understand, and transform, the way we view individuals in newly arrived communities and their processes of integration. This article responds to this need through an ethnographic investigation of two UK-based English conversation clubs, which were established to benefit refugee/asylum seeker integration. The concept of integration used in this study is taken from a socio-cultural/psychological perspective (Berry 2005). Though much work has been done on the importance of support systems for refugee/asylum seeker integration, there is a research gap regarding informal groups in which mutual accommodation (Berry 1997) is present; that is, where both host society members and refugees/asylum seekers are accepting of, and able to unite in spite of, cultural differences. This article aims to fill this gap through answering two key questions: (1) What does being part of the conversation clubs mean to the refugees/asylum seekers within the context of integration? and (2) How do refugees/asylum seekers utilise the conversation clubs? As will be discussed, emerging work on the new speaker concept provides a new profile through which to understand refugee/asylum seekers’ integration experiences and to examine how our choice of linguistic labels directly affects how a particular community is perceived and treated. New speakers are defined as “non-native speakers of languages or local varieties in different contexts [... ]and work in this area] focuses more on the speaker than on the language” (Puigdevall 2014: 45). This study focuses on the integration experiences of refugees/asylum seekers and the new speaker concept in a migration context.

1 As legal status is a sensitive issue and was kept confidential as requested by the participants in this study, the joint term ‘refugee/asylum seeker’ will be used throughout this article.
2 Refugee/asylum seeker integration

Past research of refugees/asylum seekers has focused predominantly on issues of language acquisition (Shakespeare-Finch and Wickham 2009), social networks (Ager and Strang 2004; Williams 2006), social support (Marx 1990), and ideas of place and belonging against the backdrop of instability and displacement (Hammond 2004; Yuval-Davis 2006) within the context of refugee reticence or host society antagonism (Polzer 2008). The current study moves beyond this dichotomy to an under-researched area: the integration experiences of refugees/asylum seekers in a group that is based on mutual accommodation.

The integration of refugees/asylum seekers will inevitably be associated with specific barriers due to perceptions linked to one’s legal status (Da Lomba 2010), which often reinforce their position on the periphery of the host society. This is especially relevant regarding UK refugee integration in light of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, which established the dispersal scheme, effectively removing new arrivals’ ability to choose where they live (Refugee Council 2011). This exclusionary tactic limits the control that refugees/asylum seekers have over their own lives and places them at an early disadvantage for integrating. Refugees are often placed in poorer areas of cities/towns where demand for housing is low and therefore inexpensive for government-funded accommodation (Phillips 2006). Consequently they are relegated to a particular (lower) social class and status. Underscoring these integration elements is the question of what constitutes successful integration and how it can be measured (Yu et al. 2007; Ager and Strang 2008); as Blommaert and Verschueren (1998) posit, “when is a migrant ‘integrated?’” (p. 112). In order to respond to the initial research questions, which foreground a broader discussion of the new speaker in a migration context, a deeper understanding of the aforementioned key issues involved in integration is necessary.

2.1 Language acquisition and competence

The importance of language acquisition and its effect on integration cannot be underestimated. However, although it will certainly ease the process of interacting with the host community, language acquisition alone will not guarantee “economic self-sufficiency or social mobility” (Warriner 2007: 344). Rather, acquiring a language is “part of a broader process of social integration into the new society” (Mesch 2003: 42) and social inclusion in general (Morrice 2007). On a sociocultural level, language is an entry point into the new culture where performing the fundamental tasks of daily living becomes accessible (Hou and Beiser 2006). From a psychological perspective, linguistic ability helps create a sense of belonging and
feeling that one is part of a larger community (UNHCR 2001). This has further been reflected in research on both emotional and practical hindrances to integration in the host culture resulting from language difficulties or lack of proficiency (UNHCR 2001; Taylor 2004). This demonstrates the imperative nature of language learning to facilitate integration. Research has also indicated that factors such as age, exposure to language in the host culture (Mesch 2003), the level of education in one’s country of origin and past traumatic experiences (UNHCR 2001) will all contribute to one’s (in)ability to acquire second language proficiency. Rather than see such factors as inherent limitations, an awareness of their existence is useful in creating successful and appropriate language learning environments. The power of linguistic proficiency to function as a gateway into both the ‘hard’ (i.e. practical, skill oriented) and ‘soft’ (i.e. emotional, well-being oriented) aspects of integration, appropriately positions this learning as a “vital first step in the resettlement pathway” (UNHCR 2001: 128). However, acquiring the language of the host country is a learning process that carries immense social implications, depending on the success or failure of the language learner, and therefore can be a process filled with pressure and tension. As Peirce (1995) states, “it is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to – or is denied access to – powerful social networks that give learners the opportunities to speak (p. 13)”. It is clear from Peirce’s (1995) account that linguistic competence not only affects one’s identity, but also nods to a deeper implication of ‘being heard’; namely, that minority languages tend to be positioned as less worthy and valued than the native or majority language. May (2012) explains this concept as the “nationalist valorization of majority languages” (p. 11), in which “minority languages are viewed as [...] entrenching the social, political and economic marginalization of their speakers. Only through majority languages, and particularly English as the current world language, can upward mobility be assured” (May 2012: 11).

Part of this difficulty in ‘being heard’ comes from the assumptions put on non-native speakers by those speaking the majority language regarding membership in society, education status, and access to resources (Warriner 2007). Thus, one’s majority language competence, or lack thereof, can act as a “gateway and/or barrier to success [...] to social and cultural integration (membership) and to a new sense of identity” (Miller 1999: 152). Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001) further explore this notion of majority language hegemony in which “speakers of official languages or standard varieties may be regarded as having greater moral and intellectual worth than speakers of unofficial languages or nonstandard varieties” (p. 247). Indeed, a lack of linguistic proficiency in the host language forms larger social and psychological barriers to full integration, often reinforced by members of the host society. This is largely due to the “hostile language ideologies and
practices that support and are, in turn, supported by symbolic domination” (Pastor and de Fina 2005: 38). It is precisely this exclusionary mentality that must be transcended to make room for the concept of the new speaker. What the concept of the new speaker does not do, as opposed to terms such as native or non-native, is promote the “deficiency model” (O’Rourke and Pujolar 2013: 56), which implies a lack of ability or competence. To expand the definition and profile of the refugee/asylum seeker as a new speaker, we must see them not as individuals outside of the linguistic majority, but instead as individuals who are not intrinsically tied to their native language alone; they possess the capacity to move between linguistic worlds without sacrificing one for the other. As May (2001) suggests,

It is clearly not unreasonable to expect from all language speakers within a given nation-state some knowledge of the common public language(s) of the state. Thus it needs to be made clear that the advocacy of minority language rights is not about replacing a majority language with a minority one. Rather, it is about questioning and contesting why the promotion of a majority language should necessarily be at the expense of all others (p. 380).

The process of segregation based on linguistic competence and the language one is speaking (Miller 1999) can result in prolonged social exclusion and discrimination for those newly arrived in a host country. Thus, the model of the new speaker is particularly useful, as it assists in removing an additional layer of ‘othering’, and consequently the perceived identities of those entering a new culture. In order to transgress previously held ideologies of nativeness and native speaker hegemony, there must be a two-way process of acceptance, such as was found to exist within the mutual accommodation of the English conversation clubs. Although the new speaker framework focuses largely on language, the context of migration necessitates a wider field of inquiry to fully understand the needs of the integrating refugee/asylum, and their subsequent proposed label as new speakers. As Warriner (2007) describes, language learning alone does not automatically lead to a “secure sense of belonging and membership” (p. 344). What then can facilitate this key component of integration and how does this merge with the participation of refugees/asylum seekers in the English conversation clubs in this study? The following sections illuminate how the areas of belonging, acceptance, and rootedness are essential to successful integration and why they should be considered as part of the new speaker profile within a migration context.

2.2 Social networks and support

A common barrier to integration is the loss of existing or absence of readily available social networks and support for the refugee/asylum seeker (Stewart et al. 2008). This “lack of meaningful, supportive relationships” (Simich et al.
2003: 885) will have a negative effect on the refugee/asylum seekers’ well-being for a variety of reasons; without social networks providing information or support, it is likely that one will feel excluded from society. The specific categorisation of a network or support and their respective effects on the individual have been explored throughout many disciplines ranging from sociology and anthropology to politics, psychology, and health sciences. Social networks have been shown to: affect decision-making and migration patterns of refugees (Koser and Pinkerton 2002), highlight refugees’ proactive and resourceful nature (Lamba and Krahn 2003), provide a forum in which to share common experiences (Kawachi and Berkman 2001), increase self-confidence and provide a feeling of belonging (Beirens et al. 2007), and offer valuable sources for gaining information (Simich et al. 2003). Such networks may be transnational in nature, where the refugee/asylum seeker is connected to others from one’s country of origin; they may also be local, consisting of members of the host community and refugees/asylum seekers (Williams 2006). This study discusses both local and transnational networks and relationships.

Yet another method of categorising and understanding types of social networks is the influential work of Ager and Strang (2004) and their framework of social networks within the wider sphere of integration. The three main types of relationships are (1) Social Bonds, or connections within communities that are categorised by ethnicity, religion, etc., (2) Social Bridges, or relationships between members of different communities and (3) Social Links, or connections with either local or government institutions or organisations (Ager and Strang 2004). Although there are many ways to identify and define social networks, the overall aim remains the same: to facilitate integration. This research demonstrates how participation in weekly conversation clubs provides access to each of these social relationships.

Social networks and support aim to respond to the unique problems faced by refugees/asylum seekers that by their very nature of being tied to a legal identity will pose different obstacles in the integration experience than for other minority groups (e.g. religious, political minorities). During a time of uncertainty due to awaiting a decision on one’s legal status, the refugee/asylum seeker exists in a state of ‘liminality’ in which there is a profound absence of control over one’s life (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 1992). Institutionalised discrimination through “‘deterrence’ [policy] measures” (Böcker and Havinga 1998: 263) further complicates an already difficult situation by restricting and dissuading asylum seeker entry. Such policies are not merely functions of the state, but have a secondary effect of “further threaten[ing] relationships of trust between refugees, refugee communities and members of host communities” (Williams 2006: 866). Additionally, the social meanings implied through the “negative
bureaucratic connotation[s]” (Marx 1990: 190) of the terms refugee and asylum seeker confer an even greater burden on this particular group and accord an identity that is essentially state-created (Marx 1990). Against this backdrop, the inclusion of refugees/asylum seekers into the new speaker model would begin the process of removing previous labels and assist with a more positive and inclusive identity shift within the host country. Although a long process, the language used to label and categorise groups of people has a direct correlation to their lived experiences; a shift in host country language would go a long way in transcending old exclusionary paradigms.

An examination of social support and networks provides evidence that integration must be conceived of as a two-way process, involving the participation of the host community alongside that of the refugee/asylum seeker (Da Lomba 2010). The voluntary nature of the weekly conversation clubs further illustrates this two-way process. These groups can therefore be understood as a microcosm of wider social integration if other refugees/asylum seekers and host community members participated in a similar structure. Social support and networks on their own are essential, but as is discussed in the analysis, it was also the feeling of having a place to call home that featured strongly in the refugee/asylum seeker’s narratives of their integration experiences through the English conversation clubs.

2.3 Place and rootedness

The link between place and uprootedness has unique implications for the integration of the refugee/asylum seeker, as particularly upon entry in the host country they possess neither a stable home nor a secure sense of rootedness. Place is defined both as a physical space in which one’s life is enacted and also as a “profound centre of meaning and symbol of experience” (Godkin 1980: 73). Similarly, place has been conceptualised as holding great significance for the individual despite a lack of “visual prominence [and therefore is] known viscerally […] and not through the discerning eye” (Tuan 1977: 162). The newly arrived refugee/asylum seeker will usually have a greater sense of this ‘viscerally known’ concept of place rather than a physical location of home. However, depending on the circumstances that caused fleeing one’s home country, there may be psychological trauma associated with the memory of place, further complicating one’s ability to find a true sense of home. With increasing globalisation and immigration, combined with a fluid concept of culture, there is a “profound sense of loss of rootedness” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 9) for those who voluntarily leave their homeland or are forcibly removed. In the case of
refugees/asylum seekers, this lack of grounding is further destabilised in the face of constant anxiety and worry regarding their permission (or lack thereof) to remain in the host country. Thus, the existence of not only a physical space but also a psychological concept of home and belonging is essential for increased well-being. This idea of not having a stable place affects the refugee/asylum seeker on multiple levels, as it is also used as a discrimination tool by the host society. It has been found that host country attitudes of refugees have extended the notion of lack of place and uprootedness to include the concept of moral uprootedness. In this construction, one’s “loss of bodily connection to their national homelands came to be treated as a loss of moral bearings [author’s emphasis]” (Malkki 1992: 32), leading to irreparable distrust of the refugee who became associated with living a life of crime due to this absence of morals. What is troubling with this notion is that “our sedentarist assumptions about attachment to place lead us to define displacement not as a fact about sociopolitical context, but rather as an inner, pathological condition of the displaced” (Malkki 1992: 33). Thus, being in possession of a place, or the lack thereof, is used to define and discriminate against the character of another human being. This is significant in terms of the way refugees/asylum seekers are perceived, as well as how their attachment to various places in their country of resettlement may affect their own sense of identity.

Although past research predominantly focuses on the conceptualisation of home relating to voluntary repatriation to one’s country of origin (Hammond 2004), it may also be conceived of as “a safe, everyday lived experience that is not bound exclusively to one [geographical] place” (Ray 2000: 402). In this way, home is a flexible, dynamic, and personal construction that changes and moves with the individual rather than existing as a static entity.

3 Methodology

Ethnographic research was employed to better understand the personal experiences and motivations of those under study. Ethnography is an oft-used tool when working with the refugee/asylum seeker community (c.f. Maryns 2006; Holzer 2012; Nwosu and Barnes 2014). However, this research was not a straightforward ethnography, as the inner workings of the group as a culture were not under investigation, but rather the culture of the group was important as a background to the participants’ experiences. Certain ethnographic methodologies were therefore adapted to the overall research strategy and data collection. To accomplish this, participant observation and nine semi-structured interviews...
were undertaken. Participation (and observation) as a volunteer was conducted in two English conversation clubs: one women’s-only and one mixed gender in a UK city twice a week for 2–3 hours per session. Active participation was followed, whereby the social behaviour was understood through engaging in the activity of the group and not merely “gain[ing] acceptance” (Spradley 1980: 60) from the group. Participation was conducted in line with the activities of any other volunteer, while at the same time observing the surrounding environment. This observation data provided a comprehensive context through which to assess the role of the clubs in the refugee/asylum seekers’ lives and integration strategies. Given the vulnerable nature of the refugee/asylum seeker participants in this study, issues of purposely withheld information (Jacobsen and Landau 2003; Bögner et al. 2010) and power dynamics (Lammers 2007) were acknowledged throughout the participant observations, data collection, and analysis stages of the research. Additionally, linguistic flexibility (Barriball and While 1994) and careful probing techniques (Marshall and While 1994) in the interview process were required, due to the sensitive background of the participant community. Given these recognised challenges of the research process, ethnographic research was the most effective method to understand the lived experiences “from the native point of view” (Spradley 1979: 3) of the participants.

Thematic analysis, according to the systematic approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), was chosen as the main method of data analysis due to its flexible and inductive approach. The theoretical underpinning of this particular analysis was positioned as “contextualist” (Braun and Clarke 2006: 81), whereby the discoveries of data analysis “both [...] reflect reality and [...] unpick or unravel the surface of ‘reality’” (Braun and Clarke 2006: 81). Numerous codes and themes emerged from the analysis of participant interviews, however the two that emerged as most important for the respondents in terms of their social integration in relation to participation in these clubs were: having a place and social support/networks.

4 Analysis and discussion

As previously discussed, though much research has highlighted the importance of support systems for refugee/asylum seeker integration, there is a gap in research regarding informal groups in which mutual accommodation (Berry 2005) is present. The two English conversation clubs in this study were born out of a specific desire at city level to support and guide incoming refugees/asylum seekers (City of Sanctuary 2008). Thus, this positions the clubs as
already located in a general environment of mutual accommodation. Furthermore, the conversation clubs emphasise an informal learning structure, which has the effect of not only contributing to the success of one’s learning but also to the social inclusion of the participating members. Previous studies of informal learning through social spaces within the migrant context (Jackson 2010) have shown this to be a successful strategy, particularly in terms of increasing self-confidence, self-esteem and giving the individual a greater sense of autonomy (McGivney 1999); something that refugees/asylum seekers often lack. The abbreviations P1–P6 denote a refugee/asylum seeker, while P7–P9 are British volunteers.

4.1 ‘Somewhere to go’

For the participants, place was found to inhabit both the physical and psychological realms and featured strongly in their personal experiences of integrating into society. Due to housing limitations, there are very few places to facilitate a feeling of rootedness. Newly arrived refugees/asylum seekers quite often literally have “nowhere to go” (P1), “no[t] many chances to meet people” (P2) and there “is nowhere, nowhere to go and talk to people” (P3). This is not only due to housing issues, but also due to lack of funds, knowledge about the new environment and permission to gain employment. Even if one possessed enough money for entry into a social space in the city, the refugees/asylum seekers often felt a level of discrimination that effectively maintained their social exclusion and increased their difficulty in forming place attachment. One refugee/asylum seeker described his experience in trying to engage with others in the host community prior to discovering conversation club. He expressed that “if you want to talk to someone you have to go to [a] pub or maybe nightclub so when you going there, if they see you are foreign, they don’t like, talk to you” (P3). This was further echoed by another refugee/asylum seeker saying, “because you weren’t born in the UK and eh, basically you’re foreign, that’s why yeah, that’s why I think it’s a little bit difficult” (P4). These participants were not able to easily make friends within the wider community due to this immediate discrimination and lack of a more accepting and welcoming place. Several other respondents further expressed difficulty in meeting people within the wider community outside of conversation club. P3 stated that “most of the people working and going home, working and going home. They don’t have time to talk to people”. P2 described almost this exact sentiment saying, “you never meet people, so there’s no places to meet people or people are very busy”. P5 similarly experienced this aspect of ‘busyness’ among host community members.
and the subsequent difficulty it caused in meeting people: “outside the people haven’t time, always rush”. This would suggest that members of the host society have ‘somewhere to go’, either home or work. In comparison, the refugees/asylum seekers are left to their own devices without the same sense of grounding or rootedness in a daily routine or a stable sense of place. In this way, one’s deep sense of uprootedness (Gupta and Ferguson 1992) is further exposed through seeing one’s own life in contrast to those in the host community.

Against this backdrop, understanding the conversation clubs as ‘somewhere to go’ takes on a new meaning. Perhaps the most significant aspect of participating in conversation club is the informal environment that facilitates a way for refugees/asylum seekers to meet people. Participants enter the space and sit at a table, either alone or with others. As more people arrive, groups are quickly formed and conversation easily flows. Some members immediately connect with friends they recognise, but newcomers are equally invited and welcomed into conversations. One refugee/asylum seeker described the conversation club as “a safe space, there is a table, a place and people are willing to talk” (P6). The categorisation of this as a safe place and one that brings willing host community members together with refugees/asylum seekers is important in understanding a broader definition of the new speaker profile. This was further corroborated by a volunteer, P7, saying, “I think it’s very valuable in terms of that forum that it offers to mix, to meet, and to permit a sense of belonging to those refugees”. Thus, this place offers a social space that is otherwise difficult for this community to access. Another volunteer, P8, felt the women’s conversation club was a non-judgmental space that is “somewhere to go that they feel safe, that they are doing something useful, learning new skills”.

This links the idea of place to a sociocultural aspect of integration (Searle and Ward 1990): being in this place provides a space in which to gain practical tools and simultaneously learn how to fit in the new culture. Refugees/asylum seekers described these tools as learning to speak English, learning about British culture, including values, rules and norms, as well as about other (non-British) cultures. An essential part of this sociocultural adaptation is the informal learning within the conversation clubs that was found to be “self-directed and intentional” (McGivney 1999: 1). This is largely due to the unique and extraordinary passion, enthusiasm, dedication and self-motivation from the refugees/asylum seekers themselves regarding their own learning. P4 highlights, “it is true, it [English] is hard, but I telling you [sic] I keep learning”. Having a place to learn was thus found to be important to the refugees/asylum seekers themselves who were invested in their own educational development. This adds to the new speaker profile within a migration context, as it shows the personal motivation and interest the refugees/asylum seekers have in improving their skills in order to better integrate. The conceptualisation of the new speaker as different from that of non-native speaker
takes a more holistic understanding of the individual, rather than a language-specific focus (Puigdevall 2014). Therefore, a personal motivation in learning the host country language should be counted as part of the migrant new speaker profile, as it provides a broader context through which to understand the linguistic choices and practices within this particular community.

A further outcome of having a stable place to go is the ability to transform that space into one’s own, to develop a physical and emotional attachment of having a home (Yuval-Davis 2006). This was communicated both in the fact that there is a physical location, as well as a close-knit group of people. P1 says, “one of the things they [refugee/asylum seekers] get [from conversation club] is a place which is theirs” and “it’s one home”. This is validated by the refugees/asylum seekers, highlighting that, “slowly, slowly I felt is like my place” (P3). P5 concurs saying, “I met many friends and after that I love this place, it’s like my home country”. Lastly, P2 related how “in one way or another I see myself attached to the conversation club”. These responses reveal how the concept of home can be the product of an experience (Ray 2000) rather than dependent on one’s country of origin. Furthermore, it implies that having a place and being ‘rooted’ are key factors for psychological adjustment in the integration process.

4.2 ‘Friends are like arms’

The above examination has shown that a connection to place, even to a physical location, does not exist in isolation. That is, the people one interacts with will also inform one’s attachment to a particular space. For the participants, both refugees/asylum seekers and volunteers, the place of conversation club includes multiple social networks and a wealth of support. Especially regarding the volunteers, the lack of enforced commitment demonstrates their personal motivation to participate and “conversation club is for everyone [informant’s emphasis] with different belief, different culture, different thinking” (P3). Mutual accommodation is therefore implicit in this ethos of a group that is fundamentally accepting of difference. Part of welcoming difference and emphasising sharing and learning from each other’s cultures in the conversation clubs (P3, P6, P7) is the notion of reciprocity, an implied aspect of mutual accommodation. Not only do the refugees/asylum seekers accept one another, but this is also tangibly expressed through their actions. Many of the members spoke about giving and receiving information, advice, and support as a natural part of participating in the clubs. This is particularly significant in this study, as reciprocity has been shown to promote a sense of social integration (Adelman 1988). Moreover, an unexpected thread within the data revealed that
participants found this reciprocity and acceptance of difference to converge into a unifying commonality between all members: being human. In speaking of the universality of giving and receiving support between refugees/asylum seekers and volunteers in conversation club, P3 stated, “life is like that and that’s it. There’s nothing more than that. Because we are human and we need each other”. Similarly, P6 expressed, “if I get a favour, I return a favour. That is human nature I try to be a human”. Another dimension of this humanising aspect is the volunteers’ perception of the refugees/asylum seekers. Within conversation club, it was found that the negative connotations of the labels of ‘refugee/asylum seeker’ were minimised through seeing each other as humans rather than legal categories. P9 referred to this issue saying that they are continually “working against that barrier or being aware of it at least – that potential barrier of you know, I am an English volunteer and you are a poor destitute asylum seeker – because those are just labels”. In this way, a common barrier to integration is actively confronted and challenged. This notion of negative judgments placed on others due to linguistic choices mirrors the current move away from a focus on nativeness to new speakerness. Language creates social identity (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 1983) and equally the method of language learning cannot exist in isolation of their social contexts (Jupp et al. 1983). Thus, a linguistic change of terminology used within the majority language group can begin to be reflected in the perceptions of those in the minority. This can be seen through the testimonial of P1, who acknowledged that “they [refugees/asylum seekers] are real, real human beings, and they’re treated [outside conversation club] as if they’re some cardboard objects that can be disposed of”. This is not merely a personal attitude, but also informs the very culture of the group, as other volunteers expressed similar feelings. As P8 described, the idea behind the women’s group is that it is non-hierarchical, but rather a collective in which difference itself is unifying. She explained, “we’re all cogs in the same you know, we just provide a different purpose in that wheel, but we’re all in the same wheel”. This mentality of open-mindedness and the ability to see past such stereotyping is an essential part of the mutual accommodation in these conversation clubs that further enhances the refugees’/asylum seekers’ abilities to integrate.

Mutual accommodation is also important in underscoring the theme of social networks and support within the conversation clubs. Following Ager and Strang’s (2004) framework of social bonds, bridges and links, participation in these conversation clubs was found to facilitate the maintenance of all three types of networks, however particularly social bonds and bridges.

Social bonds, or connections between members of similar ethnic communities, had a strong presence within the clubs and were shown to be important
for the refugees/asylum seekers themselves. As many have fled their home
countries, and perhaps have additionally lost family members, maintaining
relationships with people from a similar background aids in the transition
process by “rebuild[ing] culture and a sense of place in exile” (Williams 2006:
873). Integration has been expressed as a two-way process in which the indivi-
dual retains one’s cultural identity while simultaneously becoming part of the
larger community (Berry 1997). Forming social bonds is therefore significant in
this process, as it allows members to assist each other in sustaining a cultural
identity while participating in the host community. The ease with which social
bonds are formed is significantly more fluid than other relationships (P8),
especially upon arrival, as there is already a sense of trust due to this cultural
similarity. P2 acknowledged the instant gravitation towards others from his
home country or to those who speak his language. He explained, “I think
when we see each other...we go forwards towards each other to make a quick
connection and talk”. P5, who comes from an Arabic speaking country, also felt
this sense of bonding with members from her own culture: “I met a lot of Arabic
people here... after that I like this places [sic]”. P5 also mentioned that she
received emotional support from these social bonds regarding problems in her
home country. From a volunteer’s perspective, initiating ties with those who are
culturally similar is an inevitable first step when entering a new situation, as
“that’s the comfort zone, isn’t it, you will naturally congregate within your own
national group and then as you get more confident you branch out” (P8). This is
supported by the conversation clubs’ relaxed guidelines that do not enforce an
English immersion environment, but rather recognise the importance for refu-
gees/asylum seekers to speak in their native languages (P1, P9). This provides
further contextual information to feed into the profile of the new speaker, as
posited throughout this article. In addition to previously stated definitions, the
concept of the new speaker is “used to describe the ways of speaking and the
social and linguistic practices of speakers which exist outside of the traditional
native-speaker communities” (O’Rourke and Pujolar 2013: 56). The space of
conversation club can be seen as one such community, whereby the new speak-
ers use language as both a way to connect with host country members, as well
as those from their country of origin. This means that the refugees/asylum
seekers switch back and forth between languages, in order to navigate their
way in a new country and culture. Thus, their social and linguistic practices are
shaped by the presence of mutual accommodation within the clubs, which
affords them the freedom to find the best pathways towards integration.

Social bonds were not only formed between those of similar geographical
origins, but also among those who shared similar situations (i.e. life circum-
stances that initiated their journey to the UK and other issues related to being a
refugee/asylum seeker). P6 discussed how a friend introduced him to the group, saying “there are people like us there”. Being part of the group involves “meet[ing] people with the same background and situation and problems that you are facing. “That we were, are and will be facing!” (P6). This bonding through shared experiences (Simich et al. 2003) is a powerful form of connecting to others, as such relationships provide both practical and emotional support through an empathetic understanding of one’s situation.

Although there are other activities that take place in conversation club, the simple act of ‘talk’ was found to be both useful in a practical sense and therapeutic in an emotional way. The influence of talking to others and sharing experiences within a cooperative environment was a profound outcome for the refugees/asylum seekers regarding their integration process. P6 similarly described how people in the conversation club tend to bond over immigration issues, resulting in “get[ting] useful information and there is no need to go outside. We learn from others’ experiences”. Here, it becomes clear that within a migrant context, the new speaker has additional support needs than other categorisations of new speakers due to issues of legal status or the need to mentally and emotionally process their experiences of life before entry into the host country. In this way, the linguistic practices of migrant new speakers must be understood within their social and integrationist contexts.

Social bridges were found to span a wide range of network chains, providing multiple forms of support. Connections between members of different communities are particularly relevant for integration, as it highlights the essential two-way process that facilitates such transitioning. The mutual acceptance of difference in the group encourages this bridging between refugees/asylum seekers and volunteers that is not as easily found in other situations. This is important given the difficulties expressed in meeting British people outside of conversation club. P5 conveyed that “here [conversation club] easy to find [sic] friend I met many English people, friendly, and help me and give me advice”. P6 described the strength of social bridges saying, “friends are like an extra arm – they give you more power”. Here, power was related to knowledge acquisition and increased opportunities within the host community. Several other respondents discussed the positive effects of meeting people in conversation club from different backgrounds (P3, P2, P6, P4) and the broad range of knowledge that one received from such relationships. This was also expressed from the volunteers, whose participation in the conversation clubs afforded them a different perspective on their own lives (P7, P8), helping to remove stereotypes and assumptions about certain ethnic or cultural groups (P9), and feeling a sense of being important and useful for someone else (P1). Such transformation within the host community is a key part of the two-way integration process (Evanoff
These social bridges, whether between refugees/asylum seekers or with volunteers, were found to require time and trust (P3, P6, P7) in order to develop. This is common, as due to the sustained governmental suspicion of the validity of a refugee/asylum seeker’s claim (P2, P9), there is an added psychological barrier in forming friendships with members of the host community. However, participation in these clubs provides the space, both physical and psychological, for such relationships to develop over time and to move beyond such hostilities.

Although made up of distinct categories, social bonds and bridges were found to work together within the conversation clubs in helping participants develop tools for integration. The combination of stability, trust, safety, open-mindedness and acceptance of difference within the group creates a unique environment for the refugee/asylum seeker who has recently arrived in the UK, as well as a deeper context through which to broaden the profile of the migrant new speaker and a way to understand his/her social and linguistic practices. The types of connections developed in this setting were described as establishing a ‘family’ network (P1, P3, P5, P9). This resulted in less isolation and greater social inclusion (Simich et al. 2003), increased access to knowledge (Williams 2006), and a sense of belonging (Beirens et al. 2007).

5 Conclusion

This study examined what participation in an English conversation club based on mutual accommodation meant for refugees/asylum seekers regarding their own integration, and how they utilised such clubs. This environment was then used as a context through which to explore various aspects of the migrant new speaker profile, in order to better understand how such a conceptualisation helps move beyond the stark, and oftentimes discriminatory, dichotomy engendered by the terms native and non-native speaker. It was shown that the existence of a stable place in which these social networks and support were developed and sustained offered an invaluable opportunity and resource for integration, which included greater social inclusion, substantial cultural information, and increased connections with the wider host community. The informal nature of the clubs was a key factor in cultivating the presence of social networks/support. It additionally provided an element of control for the refugees/asylum seekers, as this informality allowed them to play a significant role in the construction and maintenance of their place. Mutual accommodation, resulting from the voluntary nature of the group and the willingness of participants to accept difference, was found to establish an environment that promoted integration. The humanising focus on
the migrant new speaker reveals a profile that must include an understanding of one’s wider integration needs, including, but not limited to, linguistic competence. These gatherings can be seen as a microcosm for successful integrationist strategies and future research would benefit from conducting a similar study across multiple countries that provide a safe haven for refugees/asylum seekers. Furthermore, specific research into the effects of minority linguistic labels (i.e. native vs. non-native speaker) on the broader integration process would likely provide greater evidence for the need to move towards a more holistic and tolerant sociolinguistic approach: the new speaker.

Acknowledgements: This article benefitted from ongoing discussions as part of the EU COST network IS1306 “New Speakers in a Multilingual Europe: Opportunities and Challenges”.

References


Blackledge, Adrian & Aneta Pavlenko. 2001. Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts. 5 (3). 243–257.


Bionote

Aliya Sorgen

Aliya Sorgen is a practitioner who currently works with disadvantaged young people, facilitating intercultural growth through international work experiences throughout Europe. She holds an MA in Intercultural Communication from the University of Sheffield. Aliya’s project dissertation focused on refugee/asylum seeker integration into host communities.