The ‘Critical Skills for Life and Work’ Project

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND THE REINTEGRATION OF REFUGEE PROFESSIONALS IN EUROPE

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HTTP://CSLW.EU/

Funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union
Refugee-professionals in Europe

Now well over a million refugee and asylum seekers in the EU (IOM, 2015, UNHCR, 2017).

A small but significant sub-group are highly qualified professionals who, having been displaced, often find themselves in low-skilled, minimum-wage jobs for which they are over-qualified.

Little research done to date into highly-skilled refugees and their employability challenges.
Erasmus+ funded project (2017-2019) which aims to enhance the employability and integration of refugee professionals in three countries (the UK, the Netherlands and Austria), and then the rest of the EU.

The project strategic partnership is composed of Newcastle University (UK), Universitaet Graz (Austria), Fryske Akademy (The Netherlands) and Action Foundation (UK).
Project Contexts

Newcastle

Leeuwarden

Graz
Project Aim

Development of professional intercultural communicative competence (PICC) of:

(a) Highly-skilled refugees

(b) Language teachers who work with them

People with qualifications as professionals (UNESCO, 2016) with a professional background in a key area of competence
Project Output

**Toolkit** comprised of **two training modules**:

- Module A: Teaching professional intercultural communicative competence
- Module B: Professional intercultural communicative competence for work and life

**PICC** – the communicative and interactional skills needed by our target group of refugee professionals to re-enter the job market.
The CSLW Toolkit

http://cslw.eu/toolkit/
Activity 2: Voluntary work as a way of gaining practical experience and building up a CV

Unit A2: Finding A Job
Activity 2: Voluntary work as a way of gaining practical experience and building up a CV
Duration: 80 minutes + 30 minutes of extension tasks
Rationale: Voluntary work in related or even unrelated fields to learners' professional background can provide valuable practical and social skills and intercultural understanding which will contribute to and update a CV
Focus: Related to understanding the value and benefits of voluntary work, and finding out about local opportunities in a chosen field
PICC skills: ability to show willingness to engage with the host society and local environment; ability to establish positive professional relationships in intercultural encounters
Language work: the language of volunteering and voluntary opportunities, as used in related websites and recruitment literature
Activity 2: Voluntary work as a way of gaining practical experience and building up a CV

Unit B2: Finding A Job
Activity 2: Voluntary work as a way of gaining practical experience and building up a CV
Duration: 90 minutes (and a 20 minute extension task)
Rationale: Voluntary work in related or even unrelated fields can provide valuable practical and social skills and intercultural understanding which will contribute to and update a CV
Focus: Related to understanding the value and benefits of voluntary work, and finding out about local opportunities in a chosen field
PICC skills: ability to show willingness to engage with the host society and local environment; ability to establish positive professional relationships in intercultural encounters
Language work: the language of volunteering and voluntary opportunities as used in related websites and recruitment literature
Theoretical Background

- Theories of **cross-cultural and inter-cultural communication** (e.g., Byram’s 1997 ICC model)

- **Sociocultural theories of learning** (SCT) which emphasise the social nature of learning and the fact that all learning is mediated by language

- **Reflective professional practice and reflexivity** which highlights the importance of self-reflection, dialogue and collaboration in CPD (Continuing Professional Development)
Professional intercultural communicative competence (PICC) refers to key intercultural communicative skills, knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and critical cultural awareness related to the process of successfully entering the professional sphere after a period of forced displacement.
Project Phases

- **Nov 2017 – May 2018**
  ‘Needs analysis’ and research

- **June 2018 – Feb 2019**
  Co-production of the toolkit

- **March – Aug 2019**
  Evaluation and dissemination
Our focus today: Research Phase

### ‘Success stories’

**One-to-one interviews**
- How did they make the transition?
- What had helped them?
- What had hindered them?
- What could they pass on to others like them by way of advice?

15 success stories (8 in Austria; 5 in the UK; 2 in Netherlands)

### Collecting the data

- Snowball sampling
- Working with local NGOs
Participant backgrounds (UK stories)

**Benjamin**, M, Eritrea, aged 47, 20 years in the UK; previous occupation: current occupation: property developer and CEO of a local NGO

**Muneer**, M, Iraq, mid 40s, 16 years in the UK; previous occupation: trainee doctor, current occupation: lead psychiatrist in a mental health centre and lecturer

**Sadaf**, F, Iran, aged 44, 11 years in the UK; previous occupation: translator and language teacher, current occupation: published writer, translator and language teacher

**Hanes**, M, Eritrea, mid 30s, 11 years in the UK; previous occupation: worked for the Eritrean government and as a maths and computer science teacher; current occupation: consultant mechanical engineer

**Khaled**, M, late 40s, 3 years in the UK; previous occupation: senior civil engineer, current occupation: civil engineer
All participants completed full degrees (undergraduate + MA-5 years) in their countries; 2 of them completed a PhD in the UK.

Their command of foreign languages vary:

Hanes speaks 9 languages to varying degree (e.g., Tigrinya, Tigre, Arabic, Italian, English); Benjamin and Sadaf speak 4 languages; Muneer 3 languages and Khaled 2 (Arabic and English).

The 2 Eritrean participants completed their education in English; other participants had learnt English as adults and used it in limited professional contexts.

Some participants reported to have grown up in multilingual environments and others to have worked and lived in largely monolingual and monocultural ones. Only Sadaf, who is a trained translator, reported a specific previous interest in FL learning.
Previous experiences of intercultural encounters

All participants had limited contacts with foreigners, and especially western people in their countries, and limited experiences of travelling and intercultural encounters. None of them knew British people or had ever thought to live in or visit the UK:

*I did not want to leave my country and if I had a choice I would have not chosen this country because of its colonial past* (Benjamin)

Overall, they did not feel their previous experiences prepared them for living in the UK:

*I used to watch Hollywood movies, that’s the only education that I had about the culture of the west and it not prepare me at all* (Benjamin)

*Iran was like a closed island and there are no social media at the time [...] what we knew was from books we read, films from the black market or somebody travels and tells you the stories but it was very rare* (Sadaf)
Participants’ experiences varied according to:

- Nationality and circumstances of their application
- Personal circumstances (e.g., validation of their degrees)
- Professional and job marked related factors
Maintaining a positive and open attitude

All participants showed an ability to look at difficult moments as learning experiences rather than as setbacks:

*I worked in a pizza shop. I worked in a news agency shop. I looked at it as something temporary. It was something that added to my experience in life, which possibly made me understand the community, it made me understand how to talk to people* (Muneer)

*I started to work in a restaurant and in a coffee shop. For the coffee shop, I was excited it was a job that I had never seen in my country. It was not for women. It was the first time for me to make cappuccino and chat to people and drink coffee* (Sadaf)

*I used to sell papers on the streets. I worked as an interpreter and I loved it as it gave me experiences to different mainstream provisions like the NHS, the police [...]* (Benjamin)
All participants valued their ability to re-build a social and professional network and to build relationships with people who could help them:

*The thing is that the social network you had back home disintegrated but you create a new one from scratch. The contacts I had in London were not useful but I made new ones through my interpreting job.* (Benjamin)

*The things that helped me the most were the networking and studying, starting study from scratch. [...] I tried very hard. I think that it’s important finding somebody that you can trust.* (Sadaf)
All participants valued how contributing to the new community, for example through volunteering, helped their own professional journey:

*I wanted to volunteer. I did it because I did not want to stay at home, I wanted to be out as much as possible. It was difficult because I was working at the restaurant but the rest of the time I just really wanted to be part of the community.*  (Sadaf)

*I also support newly arrived refugees. [...] I deal with some organisations that take care for refugees. We find solutions for the families.*  (Khaled)
Although some participants benefitted from the support of language learning courses, local NGOs and peer-support, they mostly credit their success to themselves and their motivation:

*Refugees came here and they have to survive. At home, everything is taken for granted. Here there are only tow ways: either live or not to live and if you want to live just find something to fight for* (Sadaf)

*I finished my degree, all by myself. I started my applications, day and night, I sent maybe 30 applications to different companies* (Hanes)

*We have a social network but it does not help me with the job. The job I had to do it myself* (Khaled)
Defining resilience

“The capacity of individuals to cope successfully with significant change, adversity or risk” (Lee & Cranford, 2008, p. 213).

“An individual’s stability or quick recovery (or even growth) under significant adverse conditions” (Leipold & Greve, 2009, p. 41).

“Resilience has to be viewed as a process and not as a fixed attribute of an individual” (Rutter, 2012, p. 335).
Some reflections

• Role of agency, self-motivation and resilience in participants’ accounts and ability to re-build their lives and careers. Is it as important as language and intercultural communicative competence.

• Key differences between the experience of foreign language learning and intercultural encounters of refugees vs other groups of migrants and sojourners (e.g., students).
Your questions, comments...

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Critical Skills for Life and Work
Developing the Professional Intercultural Communicative Competence of Highly-Skilled Refugees

This is an Erasmus+ funded project which aims to design and implement effective training tools for enhancing key skills and competences of (a) highly-skilled refugees and (b) the language teachers who work with them, and so enhance the employability and societal integration of skilled refugees.

The project focus is on improving the achievement of this target group in key skills for professional intercultural communicative competence (PICC). For the teachers, the focus is on extending and developing their competences as educators by developing their abilities to teach PICC.

The main output of the project will be a toolkit comprised of two training modules:

- Professional intercultural communicative competence for work and life (for highly-skilled refugees)
- Teaching professional intercultural communicative competence (for volunteer teachers)

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