

## **Conducting longitudinal fieldwork among adult refugees**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter highlights some of the issues I experienced during fieldwork conducted for my doctoral thesis in applied linguistics. My research project focused on the language needs of adult refugees in Ireland. I collected data on the learning journeys of a small group of students registered at Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT), the government-designated provider of English as a Second Language courses for those granted refugee status in Ireland. The project was exhilarating and exhausting in equal measures, and I now know that the specific challenges that I encountered were certainly not unique to my research project.

Researching what always seems to be described as a vulnerable group was an eye-opening experience, not least because many of the refugee learners I met in the classrooms at IILT were empowered and inspiring individuals who were seizing the opportunity on a daily basis to make a fresh start in Dublin. I also met students who had a sense of entitlement to social welfare support, who saw such support as a valid alternative to future employment, or who were only learning English as a way of passing the time. I encountered many grey areas during my fieldwork, which often led me back to my thesis supervisor and to the classroom teachers at the centre for advice on how to proceed. Below, I focus on a few aspects of the project (such as informed consent, confidentiality and disclosure of personal details) that were particularly challenging to me as a junior researcher with little experience of longitudinal research in the field and no prior background in conducting research among adult refugees.

### **Research at Integrate Ireland Language and Training**

The research project that I describe in this chapter was a qualitative, longitudinal investigation that explored the motivational role of goal-setting in adult migrant language learners (Carson, 2006). I conducted fieldwork at IILT in the centre of Dublin. During a fifteen-month period (2003-2004), I employed multiple data collection techniques including participant observation, group interviews with learners, teacher interviews, attitudinal questionnaires, and archival research. My project aimed to record and to analyse the motivational impact of a curriculum designed to encourage learner autonomy, as the learners at IILT used the Milestone version of the European Language Portfolio to set goals, record language learning activities and reflect on their own progress. Case studies drawn from this doctoral research project were later published in Carson (2007 and 2008a) as well as in an article which reported on the findings of the project as a whole (2008b).

IILT was, at the time, the government-designated body responsible for co-ordinating ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision for adult refugees in Ireland. Adult refugees (and other 'Stamp 4' individuals who had been granted leave to remain in the country) were entitled to attend free English classes for approximately one year. IILT provided classes in General English adapted to living and working in Ireland, at five proficiency levels from complete beginners as well as pre-vocational classes and Academic English for students who sought to ratify professional qualifications or enter Higher Education in Ireland. It also provided support, resources and training to primary and secondary school language support teachers, and distributed language and integration classroom materials and resources free of charge to teachers and tutors throughout Ireland. The students who participated in my research attended full-time General English classes with twenty contact hours per week over a term of four months. In 2004, there were 529 learners enrolled in General English classes. All staff and the students with whom I was in contact knew that I was conducting fieldwork for my doctoral thesis: my role during the three months of familiarisation and twelve months of data collection was as a volunteer classroom assistant. I spent at least two full days each week at the centre in this role, and also attended special events and social occasions.

As a campus company established by the Centre for Language and Communication Studies at Trinity College Dublin, IILT was not a typical language school. Based on the work of David Little, the founding and managing director, all activities in the centre aimed to support learners in becoming autonomous language learners. Teachers systematically encouraged students to assume responsibility for the content and the modalities of the course, through collaboration, reflection and self-assessment (Little, 2009; Little & Lazenby Simpson, 2009). Students developed individual agendas which corresponded to their needs as well as a plan for their class as a whole. Retention and transition rates to further education, training and employment were remarkably high, and IILT attracted international attention as a model of good practice.

Although IILT was involved in providing innovative and groundbreaking language support which was making a visible difference in its learners' lives, its facilities were not quite up to the quality of its pedagogy. When I first commenced my project, the centre was located in a repurposed industrial building which had been – just about – adapted to meet the needs of a language school. As with so many other associations and centres in this sector, the centre faced substantial funding challenges. Whilst the centre moved to a more appropriate location toward the end of my data collection, it is worth noting the centre became one of the first casualties of the Irish financial crisis, when funding was diverted by the government in 2008. IILT ceased its activities in August of the same year.

At the time when I was writing my doctoral thesis, Ireland was in a period of transition from a country of emigration to a country of immigration. There were only 39 requests for asylum in Ireland in the early nineties (ORAC, 2006). A dramatic increase occurred in the years before my research project. In 1996

there were 1,179 asylum applications. By 2002 this had increased to 11,634 applications. During the time of my fieldwork, numbers had decreased to some 4,000 annual applications for asylum. The top eight countries of origin of individuals in 2004 were Somalia, Iraq, Sudan, China, Iran, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Afghanistan (Irish Refugee Council, 2006).

Being a refugee is a difficult and complex life situation. A group of Irish scholars from different disciplines were beginning to publish incisive work on the struggles of refugees, the government's responses, the legal framework, and the host community response (see for example Collins, 2002; Fanning & Mac Éinrí, 1999; Mac Éinrí, 2001; Maguire, 2004; Torode, Walsh & Woods, 2001). I immersed myself in these readings, supplemented by regular reports in the press and in the NGO community on topics such as unaccompanied minors, the system of direct provision, 'bogus' asylum-seekers, court interpretation, and the growing, very substantial, delays in the asylum process. Media coverage was often negative, and much of the Irish population were largely uninformed about the changing reality of asylum and immigration, with confusion about the terms used (refugees, asylum seekers, economic immigrants, illegal immigrants, etc.) (Breen, Devereux & Haynes, 2008). In brief, asylum seekers are individuals who ask to be recognized as refugees, for instance according to the definition in the Geneva Convention, and await consideration of their application. Successful applicants are granted refugee status, which offers refugees rights and entitlements similar to those of Irish citizens. Torode et. al described the response of the Irish population at this time of striking growth in the number of requests for asylum as "ambiguous, complex and varied" (2001, p. 59). Once individuals were granted refugee status in Ireland, they had considerable bureaucratic process (most of it just newly in place) to navigate including: annual police registration; registering for social welfare support; obtaining a medical card; finding accommodation and arranging rent supplements or registering on waiting lists for Local Authority Housing; obtaining international travel documents; accessing education, training and employment.

Immigrants in general, and perhaps particularly asylum-seekers and refugees easily feel excluded and isolated, and may perceive discrimination against themselves, even if this is not the case, which can in turn generate feelings of resentment toward the host community. Without sufficient proficiency in English, some refugees may never access employment or anything more than minimum wage jobs, and become victims of the disadvantages which accompany poverty, such as low self-esteem, loss of dignity, mental and physical health problems. This vicious circle leads to a culture of dependency and prevents refugees participating in processes of Irish society. Refugees, unlike other minority groups, are individuals who have fled their homes and taken the risk of seeking new life elsewhere. The psychological and emotional effects of this disruption mean they may not have positive attitudes to the host community. I witnessed during my time in the classroom at IILT that whilst some individuals were relieved to settle in Ireland and were looking forward to a new life, others were angry that they had to leave their country and desired to return home at the first possible opportunity. And of course, many students expressed in the same conversation feelings of relief and frustration, hope

and anger, ambition and resentment. No research site is homogeneous in terms of participants, but the incredibly diversity of human experiences, emotions and aspirations that I encountered at IILT led to an exhilarating, sometimes just plain exhausting, and ultimately rewarding stint of longitudinal fieldwork.

### **The obstacles**

“You just assume that everybody brings their rucksack and their apple for break and they go home and do their homework diligently. It’s just not the case, it’s just not the case with our learners.” (Class teacher, audio interview recording during fieldwork at IILT)

As my discussion at the end of the section above suggests, language provision for adult refugees is a challenging educational context because of many and diverse needs of the learners. Conducting research in this context was also difficult. The fifteen months of the project were hard to manage at times, and I faced a number of obstacles and dilemmas during my time at IILT.

Firstly, working with a group of students with very clear language needs was something I was accustomed to, having taught EAL for some years prior to this project, but the needs of the students at IILT went beyond acquiring the right IELTS score. Equipping refugees with language skills means they are more likely to access training and employment, to become less welfare-dependent and to participate in their local community. Individuals move from passive recipients to active producers, and take charge of their own lives. Some of the things they needed to learn were fairly straightforward: going to the shop, describing symptoms to a doctor, talking to a child’s teacher. These types of topics were covered fully in class, and it was enriching to see the progress made by some learners. Other steps, such as putting down roots in a new community, gaining financial independence, participating fully in a child’s education, are more demanding. Learning English had an important psychological impact for many students, redressing exclusion, alienation and depression. I saw first-hand how speaking English helped refugees take control of their lives, but I also witnessed students who remained helpless or closed off from what was being offered at IILT, who were always silent or afraid to speak, sometimes angry or cold, and who seemed unlikely to be able to cope with the demands of their new life in Ireland. Others gained a new voice and learned to speak out, not just in the classroom. These voices were heard in all sorts of places: the Iraqi student who had never dared ask any shop assistant anything but who started asking for samples of cosmetics in department stores as her first attempt at engaging with native speakers of English outside IILT, or the Bosnian student who had been previously too scared to complain about poor service in Dublin – she returned a faulty product to a shop with her receipt, and was thrilled to recount receiving a full refund after rehearsing her complaint in class. Other students described daring to speak with their neighbours for the first time (‘nice day, isn’t it), or learning how to respond to the greeting ‘how are you’ with the typical response of ‘fine, how are you’ (a greeting which, in Ireland, doesn’t expect any account of health or well-being!).

One of the biggest obstacles was related to conducting research among a vulnerable population – although many individuals who participated in my research would have denied that they were vulnerable. Responsibility lies with the researcher to ensure that no harm comes to any individual because of their participation in the study, and I felt a particular burden to ensure that any involvement in my study would be a benign process. During the process of obtaining their informed consent to participate in my data collection, I could see that it would be easy for me to skim over, for instance, implications arising from their participation in the project – such as quotations from their interviews appearing in published articles and in my teaching slides as well as in my Ph.D. thesis (something that some of them referred to as my ‘big book’). For financial and practical reasons, I was unable to provide translations of my information leaflet and consent forms into all the languages represented in the classrooms I was researching (some very small language varieties were represented, for example).

In any research project, a fundamental step to protecting research participants is a complete guarantee of confidentiality. My project involved following thirteen learners during the twelve months of data collection, and as IILT was a relatively small place, it would have been easy for a reader to figure out the identity of the twenty-year old Afghan female in the complete beginner class in the autumn of 2003. Just providing a pseudonym would not have been sufficient to protect her identity. In other words, I needed to disguise the identities of the group in such a way, yet without confounding important aspects of the study.

I also experienced first-hand that when trust has been established between a researcher and a group, it is often difficult to stop individuals sharing some sensitive personal details, even during audio-recordings, when the cassette recorder was clearly visible on the table in front of us. This kind of sharing as relationships develop is especially likely in a longitudinal study – some learners eventually forgot that I was working on my doctoral dissertation and may have seen my central role as classroom assistant. During several of the group interviews with students, stories were shared about some very difficult indeed visceral experiences: an arrest, a miscarriage resulting from a fall at home, many accounts of racist attacks both verbal and physical, discussions of ways that some refugees had exploited the various social welfare programmes, and criticisms of some aspects of IILT (as well as praise too). When it came to transcribing these interviews, I faced the dilemma of deciding whether or not to include everything that had been said. I also heard and recorded many statements which were not palatable, and indeed would have fuelled much of the anti-migrant sentiment in the press, for instance on how the generous social welfare programme in Ireland meant that individuals would never have to work again or whether it was worth working if it meant giving up a medical card.

Finally, this was my first longitudinal study, and I worried constantly about my sample size, attrition, cooperation of both students and staff, whether I would obtain sufficient data from the repeated questionnaire administration and so

forth. Some of the other challenges I experienced during my doctoral research project have been tackled by other chapters in this book, and included how to manage attrition among my group of research participants – as the composition of the classroom was constantly in flux – and how to tackle a large dataset with multiple data sources and participants.

### **Overcoming these challenges**

Working in this particular research context was a fairly steep learning curve for a young researcher. It was immediately clear that I had a lot to learn from the staff at the school who had many years of experience in teaching and working among vulnerable population groups, and conversations in the staff room were especially enlightening. I learned not to rush away from the centre, but instead to stay around for a while and to ask questions. Without realising it explicitly, I learned the importance of a regular debriefing procedure. Another way of dealing with tears of a student in the classroom or the challenging stories I had just heard (about racism, poverty, exploitation) was through maintaining regular field notes. I wrote up approximately one page of notes each day I was present at IILT, and this diary provided a way of making sense of some of the experiences I was witnessing. Sometimes, what seemed like minor incidents became the memorable ones. One instance of tears in the classroom was recorded in my diary, and remembered by the class teacher some months later in an audio interview. My log entry read:

“Alina was sitting in her usual corner, and on either side of her were Musa and Sergei. We were going round the class asking how to get to a place and giving the directions. Susan [the class teacher] asked Alina a very simple question and she seemed to get a bit flustered, and then Musa and Sergei repeated (I think) what Susan had asked her in Russian. Alina speaks a bit of Russian, but those two were on either side both talking to her whilst Susan asked her the question again, and then said, we really have to speak English in this classroom. Alina then burst into tears, and Susan felt so awkward. The class could all see what was going on as we were sitting in a semi-circle with all the desks pushed beside each other. Alina went bright red, very very embarrassed. I think Susan didn’t want to stop the class as she would have drawn even more attention to Alina, who is so shy.” (Carson, 2006, p. 147)

The class teacher’s description of the same incident confirmed that she was aware that although Alina knew what had to be done in class, two distracting voices speaking in another foreign language were a pressure she could not cope with: “Naturally she knew she should be speaking English in English class, she didn’t need to be told that” (ibid.).

I also shared my field notes regularly with the two teachers whose classes I was observing, and they talked through their perspective on the same events as well as recording their own account in the margin of my notes. At the end of the project, when I conducted a long and in-depth group interview with both teachers, there was a clear sense of shared ground. This particular interview yielded some very valuable and insightful comments which helped me make

sense of the data I had collected from students. In this way, I learned not only how to be transparent about what I was writing up (which would become public down the line anyway), but I also learned about the value to sharing and triangulating my emerging thoughts, ideas, and ways that I could try to understand what I was witnessing.

In my thesis and the ensuing peer-reviewed articles, I provided subjects with pseudonyms and slightly altered some identifying features (e.g. ages and assignation of a neighbouring nationality) to ensure that all identities were comprehensively protected. Although I felt I was very careful in creating a new set of identities for my thirteen participants, this was called into question by one reviewer of a peer-reviewed journal when it came to publishing part of my doctoral thesis. I felt somewhat offended that the reviewer was challenging me on the care I had taken to mask the participants' origins and ages, but on reflection it was good that this aspect of working with a vulnerable population was tackled so specifically by a reviewer. I was able to satisfy the journal editor that the identities of my participants were fully protected through the measures I had taken. Seeing this process in action highlighted the importance of explicitly outlining the confidentiality procedures used when reporting on work with vulnerable groups, even more so than the usual assurances offered in published research.

As I mentioned earlier, some of the relationships that developed with learners during my time at IILT became very close, especially with the female students. IILT did not limit language learning to the classroom, and I accompanied the class on regular trips to museums and other destinations in the city, and eventually I began to meet some of the students outside class for coffee or lunch. I became friendly with one particular student who is now a close family friend. Hospitality and reciprocating friendship is often an important part of the process of putting down roots in a new home, and over food we shared stories together which were not just about language learning. By the time it came to conduct interviews, trust had been established but I was not prepared for intimate stories to be shared on tape, as I describe above. Following these experiences, I immediately spoke with my Ph.D. supervisor about how to treat the data without divulging the specifics of the conversations. I was advised to ensure that I treated the cassettes themselves with great care when transporting and storing them, and especially when digitising them, but to transcribe as much as possible without compromising identities.

In terms of the interview transcriptions, I therefore omitted some information that could have directly identified any participant in the future. The aspects omitted were small, but included details such as the number of family members in the household or the specific area of Dublin where the individual was living. However, I also learned to be sparing about omissions when there was nothing said that could identify the individuals who were speaking. I included all the statements which I (and perhaps my readers) found unpalatable, such as when students criticised aspects of life in Dublin, when they described untenable host community attitudes to refugees, exhibited a sense of entitlement to all possible social welfare supports or shared exactly

how to make the most of the system. I learned not only to include what I may have disliked, but also to write sparingly and to allow the data to speak.

For example, one interview included a long debate between participants named Rose and Nicolae. Rose argued with Nicolae that simply taking English classes because they were available, or even learning just enough English to cope, was unacceptable to her. Part of her debate with Nicolae was about a hypothetical refugee who did not speak English and was employed as a driver. She pointed out that the low income jobs that do not require much English were problematic if the worker falls sick, “maybe he lose his leg” (Carson, 2006, p. 161). Nicolae’s response was that he would be taken care of by Social Welfare, “if he lose his leg, it’s for social pay!”. Rose was adamant that this was the wrong attitude. Later in the interview, the conversation again turned to the importance of speaking the language of the host country in order to integrate fully. Nicolae continued to contest this point, and Rose became incredibly flustered and angry with her fellow student. Their words painted a much richer picture of the complexities of their situation than my description could have ever achieved.

### **Suggestions for researchers working in similar contexts**

On reflection, my experience conducting fieldwork at IILT was a research apprenticeship in a fairly literal sense. I was able to turn readily to my thesis supervisor for practical advice when I encountered a dilemma such as what details to include or exclude. Asking for help in these situations is a must – especially when issues of consent and confidentiality are concerned. The age-old advice of ensuring that your dissertation supervisor is someone that you can rely on is a crucial part of completing a successful research project in a context such as the one I describe above. One way of determining this before you start your project is to talk to other people who have been supervised by the academic in question about how their fieldwork went, and whether they felt they had sufficient support from the supervisor in question.

My concerns about confidentiality, revealing identities and obtaining informed consent are all crucial aspects of conducting good research. However, each situation brings a different set of ethical issues to bear, and no amount of reading can prepare you for the challenges that you will encounter in the field. This lived experience of learning how to research in an ethical manner (rather than simply obtaining ‘ethical approval’ in a university, perhaps seeing that as a box-ticking exercise) was something that the teachers and learners at IILT helped create for me, through fostering a culture of honesty and openness about the aims of my project, my data, field notes, interview transcripts and so forth. I should say that I have been the chair of my department’s ethical review committee for some years now, and that this first experience of researching extensively among a vulnerable group was a seminal part of my training for such a role, without realising it at the time!

Then, setting up a way to debrief regularly during fieldwork is something that I had not imagined I would need or want to do, but in fact the opportunities to talk through when I heard something difficult, such as a racist attack or personal trauma, afforded me a way of managing my own emotions and

helped me through the project. Many universities provide a formal system of confidential debriefing for researchers in the field, and if that is the case in your university, do consider it as an option. Otherwise, even keeping a diary during fieldwork is a good way of processing what you see and hear.

On reflection, more than a decade on, I suppose when I started my project I was fairly idealistic about conducting research about adult refugees. I was sympathetic to their situations, and frustrated by the lack of a joined-up response by the Irish government. I had read all the guides on how to conduct fieldwork, but I had no idea about the reality of working with a 'vulnerable' group. I learned through my time among this heterogeneous group of people that the dataset I was assembling was more than rich, and indeed, the voices I recorded there continue to speak.

"What happens when people open their hearts?"  
"They get better."

— Haruki Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*

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