

Aisling O'Boyle

A Welcome Dictionary: refugee families using dictionary resources to support English Language Learning



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Dr Aisling O'Boyle, a senior lecturer at Queen's University Belfast, set out to explore how refugees in Northern Ireland use dictionaries to support them in learning English and what problems they encounter. The restrictions of the Covid pandemic together with the inherent challenges of recruiting and keeping in contact with this group of learners meant that she was only able to gather a small amount of data. However, the data that she was able to collect provides valuable insights into the numerous challenges faced by this group and the key role that dictionary resources can play in supporting their language development.

Who? The participants in the study were Syrian refugee families who had arrived in Northern Ireland as part of a resettlement scheme. The scheme involved a Welcome Centre that offered informal English classes delivered by volunteers. At the end of the Welcome Centre English classes, families were gifted bilingual, English-Arabic, picture dictionaries by the volunteers to help support them going forward.

We wanted to understand the types of problem-solving activities for which dictionary resources were being used and how they were being used by Syrian refugee families resettled in Northern Ireland.

How? Aisling initially set up a bilingual online survey to gather information about how refugee-background families used these dictionaries. The response rate to the survey was disappointingly low, with less than 20 responses. This reflects the challenges of keeping in touch with these families in general, with contact details regularly changing, concerns around using up precious mobile data as the research had to move online, low and no levels of literacy in some cases, and wariness about being identified as refugees against a background of negative public discourse. In addition, five families took part in more detailed, semi-structured, online interviews with the help of an interpreter.

What they said: Listening to the lived experiences of these families builds a picture of the complexities and challenges they face and the role that language learning plays in trying to survive and thrive in a resettlement context. The combination of the survey responses and the interview data revealed that these learners view a dictionary as a highly valued resource, used daily and often shared by several family members. They described it as essential in preparing for everyday encounters such as going shopping or visiting the doctors. They also explained that it was useful in becoming familiar with the 'new' cultural practices and places illustrated in the dictionary, as well as for explicit vocabulary learning and support when writing in English. Although most participants said they found the dictionaries easy to use, they also highlighted problems including not knowing how to pronounce words or use them correctly in a sentence, and all were enthusiastic about the idea of receiving dictionary training.

Of all the learners I have seen use, misuse, complain about, try, and buy dictionaries, none have held more tightly to their dictionaries than this group.

Recommendations: Aisling concludes that free dictionary resources should be made available to all newly arrived refugees, along with dictionary training workshops for both learners and teachers/volunteers, and the development of associated digital resources in the context of data poverty. To this end, the project has developed and continues to deliver workshops for various groups and organizations, and to collect feedback to evaluate their usefulness.