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## The CATESOL Journal

### Title

Educating Students of Refugee Backgrounds: Critical Language Teacher Education in TESOL

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/52w5w0d9>

### Journal

The CATESOL Journal, 31(1)

### ISSN

1535-0517

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### Publication Date

2019

### DOI

10.5070/B5.35942

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## **Educating Students of Refugee Backgrounds: Critical Language Teacher Education in TESOL**

Critical language teacher education (Hawkins & Norton, 2009) describes an approach to TESOL teacher preparation that explicitly attends to the structures of schooling and society that privilege some groups over others. More than presenting methods or theories of TESOL in isolation, the intention of a critical approach is to foster awareness of local policies and practices in relation to possible teacher action for equity—essential for those in the position of welcoming and supporting English learners in US schools. This article explores how this approach was enacted in a domestic travel course for ESL teachers focused on the education of students of refugee backgrounds, an area underdeveloped in teacher education. Implications for TESOL teacher preparation in general, and for TESOL teacher professional learning about refugees specifically, are discussed.

Often, the first educators to welcome and assist students of refugee backgrounds as they enter schools in the US are English as a second language (ESL) teachers. However, very few ESL teacher-education programs specifically prepare teacher candidates for the unique needs of these students. This means that teachers of youth and adults of refugee backgrounds often require specialized additional professional learning once they are in the workplace. In order to enhance in-service ESL teachers' understanding of students of refugee backgrounds and develop their expertise in supporting them in school, an intensive, short-term course for teachers was developed and implemented at a refugee center in Tucson, Arizona. This article explores the design of this course and its impact on participants through the lens of Hawkins and Norton's (2009) principles of critical language teacher education.

## Refugee Resettlement and Education

According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR, n.d.), refugees are those who are forced to leave their country because of persecution, violence, or war and are unable to return. Refugees experience displacement, genocide, gender-based violence, and other traumas (Miller, 2012). Further exacerbating their trauma is a lack of access to human services. For example, when displaced in camp environments, children may or may not have an opportunity to attend school and basic human rights and services such as employment, health and mental health care, and safe housing are severely limited.

In the US, the president consults yearly with Congress to determine the number and origin of refugees who will be admitted. Refugees come to the US as legal permanent residents, unlike other immigrants, and undergo an extensive vetting and eligibility process. In 2018, the number of refugees admitted to the US was cut in half to 45,000, and in 2019 the number was further reduced to 30,000 (Refugee Council USA, n.d.). Approximately 34% of all refugees resettled to the US are between the ages of 5 and 18 years old (BRYCS, 2018).

Academically, students of refugee backgrounds possess many of the multilingual and personal resources of their fellow English language learner (ELL) peers, but they also face challenges related to interrupted or minimal formal education. Often, refugees have missed many years of schooling because of conflict and other stressors in their lives before resettlement (Mendenhall, Russell, & Buckner, 2017). In some cases, refugees may have never had an opportunity to attend school at all. They may be preliterate in their home language and thus face the additional hurdle of learning to read and write in an entirely new language. Complicating this challenge is the lack of native-language resources within their communities of resettlement—particularly in languages such as Kinyarwanda, Tigrinya, Chaldean, Tedim Chin, and Dzongkha, to name just a few of the many home languages of refugees resettled to the US (Capps & Newland, 2015).

US graduation rates for refugee and immigrant youth lag far behind those of their peers, particularly when ELL data are examined. The national high school graduation rate is 82% but only 63% among ELLs. In New York State, the ELL graduation rate is only 37%, compared to the overall state rate of 78%. Arizona has the worst graduation rates for ELLs in the nation, with only 18% of ELLs graduating as compared to 76% of students overall in that state (Sanchez, 2017). Though many factors contribute to this—including a restrictive four-hour English Language Development model in Arizona and rigorous standardized testing in New York—quality teaching and the consistency of having qualified teachers in classrooms who have been prepared for and are supported in their work with students of refugee backgrounds is of primary concern.

In 2016, for example, 32 states in the US reported not having enough qualified teachers for ESL, bilingual, and dual-language instruction (Sanchez, 2017). Approximately 25% of teaching positions remained open at the start of the 2018 school year in Arizona, with nearly half of the filled positions in the state taken by individuals without standard teaching certification or credentials (Flood, 2018). There is a shortage of highly qualified teachers in US classrooms to meet the needs of refugee youth.

The picture is even more dire when looking at refugee education outside the US. The UNHCR 2016 report on refugee education notes:

Of the six million primary and secondary school-age refugees under UNHCR's mandate, 3.7 million have no school to go to. Refugee children are five times more likely to be out of school than non-refugee children. Only 50 per cent have access to primary education, compared with a global level of more than 90 per cent. And as they get older, the gap becomes a chasm: 84 per cent of non-refugee adolescents attend lower secondary school, but only 22 per cent of refugee adolescents have that same opportunity. At the higher education level, just one per cent of refugees attend university compared to 34 per cent globally. (p. 4)

These equity and opportunity gaps persist for a number of reasons, not least of which is a lack of teachers for children worldwide, particularly within refugee education contexts. UNESCO estimates a need for 69 million schoolteachers by 2030 to provide basic primary and secondary education to every child in the world (GPE, 2018).

### **Preparing Teachers to Serve Students of Refugee Backgrounds**

In addition to global teacher shortages, there is a lack of teachers prepared specifically to work effectively with students of refugee backgrounds, according to the scant research focused on refugee educators' professional learning (Stewart, 2011). Moneymaker-Lamson (2013) found, for example, that while teachers in her Sawtooth school district in Idaho had been offered professional-development sessions related to ELLs, "few professional development opportunities have addressed the particular context relevant to working with refugee students and their families" (pp. 1-2). Likewise, in their Australia-based study, Miller, Mitchell, and Brown (2005) found that "teachers expressed a sense of dealing with a new and highly vulnerable group for which their prior teaching experience had not prepared them, accompanied at times by feelings that they were barely able to cope with the demands" (p. 25), noting also that they found available texts and resources unsuitable for their students of refugee backgrounds. Other studies have found teachers of refugee students to lack knowledge of their lives, home

cultures, and prior learning experiences (e.g., Goodwin, 2002; Humpage, 1999). In brief, very little professional learning has been offered teachers that might help them better capitalize upon the assets and meet the needs of their students of refugee backgrounds. ESL teachers, who would be particularly in need of accessing this knowledge base, do not usually receive this specialized focus in their teacher-preparation programs (Cummins, 2015; Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2016).

The limited scholarship on teacher preparedness for work with refugees distinguishes some of the differences between young students and adult learners. For instance, in their study focused on the needs of young refugee students, Szente, Hoot, and Taylor (2006) identified three important tasks for teachers: “helping children cope with trauma, supporting academic adjustment of refugee children, and establishing positive parent/teacher relationships” (p. 16). Research with teachers of adult refugees emphasizes the need to prepare them to ensure that the content they teach is relevant to refugee adults’ immediate needs, the need to provide strong motivation and encouragement to persist through progress that can feel slow to adults first acquiring literacy, and the necessity of being flexible as attendance is often inconsistent because of students’ schedules (Farrelly, 2017).

When preparing teachers to work effectively with students of refugee backgrounds, it is also important to be cautious of what Rodriguez (2015) terms “the dangers of compassion.” While educators must be aware of the trauma refugee students may have experienced and attend to their students’ social and emotional learning and well-being, it is essential the work does not “position refugees like vulnerable problems to be fixed through education and other services” (2015, p. 112). Additionally, providing teacher preparation on the education of refugees must “employ a critical approach to transnationalism, considering the ways refugee issues are politicised in the wider social context” (Gagné, Schmidt, & Markus, 2017). This suggests that teacher preparation for refugee education must be based on an approach that heightens teachers’ self-awareness and criticality.

Hawkins and Norton (2009) defined *critical language teacher education* as an approach that highlights the sociocultural aspects of language learning but moves beyond it in order to directly confront how “dominant ideologies privilege certain groups while marginalizing others” (p. 31). In their review of several studies of TESOL preparation initiatives that were designed to promote a critical view on education for equity, they determined that five themes were present:

1. The situated nature of the experience;
2. The responsiveness of the faculty instructors to their teachers as learners;
3. A dialogic structure to encourage interchange of ideas;

4. Space for teachers to reflect on their prior experiences and the course itself; and
5. Praxis—the connection between theory, teaching practice, and linking the two for social change.

We argue that the complexity of preparing ESL teachers to support refugee students best happens among in-service practitioners, in hands-on, experiential learning situations (Li & Lal, 2005)—such as the professional-development course described and analyzed in this article—which allow for discussion with a wide variety of stakeholders, personal engagement with students and families, and an application of theory and research in context. This intersectional design, constructed on the five themes outlined in critical language teacher education, informed the development of the professional-learning course we explore in this article.

## **The Study**

### ***Participants***

New York City TESOL teachers ( $N = 21$ ) who participated in this professional-development course had between 1 and 15 years of teaching experience, with an average of 5 years, in a wide variety of ESL programs in both K-12 and adult settings. All of the participants had MA TESOL degrees, 18 from a K-12 strand while 3 had focused on adult learners. Additionally, 1 participant was a principal of an international high school and participated with a team of teachers from his school. The first and second authors were the course designers and instructors, while the third author provided guest lectures, resources, and connections to local refugee resettlement experts. Author 1 is faculty in a master's TESOL program with 25 years of experience in TESOL, with expertise in curriculum design in TESOL teacher education, but did not have particular expertise on students of refugee backgrounds. Author 2 has extensive experience working with refugee students, their families, and their teachers in Arizona and had founded and served as the director of CENTER (Collaborative Engagement to Nurture Talent and Educate Responsively), the refugee center that served as the hub for the course. Author 3 is an expert in refugee resettlement, having served as a director at the International Rescue Committee and a specialist in the area of trauma and emergency management from outside the field of TESOL, and supported triangulation of findings.

### ***A Professional Learning Course for ESL Educators on Students of Refugee Backgrounds***

This short domestic travel course brought 21 in-service ESL teachers from New York City to Tucson, Arizona, and provided 30 hours and 2 grad-

uate credits. The course included predeparture sessions in New York City, sessions at the University of Arizona, and field experiences at CENTER and area public schools.

The choice of Tucson was due to several factors. First, there was a strong professional and personal relationship between the first two authors—both had begun their careers as ESL teachers in New York City but one had moved to Arizona, her home state, to teach and then opened a community-based center to support the education of students of refugee background. Second, Arizona offered the opportunity to visit an area in the US with a history of refugee resettlement. Before 2017, about 1,000-1,200 refugees resettled in Tucson per year. The Refugee Processing Center notes that 42,144 individual refugees were resettled in Arizona between October 1, 2001, and September 30, 2019 (Arizona Refugee Resettlement Program [n.d.]). Third, Arizona offered a radically different approach to ESL teaching and programming, which could afford the New York City teachers the opportunity to explore the tensions that exist when TESOL is viewed through an equity perspective, from policy, programmatic, and practice points of view. For instance, in Arizona the Structured English Immersion policy requires that English learners receive four hours of intensive English per day, effectively restricting their access to content and credit-bearing courses. In New York State, the Part 154 policy requires English learners to receive content and English in integrated classrooms cotaught by ESL and content-area teachers. These differing contexts offered teachers the chance to see their own and other approaches in new ways.

The choice to bring teachers to a completely different environment was intentional and a core aspect of the design of the course. Participants could step away from familiar contexts, be immersed in new and complex teaching and learning environments, participate in diverse practices, and learn about TESOL while working with refugee students and families. The dissonance created when we step out of our comfort zones can be transformative for educators (Mezirow, 1997). Often, professional development for TESOL teachers tends not to implement a critical perspective, and studying teaching in unfamiliar settings can be a catalyst for critical reflection on one's own. The skills and critical perspectives gained in the experience could then transfer to their classrooms as participants returned home. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the course activities.

### ***Data Sources and Theoretical Framework***

Participant teachers shared their anonymous pre- and postexperience questionnaire responses and their full refugee projects (papers of about five pages in length). Three open-ended pre-participation questions relevant to this analysis were:

**Table 1**  
**Refugee Education for ESL Teachers Course Activities and Timeline**

<i>Timeline</i>	<i>Activities</i>
Predeparture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a learning community among participants.</li> <li>• Gain overview of refugee resettlement process through International Rescue Committee guest speaker.</li> <li>• Participate in online course on refugee youth education (<a href="https://therefugeecenter.org/teaching-strategies/teaching-refugees/">https://therefugeecenter.org/teaching-strategies/teaching-refugees/</a>).</li> <li>• Select articles of personal interest from provided academic reading list.</li> </ul>
Day 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learn about the history, culture, and political climate of Tucson regarding refugee resettlement from local organizations.</li> <li>• Analyze the Arizona Structured English Immersion (SEI) policy.</li> <li>• Meet with graduate students from the University of Arizona's College of Education to exchange observations and compare practices.</li> </ul>
Day 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Observe classrooms with large numbers of refugee students at K-12 and adult learning centers, followed by debriefing sessions. Each of the schools had "large numbers" of refugee students, meaning the classes were (on average) 75%-80% students of refugee backgrounds.</li> <li>• Visit University of Arizona for faculty presentations on language policy in Arizona, supporting undocumented students, and indigenous peoples and education.</li> <li>• Attend panel discussion led by refugee students and parents about their experiences in the Tucson educational system.</li> </ul>
Day 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workshop in groups with local educators to discuss self-selected topics in refugee education.</li> <li>• Interact with refugee students at the Collaborative Engagement to Nurture Talent and Educate Responsively (CENTER). Participants assisted refugee youth with homework and engaged in sports activities and informal discussion groups.</li> </ul>
Postreturn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete a Refugee Focus Project: "Choosing a particular aspect of working with English language learners of special interest, and using data collected from your time in Tucson (interviews, discussions, observations, documents, artifacts, videos, student work), analyze how teachers or schools could better address the needs of refugee ELLs."</li> </ul>



1. What is your experience with refugee populations?
2. What do you hope to learn from this course? What specific topics do you want to hear about?
3. What questions do you have about refugees and resettlement?

Included post-participation questions were:

1. In what ways do you now feel prepared in your role to help refugee students achieve academically? Please provide specifics.
2. In what ways do you now feel prepared in your role to foster socio-emotional well-being and integration of refugee students? Please provide specifics.
3. What information/resources/activities did you find most useful?

Responses to the questionnaires and participants' refugee projects were coded based on the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997), and then categorized via the procedures for thematic content analysis (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Thematic content analysis allowed for the identification, analysis, and pattern finding within the questionnaire responses and refugee project texts in connection to the themes found by Hawkins and Norton (2009) in critical language teacher education. Analyzing the data through this lens allowed us to examine the specific approaches participants deemed important for ESL educators working with refugee students within the larger frame of critical language teacher education that has broader implications for the design of teacher professional-learning experiences.

## Findings

### *Principles of Critical Language Teacher Education*

The pedagogical approaches that were described by Hawkins and Norton (2009) as effective in promoting inquiry, reflection, growth, and action for social justice among TESOL practitioners also appeared to be components of this professional-development experience. Each principle is presented with instances from the data.

**The Situated Nature of Programs and Practices.** Physically bringing teachers together and to the site of the refugee center was an important feature of the experience, and engaging local teachers, researchers, professors, social workers, and other community-based staff provided the teacher participants with local and specific cultural and historical knowledge. This allowed participants to ask questions, investigate misconceptions, and clarify their impressions with local informants' input. Rather than occurring at arm's length, or through a strictly textual/academic lens, the learning took place in and through the interactions with local educators and refugee stu-

dents. One participant describes the evening that refugee students spoke to our group in a panel about their experiences in school as such a moment:

These teenagers and young adults showed us how despite the struggles they faced, they were all able to adapt to a new country's culture with the right support and guidance. The room felt electric on that evening, and those in attendance hung onto every word spoken by these strong, capable, and determined human beings. We learned so much from those individuals about how to be better teachers and more compassionate humans, and were given an opportunity to receive first hand a tiny slice of human struggle experienced by displaced persons all over the world. They opened their minds and hearts to us, and we to them. This moment felt palpably humbling and inspiring, and has since filled my work as an educator with a jolt of energy that was very much needed. That experience made clear for me: there is no more powerful effect on a person than their right to an education, particularly as a refugee.

Perhaps the aspect with the most impact in the design of critical teacher education is an experience that takes teachers out of their comfort zone and is emotionally resonant. The empathy-raising aspect of this situated experience was referenced by all participants as particularly generative.

**Responsiveness to Teachers as Learners.** The rich diversity of settings and prior knowledge that the participants brought to the experience was highlighted and capitalized on in the design of pair and group activities and predeparture community-building activities. As one participant put it:

In our brief but powerful period of study in Tucson, my colleagues and I learned about the larger picture of the national refugee resettlement process, Arizona language policy and its impact on schools, and even a small handful of snippets of stories from young people and adults at different points in the experience of resettlement. We left inspired by the connections between university faculty and local educators, the young refugees advocating for themselves and each other, and the almost magical space that truly was a CENTER of so much of this power and community building.

As above, the design of critical teacher education rests on the individual human interactions and creating opportunities for teachers to share their own funds of knowledge and to connect with each other. The teacher participants brought their own cultural, historical, professional, and linguistically diverse perspectives, which were essential to enacting the curriculum.

**Dialogic Engagement.** The structure of the learning was often pair and group conversations with focused-inquiry prompts and with a variety

of actors involved in refugee learning. These allowed participants to speak with students and parents of refugee backgrounds, university professors, classroom teachers, and volunteers about these topics. One participant said, “The conversations with teachers in different contexts brainstorming ways to connect seemed really fruitful.” These conversations were the vehicle to lead participants in making connections between educational practices with opportunities afforded refugee learners. Another participant said:

A major problem with a population of refugee and immigrant students is not within the students themselves, but within the lack of understanding and empathy of populations that are seen as different. When it comes to teaching these populations, the language of “mainstream” teachers seems to unfortunately be focused on the *lack* of skills, the lack of literacy, the amount of work it takes to include them, etc.

Dialogue was essential in helping teacher participants make connections to larger themes of social justice, which is the heart of a critical approach to teacher education. Teacher participants recognized how the school experiences of refugee students is a result of how teachers perceive them, not arising from any deficits inherent to that student group.

**Reflexivity.** Teacher participants described how they looked inward to analyze what had occurred during the program and in their prior work, and how they might use the experience to support future steps. In looking at her work with adults, traditionally separated from work with K-12 English learners, one participant noted that a new approach could be taken:

English classes for adults (parents) while the children are simultaneously receiving tutoring and homework help is a more holistic approach for the family’s well-being. Expanding services designed for Spanish-speakers (like Cafecitos coffee hours) to include Arabic speakers. [Parents are empowered when they interact with other parents with similar struggles.

A key outcome of reflection in Hawkins and Norton’s paradigm is that it connects analysis to ideas for future actions the teacher envisions. Another participant reflected on an existing program to support refugee students that did not seem successful:

Incidents of aggression between different cultural groups at [my school] suggest that not enough is being done. The social worker is well-versed in coping strategies and meets with many students to help them develop those abilities. However, the ratio of one social worker to 400 students limits her impact.

Stepping away from home and looking back from a distance provided participants a chance to reassess their goals and consider alternate approaches.

**Praxis.** Integration of theory and practice is part of teacher education; in critical teacher education it is done with the purpose of fostering social change. Teacher participants generated “praxis” projects that required them to connect theory, observations made in Tucson, and their learning about refugee education with practices that they could implement in their own schools. During the final day of the program and then in the month to follow, participants completed their explorations of “praxis” with the goal of creating a set of recommendations that could become part of their practice. The following themes emerged as participants’ recommendations for ESL teachers and schools to better support refugee students.

*Create Leadership Roles for Refugee Students.* Participants recommended that teachers should actively work to help refugee students seek and receive leadership roles, an aspect discussed in Montero, Ibrahim, Loomis, and Newmaster’s study (2012). Specific ideas included creation of a student organization, advisory roles to school administrators, and formation of a speakers’ bureau.

Refugee students should also be given the freedom to form their own organizations that give counsel to the school teachers and/or administrators. This leadership group could even survey the students to see what they need and get more input from the refugee students, who may otherwise be less inclined to provide feedback. They could even be responsible for creating and helping to implement orientation protocols for future incoming students.

Participants suggested that this would also support language development and affect nonrefugee students, staff, and the community in how they are perceived. They pointed out the value of maintaining refugee students’ stories and histories in their identity development.

*Consider the Social-Emotional Supports Helpful to Refugee Students.* Participants resoundingly agreed that schools must better address students’ needs for safety and well-being. One participant noted in the postsurvey: “Overall, I left the trip more reflective on how I could meet refugee students’ academic and socio-emotional needs and how to further create inclusive and welcoming environments in my current practice.” Many participants suggested the creation of a buddy system for student newcomers.

One student noted that while she was initially overwhelmed in her new middle school, a peer who spoke her language and had more experience showed her around the school, helped her find her classes, and ate lunch with her in cafeteria. This school-organized buddy helped the

new student to feel more at ease and enabled her to acclimate more quickly to her new surroundings.

Participants described establishing a network of community members who share the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the refugee arrivals, and they called for time for teachers to infuse reflective practices into their instruction of refugees.

*Examine the Curriculum for Its Accessibility for Refugee Students.* Another set of recommendations asserted the importance of home-language support for speakers of languages other than Spanish, creation of home-language maintenance classes or clubs, and greater efforts to include culturally relevant materials, resources, and tasks. Administrator involvement in ensuring that refugee students' languages and lives are reflected in the curriculum was a strong recommendation. One participant stated in the post-survey that she has "made an effort to create more of a culturally responsive curriculum, opportunities for students to share aspects of their culture throughout each of my curricular units."

These projects indicated that participants had woven together their learning in ways that pointed to specific instructional approaches that they saw as beneficial for refugee ELs.

### **Conclusion**

At the time of the trip, the US had just implemented a travel ban, "Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States" (also referred to as the "Muslim Ban"), that severely limited the number of refugees coming from Muslim countries (ACLU Washington, n.d.). The number of refugees entering the US has dramatically declined, and yet the educational needs of youth and adults of refugee backgrounds are and should continue to be of concern in the field of TESOL. From the experiences of the authors and participants in this course, topics that would be important to include in TESOL teacher education include:

- Social and emotional learning;
- Trauma-informed systems of support;
- Inclusive practices;
- Culturally responsive, relevant, sustaining pedagogies; and
- SIFE instruction for adolescents and adults with limited formal education.

In equitable education, refugee learners are afforded opportunities to sustain their heritage languages and cultures, develop critical consciousness around their new position within the US and in relation to larger social issues, and develop a strong sense of agency and the realization of their full

capacity and humanity with dignity (Paris & Alim, 2017). The same must then hold for their ESL teachers. A critical approach to language teacher education can bring teachers the same energy and recognition of their capacity to serve as agents for equity.

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