Supporting migrants in low-paid, low-skilled employment in London to improve their English

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Research

Commissioned by Greater London Authority, 2013

Investigate English language learning experience of migrants in low-paid work in London

Identify barriers and enablers to inform new approaches to support

Talk to migrants with low-level or no English in low-paid, low-skilled jobs

Migrant = non-UK-born resident
Low skill = EQF L3 or below
Low pay = ?

UK median = £13 (€16, $20)/hr, UK Nat Min = £6.50 (€8.15, $10)/hr
London Living Wage = £8.55 (€10.70, $13.50)/hr

2014 data - 21% of UK workforce in low paid jobs, unchanged for 20 years
Resolution Foundation (2015), Low Pay Britain 2015. resolutionfoundation.org
Drivers for research

‘Huge unmet demand’ for English language learning in London

- Participation in English language learning provision = 60 000 (2012)
- Need estimated at 300 000 to >600 000 (+ constant new arrivals)

Migrants in low-paid work = important ...

- 500 000+ migrants in low-paid work in London
- Migrants in low-paid work more likely to stay in UK than high-paid migrants
- Migrants with limited English clustered in low-paid work
- Language skills linked to full-time work, participation in vocational learning, utilisation of existing higher level skills
- Migrants in low-skilled jobs + better language skills = added value for migrants, employers and economy

...but hard-to-reach group

- ‘Disproportionately disadvantaged’ by funding arrangements, long work hours
- Unlikely to attend classes
**Approach**

Semi-structured qualitative interviews with 60 migrants
- 50 interviewees in low-paid, low-skilled jobs
  - 15 fully interpreted, two part-interpreted
- 10 interviewees in jobs requiring intermediate level skills

Recruited via employers, trade unions, migrant support organisations

Interviews explored migrants’ skill levels, experience of learning English, views on meaningful support

Desk research: practice related to linguistic integration of adult migrants, including workplace language development programmes
Informants

50 migrants (19 male, 31 female) in low-paid, low-skilled jobs
– Care work, cleaning, hospitality, retail, construction, etc.
– 23 countries
– 20 first languages
– 30% of interviews fully interpreted

10 migrants (3 male, 7 female) in intermediate-skilled jobs
– Admin, community work, HR & training, reception
– Seven countries

Age: from 17 to 65       Resident in England: from 3 months to 40 years
All phases of migration from 1950/60s to now within sample
55% in full-time work, 45% part-time       Qualifications: from zero to post-graduate
70% intending to live permanently in UK, 30% unsure

English: mostly CEFR level A1 to B1       Median wage = £6.50/hour
Note: London Living Wage = £8.55 (€10.70)/hr       Nat Min Wage = £6.50 (€8.15)/hr
Areas of investigation

1. Why don’t migrants in low-skilled jobs access provision?

2. What barriers to language learning do they identify?

3. What support do they want?

4. What support do they need?

5. What support is practical?
Why don’t migrants in low-skilled jobs access provision?

Dynamics
Migrant arrives → seeks work, seeks friends (support network)
→ Work = job suitable for person with limited English = low-paid, low-skilled = long hours + problems of low income
→ Friends = people who speak migrant’s language(s)

Migrant starts English course → finds job, friends → stops course
No time, energy, money, etc + no need: is working, has friends

Result = low-pay, limited-English trap
→ Limited exposure to English at work, at home
→ Study in non-working hours difficult, unattractive
What barriers do migrants identify?

**Barriers** to learning

- Limited *contact* with English-speakers
- Lack of confidence to *interact* in English
- Not knowing how to find *suitable language tuition*
- No *time, money* for tuition
- No *learning support* at or outside work
- No effective *personal learning strategies*
- No *motivation* to persist with language learning

**Addressing barrier = enabler**
What support do migrants want?

[Note: all informants wanted to improve their English]

**Guidance** to help them learn effectively, efficiently

**Motivation** to help them **persist** with learning

**Opportunity to extend** their exposure to + use of English

**Personalised feedback**

**Requirements**
Accessibility (location + time + cost), relevance to own learning needs  
Access to learning when ‘mentally fresh’

**Preferences**
Structured, teacher-led learning (familiarity, feedback, motivation)  
Speaking + listening, pronunciation (lower levels)  
Writing + pronunciation (higher levels)
Key findings

[Note: all (50+10) felt their English limited them & wanted to improve it]

Q. Where do you use English most?

A. At work  [no matter how narrow the job]

Q. Where would it be most convenient for you to study English?

A.  At work

Q. Do you use the internet on a daily basis in your personal life?

A. Yes
What support do migrants need?

- Encouragement and support to learn English
- Exposure to authentic English, spoken & written
- Opportunity to interact in English, spoken & written
- Help to understand the form of the English language
- Help to develop effective personal learning strategies
- Rewards that encourage persistence

In other words – exactly what every other language learner needs
Observations

Formal language teaching system lacks **capacity** to meet demand/need

Language acquisition is about **learning**, not teaching

Language is learned through communication

Workplace offers **structured opportunities to communicate** linked to role & task + **support** (management, supervision, team)

Support for workplace communication = **support for learning**

**Communication** is a key issue in the low-paid workplace (basic skills)

**Support** useful to **all present**: migrant/non-migrant, manager/worker

Indicative approaches: **workplace learning**  **self-directed learning**
Implications

Focus support on

Workplace as collective learning space

Self-directed learning for individuals & groups

High Performance Working practices
Employee engagement
Continuous improvement

31-Mar-16 Symposium LIAM / ILMA 2016
What might that look like in practice?

Internet-enabled **scaffolding programme** to support learning

**Help for employers** to support communication in a way that enables language development at work (without expensive classes)
- Guided learning materials, coaching & mentoring, work organisation, supervisory feedback, peer learning groups etc

**Help for staff** to form **self-directed study groups**
- Curricula, resources for self-directed learning programmes

**Help for individuals** to develop **effective learning strategies**
- Apps etc to help personalise and support learning

**Incentives for learners & employers** to engage & persist in learning
- Reward schemes

**Expert support and facilitation** from **workplace learning service**
- New role for learning providers – or an old one resuscitated?
Reference

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Language for Work network

European learning network for professionals
Find out more at http://languageforwork.ecml.at/

Supported by European Centre for Modern Languages