

Fiona Dalziel\* and Francesca Helm

## Introduction

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Large numbers of people are constantly forced to leave their homes due to conflict, persecutions, climate change and poverty, and as if that were not enough, they face barriers when seeking to enter European societies so as to start new lives here. In the mainstream media we are used to hearing about opposition to migration and hostility towards refugees and immigrants arriving in Europe. Yet, little is reported about solidarity at a grassroots level on the part of informal networks and collectives – or about people working with refugees within and across higher education institutions.

This edition of *Language Learning in Higher Education* brings together a wide range of contributions which open our eyes to some examples of inclusive pedagogies, reflective practices and concrete actions that we, as language teachers, can engage with. The articles and reports present both top-down institutional projects, which have seen language centres play an important role in facilitating refugees' access to higher education, and bottom-up initiatives arising from the actions of individual educators but then involving institutions.

What all the contributions highlight is the importance of creating networks that can bring together a wide range of actors in the development and growth of such initiatives. Besides single language centres and universities these networks include local, national and international NGOs/charities, municipalities, local businesses, volunteer teachers and, of course, the refugees themselves – those who are directly concerned but whose voices are rarely heard or published.

The articles and reports in this special edition have been written by educators working in Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK. They approach the issue of language education for refugees from a range of perspectives: some focus more on theory, others on practice, some regard the professional development of teachers, others are about the students. What many of the contributions also highlight is that in order for these initiatives to function at an institutional level much more than language education is required – those involved have often had to raise awareness amongst their colleagues and

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departments, lobby their institutions and authorities, look for funding outside the universities.

Dalziel and Piazzoli adopt an ecology of language approach in order to identify the needs of asylum seekers and refugees who often find themselves in host communities whose inhabitants are reluctant to enter into exchange and dialogue with them. They argue that learner agency and celebration of diversity should be the key to language provision and that the language class should recognize the differing needs of participants, build on the strengths of their existing language competence and foster a sense of belonging by seeing inclusion as two-way process. They give a brief overview of performative approaches to language teaching, in particular Process Drama, and its adoption in language classes with adult asylum seekers and refugees. The focus of the article is a research study which used focus groups and video-stimulated recall of a Process Drama enacted in an Italian context. They report on how the creation of a dramatic frame which reversed the roles of teacher and student, refugee and citizen, novice and expert, allowed the adult refugees involved to position themselves as active agents, and use the target language in a creative, and welcoming way.

Gkaintartzi, Mout, Skourtou and Tsokalidou bring us a study of teachers' perceptions of multilingualism and language teaching in the context of a Master's programme specifically designed for the language education of refugees and migrants. They explore the interplay between teachers' beliefs and pedagogical practices, and highlight the ambivalent and complex ways in which teachers in their context understand and interpret the multilingual classroom with both school-age and adult learners. They find a gap between the positive attitudes towards multilingualism in general and the reluctance to implement multilingual practices in the classroom. This gap, they argue, could be filled by raising awareness of the relationship between multilingualism and language learning in order to respond to diversity in the classroom in such a way as to promote inclusion and empowerment.

Dell'Olio's paper problematizes the conceptualisation of language, nation and culture in language and integration policies and practices which do not take into account power relations and the social and political dimensions of language. Drawing on theorizations of coloniality and her own research on language education for migrants in Brazil and Italy, she offers four "key ideas" as theory promoting insights. Together with activities and discussion questions, these key ideas invite language educators to reflect – also with their students – on the relations between language, society and power both inside and outside the classroom.

Bradley, Bartram and Al-Sabbagh's contribution regards the usability of mobile learning apps. By involving recently-arrived Arabic-speaking migrants and refugees in the usability testing of apps for learning Swedish, the authors were able to understand both the limitations of the apps and the needs and desires of this target group. The data gathered from this process informed the development of an app specifically for Arabic-speaking refugees learning Swedish in their context and led them to include audio and video materials with authentic dialogues in everyday situations which are relevant to the needs of the refugees.

In their report, Reusse and Crettenand describe the Swiss programme "Horizon Académique", whose aim is to facilitate academic and social inclusion for asylum seekers. Teaching the French language is one of the most important elements of the programme, and it has led to the evolution of teaching model which could best meet the needs of the participants. The courses represent a cross between "Français langue étrangère" (FLE) and "Français langue d'intégration" (FLI), and incorporate the role of a study tutor. Thanks to the experience gained over the last two years and the collaboration with the local canton, the "Horizon Académique" programme has managed to identify the appropriate tools necessary to teach asylum seekers at a university level.

Carlioni and Sisti reflect on the bonds between language and identity drawing on post-structuralist conceptualisations of identity and the notions of investment, narrative theory and embodied cognition. They present a case study carried out in Italy in which a narrative approach is adopted in an art-related learning pathway, implemented within an intercultural framework so as to foster social inclusion and language learning. With the support of a "museum cultural mediator" and the use of cultural artefacts, this approach allows migrants to reinterpret their individual, transnational histories and reposition their complex identities in the new social and symbolic spaces they inhabit.

Palanac tells the story of how a teacher at a UK university's English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU), one of the university's "gatekeepers", responsible for implementing admissions policies which may exclude individuals from access to the university, has worked from the bottom-up, persuading the university to open the doors of the academy to refugees and asylum seekers. The starting point was the provision of a space for language classes, but the initiative gathered support and momentum, gained expertise through networking with other more experienced universities and established charities, and has led to the university becoming an officially-recognised University of Sanctuary.

Roselaar and van Bielder describe a year-long pre-bachelor's programme developed by a university language centre in the Netherlands, which already had experience in refugee education, working with other organizations in the

region that were part of a network on refugee education (other universities, the municipality, the Dutch Foundation for Refugee students). The pilot project was launched in 2017–18 and included not only the study of language but also that of other subjects required for the state exam and preparation for possible future job placement schemes. Successful completion granted access to bachelor's courses, and of the 16 participants on the pre-bachelor's programme, 10 subsequently enrolled on higher education programmes.

Duso and Marigo start by providing an overview of initiatives aimed at refugees in Italian higher education institutions, and then present a pilot project “Cultura e Accoglienza” which took place at one university and involved the inclusion of 30 asylum-seekers as “guest students”. The latter were given access to facilities and services such as libraries, and the chance to attend individual course units as well as Italian courses at the University Language Centre. The authors highlight both the opportunities that this project offered to the university language centre teachers, local, international and the guest students, and some of the lessons learnt in the two years of implementation of this project, which was the first initiative of this kind for the university.

Brewer and Whiteside describe how a network of volunteer academics working on Academic English programmes in the UK partnered with the organization CARA to support Syrian academics who had to abandon their positions at universities in Syria when they fled the conflict. The UK academics have developed a blended programme which combines online tutoring through webinars and intensive language workshops in Turkey. This academic English course is part of a broader training programme in Academic Skills, designed to offer a means for displaced academics to re-establish their academic identities. The authors also see the project as opening up the way for potential research collaborations between Syrian and UK academics.

This special edition closes with the voice of Ghaith Alhallak, who speaks from the perspectives of a refugee language teacher and a foreign and second language learner. His report highlights the opportunities offered by online language learning and teaching, but also its challenges. Online resources allowed him to learn English in a context where his safety was at risk, and teaching Arabic online helped him to become more financially independent and connected to the outside world. However, as he points out, we cannot assume that all refugees have access to the internet or possess the necessary digital literacies to learn languages online. Like other contributors to this volume, he highlights the need for pedagogic approaches which are relevant to the diverse backgrounds and the communicative needs of asylum seeker and refugee learners and he emphasises the importance of establishing relations in the community, particularly when the political and cultural climate is hostile to them.

University language centres are often the first port of call when institutions decide to take action and implement measures to support refugees' access to higher education. There is a wealth of knowledge, resources and lessons learnt that can be shared by those who already have some experience in this field. Of course every context is different and the specificities of individuals, organisations and local contexts must not be lost, but the shared knowledge already acquired can be further enriched by continuing dialogue and engagement from an ever wider range of individuals and contexts. We hope that this journal issue is but one small step in this direction and look forward to initiatives which will support the building of more accessible and inclusive higher education institutions and societies.

## Bionotes

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