



AN EVALUATION OF THE RURAL REFUGEE NETWORK'S 'BUILD UP TO IELTS 'PROGRAMME FOR UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Rural Refugee Network (herein RRN) has worked across East Hampshire and the Havant communities since 2016, assisting refugees to settle into new communities. In order to support their transition to independence, RRN helps individuals and families find accommodation, training, education, and employment, and engages with fundraising and awareness activities in the local area. Previous (and continuing) initiatives include a 1:1 Employment and Education Programme, the South Downs Youth Discovery Project, and, since Summer 2022, English-language support through bespoke ESOL courses. This report aims to evaluate the impact of the newest addition to their language-support provision, the Build Up to IELTS class conceived and first delivered in Autumn 2023.

RRN's bespoke ESOL support programmes were created in response to the arrival of refugees from Ukraine in summer 2022. It was estimated that more than 8 million people had fled their homes for safety in other countries by February 2023 (UNHCR, 2023). As of July 2023, more than 6.2 million refugees from Ukraine have been recorded globally, 400 of whom are in East Hampshire (UN Refugees, 2023). With previous experience in providing ESOL support for refugees, RRN had the capacity to respond to the immediate need of these individuals for language learning support. Evaluations of RRN's pilot ESOL programme for Ukrainian refugees in July 2022 found that students experienced improvements across all language skills, a greater sense of community belonging, and strong desire for further provision. In January 2023, RRN was awarded a generous grant by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Community Foundation which allowed the organisation to expand their existing provision of ESOL classes in East Hampshire. This programme similarly made a tangible difference to the lives of learners, both in terms of their language ability and in their feelings of wellbeing and confidence. The classes also supported learners indirectly to access employment and work towards future goals. This provision was extended, funded by East Hampshire District Council from September 2023, and RRN-led ESOL classes in Petersfield which concluded a further 11-week programme.

In line with both their language and professional goals, several learners who had been engaged in RRN's Intermediate ESOL classes since Summer 2022 expressed their desire to work towards the IELTS qualification, which can pave the way for the professional development desired by these learners. Many learners have goals to return to professional careers they left in Ukraine, which would require achieving high grades at an accredited IELTS test. As an advanced qualification, it was judged that learners would benefit from a programme designed to introduce learners to IELTS at an intermediate level more aligned with their current capability.

Based on learner feedback, evaluations from RRN's previous ESOL provision, and individual enquiries, this Build Up to IELTS course was developed as a pilot intended for a small number of students. It aimed to introduce learners to the types of tasks they may be required to complete in an IELTS exam but at an Intermediate level (bands 5.5-6) rather than an Advanced level. This was intended to complement the learners' other engagement with ESOL classes at local colleges. The class was therefore not intended to make students ready to take the exam; instead, learners may feel more prepared to join an accredited IELTS course at a later date. The course was structured around the four main language disciplines (Writing, Reading, Listening, and Speaking) but with central attention to Writing as this is centred in the IELTS exam. More about the intended outcomes of the class can be found in Section 2.1.



The course consisted of one weekly 2-hour class for 11 weeks and followed the coursebook 'Build Up to IELTS: A Step-by-step Guide 'by Lewis Richards. This also emphasises Writing skills. The classes planned to cover all 10 units of the book, thereby engaging with 10 of the most common areas language topics covered by the IELTS exam. Like the ESOL classes, Build Up to IELTS was delivered by Susanni Jameson, a specialised ESOL teacher with previous experience of working with refugees through RRN. The programme was intended for a single class for around 6 learners. Most of these learners had worked with Susanni previously in the Intermediate ESOL class.

This evaluative report intends to examine RRN's Build Up to IELTS course in the context of its intended outcomes and the impact the course had on learners.

2. THE EVALUATION

This evaluative report intends to capture the impact of RRN's IELTS provision for students, and will be used to reflect on this provision and inform the future provision of similar programmes.

2.1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This report will measure the outcomes of the Build Up to IELTS course across three key areas.

1. Improved confidence across all four language skills, but particularly Writing.
2. Improved competence across all four language skills, but particularly Writing.
3. A greater knowledge of what the IELTS comprises and requires at levels 5.5 – 6

We will also consider the efficacy of the design, planning, and delivery of the classes, asking what worked well and what could be better. This is considered in the Process section (Section 4).

2.2. METHODS AND SOURCES

Progress in learning was assessed through teacher and student perceptions. Susanni provided a written report assessing the impact and process of the classes from her perspective. The learners each undertook a survey so their responses could be collected in a consistent format. These surveys are contained in the appendices of this report. Students were asked to:

1. Rate on a Likert-like scale the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements about planned outcomes.
2. Comment on the teaching, what worked well and how provision could be improved.

The participation of the organisers and teachers in this evaluation will ensure that the findings will actively inform future funding bids and the detail of provision, and help the teachers to understand where they are at their best and build on the best of what they do. This research took an appreciative enquiry approach, which 'aims to identify good practice, design effective development plans, and [...] offers an affirmative approach for evaluating and envisioning future initiatives based on best practice' (NFER, 2009, p.2).

The dataset overall comprised:

- 4 questionnaire responses
- Feedback from teachers
- Organisational records

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results examined below are drawn from all parts of the dataset and examine how students and stakeholders perceived the programme in relation to the identified outcomes (Section 2.1) and the programme's Process (Section 4).

3.1. IMPROVED CONFIDENCE AND COMPETENCE WITH THE FOUR LANGUAGE SKILLS

Build Up to IELTS aimed to improve the learners' confidence and competence with the four main language skills of Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening. Reflecting the centrality of Writing to the IELTS exam, Susanni's intention was to hold one 2-hour class focused on this skill and a second weekly session engaging with the other three. The coursebooks and lesson plans were chosen to centre Writing, which is often de-prioritised in ESOL classes. Learners would be encouraged to spend time on Reading, Listening, and Speaking independently. Other demands on the learners' time made this approach unfeasible. As many were employed single mothers who therefore had little spare time to dedicate to further independent study, the focus of the IELTS classes was broadened. Instead of covering all 10 modules, Susanni decided to cover half of the book's modules and all four skills in detail, with an emphasis on Writing. Susanni believes this worked positively for all learners and would be a beneficial approach to take in future.

All students agreed the classes improved their ability to express themselves in written English, with two stating they 'strongly agreed'. This extended to the techniques of essay writing, in which all the students reported greater feelings of confidence (1 'strongly'). One learner stated, "I feel more confident in writing and explaining my opinion", and another that "All of [the aspects of the course] were helpful, but especially the writing". In explaining what they found helpful about learning to write essays, one learner mentioned "it helps to learn vocabulary, show your thoughts on the paper, and understand grammar more." The IELTS test requires learners to organise ideas competently, display a wide range of vocabulary and a competent grasp on grammar. The survey responses and teacher evaluations suggest the students felt considerable progress across these skills, supported by the programme's emphasis on writing. It could therefore be concluded that Build Up to IELTS successfully improved learners' competence with Writing in a way that supports their future progress towards IELTS.

The evidence suggests learners also felt progress across the other language skills. Half of the learners agreed 'strongly' that their Reading fluency had improved as a result of the classes, with the other learners agreeing more moderately. This suggests widespread and consistent progress in both confidence and competence relating to Reading. Similarly, all learners felt their confidence in Speaking English had improved, suggesting the course was successful in helping learners move closer to the fluency and confidence required for the IELTS. Confidence and improvement in grammar and vocabulary are relevant for all the language skills and for the specific goal of progressing towards the IELTS test. The learners reported a broadly positive feeling of improvement in both areas. Although one learner felt 'neutral' progress on grammar, all other learners either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they had made progress in both grammar and the range of vocabulary they possessed. The evaluation therefore suggests that the outcomes of Build Up to IELTS were achieved.

3.2. GREATER KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT THE IELTS COMPRISES AND REQUIRES AT LEVELS 5.5 – 6

The defining intention of Build Up to IELTS was to help learners feel more ready to undertake a formal IELTS test or join an accredited IELTS programme. The desire to take the IELTS and thereby progress to future career goals was a key motivation for all the learners in undertaking this course, mentioned by 75%. One stated for example that “it helps me to find a reliable and stable job with a good salary” while another noted that IELTS was “recognized by international company” and is “a good addition to my CV when looking for a job”. Susanni specified that many would need “a good IELTS grade, e.g., bands 6.5 – 8”, thereby justifying this programme’s situation in the Intermediate bands 5.5 – 6. While the course was not designed to support learners in pursuing specific professional goals such as directly finding a job, 75% agreed that the classes had made them feel more able to do so, one agreeing strongly. The future applicability of the course was therefore a central motivation of the learners.

Some learners also mention taking the course as an “opportunity to study the language further and reach a new level in learning English”, thereby using the classes functionally as a more advanced ESOL class not solely restricted to its IELTS functions. This could suggest there is demand for further advanced ESOL provision in RRN’s programmes, though this must be examined in context with the other commitments of learners and the capacity of RRN’s teachers. An intermediate class was organised to be held in Petersfield this autumn, but many learners were not available.

The evaluation suggests that the course was successful in its aim to prepare learners for future progress towards IELTS, with all learners agreeing that they felt more prepared to join an accredited IELTS course by the end of the classes. Furthermore, there was universal agreement - half ‘strongly’ and half moderately - that they understood the requirements of the IELTS course better. This suggests that RRN’s IELTS provision was successful in this central aim. There was a wide diversity in learner responses to the statement, “I need more help to join an IELTS course”. One disagreed, which could indicate confidence in their English level, no current plan to complete the IELTS qualification, or disappointment in the course. However, this learner’s general feedback on the class and their progress was consistently positive. Another learner stated they neither agreed nor disagreed, while the others agreed strongly or moderately. These responses likely reflect the diversity of the learners’ intentions and confidence, and can be used to consider how learners can be supported in future.

4. PROCESS

This section considers the effectiveness of the programme’s design, planning, and delivery, evaluating how the programme was arranged and what improvements could be made. The conclusions are based on feedback from both learners and teachers. This programme was developed using the July 2023 evaluations of RRN’s previous ESOL provision, where learners consistently requested longer and more frequent classes. In the present evaluation, many learners reported a desire for even longer and more frequent classes for future iterations of RRN’s provision. As found in the July 2023 evaluation and the experience of these autumn classes, the provision of more sessions weekly, as well as their duration and format is highly determined by the availability of learners, which is rarely uniform and often constricted by childcare or employment. Susanni reported: “Classes initially started in person during the day but only 1 learner was able to attend, so the class

changed to online lessons in the evening. From here on, 4 out of 6 interested learners were able to attend.” Each lesson was extended to 2 hours, which was positively received.

The content of the classes gained positive feedback from learners. All learners agreed the course was “just right” in difficulty, and there was positive feedback about the variety of topics and the inclusion of those relevant for everyday life. Both teacher and learners also noted the value of having a designated, trained teacher as well as opportunities for group discussions, which both provided benefits inaccessible when learning independently. Although the provision of the course book allowed students to study alone, “the benefits gained from face-to-face interaction with others or a tutor/teacher”, Susanni notes, are “constantly reiterated by the learners themselves”.

The online form of the class provided benefits to the class experience. More use was also made of online tools for setting and marking homework, showing positive developments in the teachers’ and learners’ engagement with what remote learning can offer. Susanni notes: “If an essay had been written, it was emailed to me and I was able to mark it and make comments using the ‘review’ tool in Word and send it back to them. This is so much easier and more useful than trying to mark handwritten work”. While no learners commented on this in the surveys, the beneficial impacts that in-person settings have on social wellbeing and learning outcomes, seen in other RRN evaluations and wider literature, should be considered.

Regarding future provision, Susanni stated that it would be possible to offer a further 10-week course covering the second half of the book in the same depth as this programme. Alternatively, she suggested learners may feel confident to complete the rest independently. The diversity in responses to their desire for further IELTS support suggests that the demand for future IELTS provision would depend on the individual learners considered as participants. One learner recorded a request to extend the course further and another stated they would similarly “like more time to study and delve deeper into the topic”. This suggests the demand for further provision may exist within the current cohort, both for specific IELTS support and for further intermediate/advanced ESOL classes. The concurrent evaluations of RRN’s autumn 2023 ESOL provision suggest there may be a number of other learners soon interested in Build Up to IELTS.

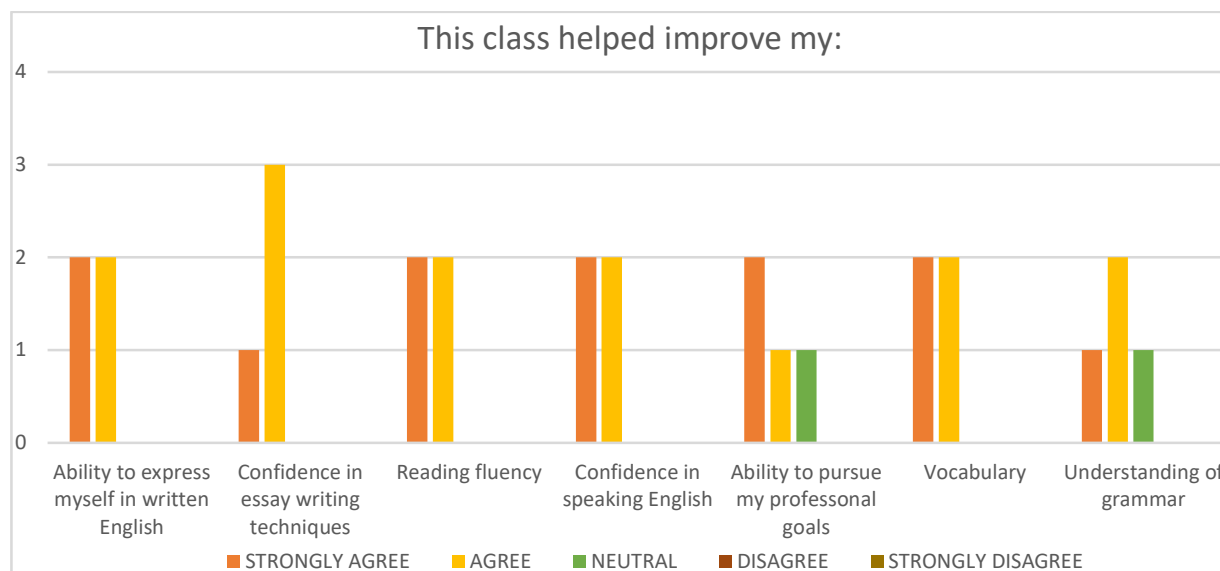


Figure 1

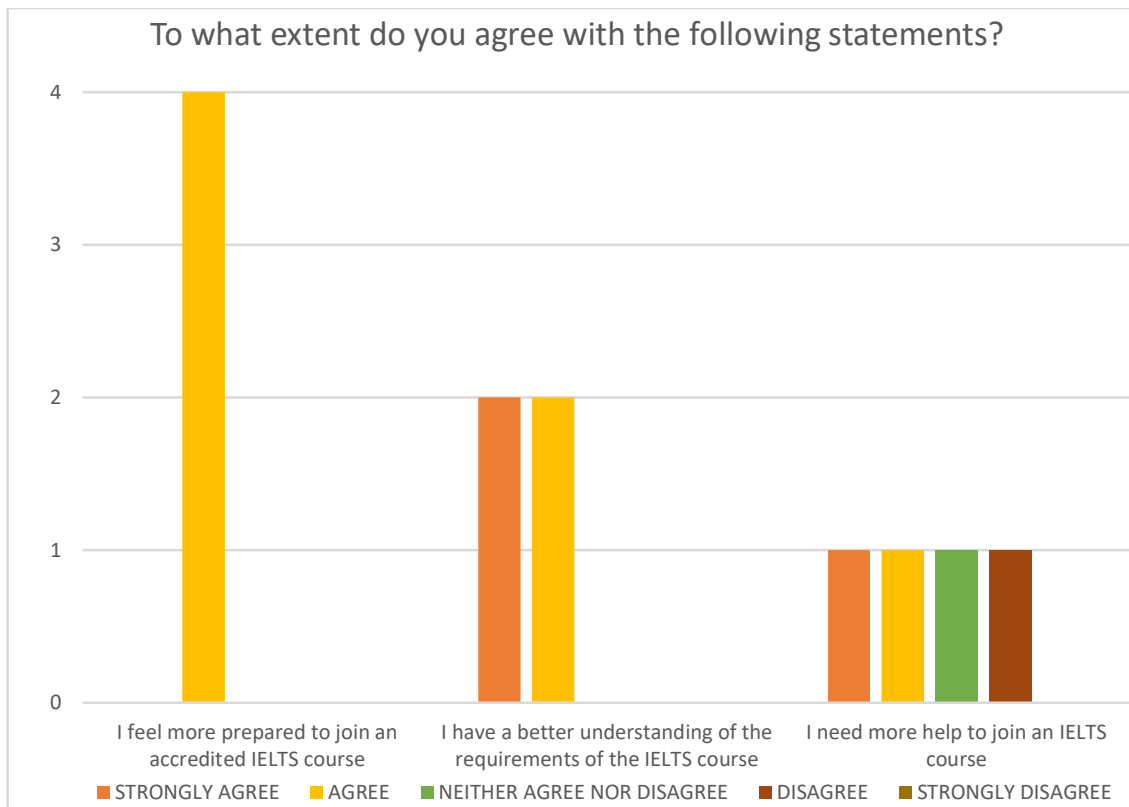


Figure 2

5. CONCLUSION

Overall, the evidence suggests that RRN's bespoke Build Up to IELTS programme had a beneficial impact on learners in line with its intentions and key outcomes. Learners felt consistent progress across all language skills, and responded positively to the course's focus on Writing. They mentioned specific skills they felt the course's design had helped them improve, which are aligned with the skills required for the IELTS exam. Furthermore, these perceptions of greater competence combined with responses to questions about future progress suggest learners grew considerably in confidence. The evaluation showed that although learners had a range of reasons for undertaking the classes, they reported a universal feeling of greater preparedness for future pursuit of an accredited IELTS programme. Similarly, the core aim of Build Up to IELTS, improving learners' knowledge of what IELTS entails, saw self-reported progress by all learners. Based on the learners' motivations and reported perspectives on the class, the difficulty level and content of the class can be said to align well alongside RRN's other ESOL provision. While the learners surveyed had diverse responses to whether they needed future support to join an IELTS course, this likely stems from the individual needs of each learner rather than any systematic dissatisfaction with the programme. Viewed alongside the learners' requests for more classes of longer duration, future IELTS provision should be considered in the context of learner availability, concurrent advanced ESOL provision, and the evolving cohort of learners moving through RRN's other provisions, possibly towards advanced qualifications like the IELTS.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The data in this evaluation point to the following recommendations. Some reflect ideas directly from participants, who were asked how provision could be improved, others have been inferred from the data by the researchers.

For RRN and similar providers

- A class specifically focused on IELTS preparation has beneficial results and a receptive audience, which can be best achieved through a programme separate to general ESOL provision.
- The intermediate level of this provision was suitable for bridging the gap between learner ability and future advanced courses.
- There is clear evidence of the success of this programme, and of likely future demand from other students in the area.
- The capacity, demand, and need for providing longer and more frequent classes should be examined further, in the context of learners' other responsibilities.
- The capacity, demand, and need for providing more advanced ESOL provision could be examined further, in the context of learners' other responsibilities.
- Teachers and organisational bodies should consider how they can best make use of both digital and face-to-face tools in ESOL/IELTS provision.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND HEARTFELT THANKS

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9. APPENDICES

9.1. APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE

Rural Refugee Network 'Build Up to IELTS' programme in Petersfield, September - December 2023. Feedback survey

Thank you for helping us understand your experience of the 'Build Up to IELTS' class you have attended. Please only answer these questions about the IELTS class, even if you are also attending one of RRN's ESOL classes.

We will use what you tell us to write a report about the programme. Your name will not be used and no one will be able to identify you in the report. This survey is run by Katherine Lawrence, an experienced evaluator and trustee of the Rural Refugee Network. If you have any questions about this survey, you can contact research@ruralrefugeenetwork.org.

If you choose to provide your contact details and subsequently decide that you want to withdraw your responses, you can do so by contacting research@ruralrefugeenetwork.org.

* Indicates required question

1. I have read and understood the above information and agree to participate. *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

2. Why have you chosen to attend the 'Build Up to IELTS' class?

3. Why do you want to work towards the IELTS qualification?

4. Did you feel the class was:

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Too easy
- ☐ Just right
- ☐ Too difficult

5. This class helped improve my:

Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Ability to express myself in written English	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Confidence in essay- writing techniques	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reading fluency	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Confidence in speaking English	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ability to pursue my professional goals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Vocabulary	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Understanding of grammar	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Mark only one oval per row.

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>
I feel more prepared to join an accredited IELTS course	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have a better understanding of the requirements of the IELTS course	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I need more help to join an IELTS course	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. What aspects of the course were most useful and valuable to you?

8. What could we do differently in future to improve your experience of the course?

9. Thank you for completing this form. You do not have to give your name or contact details. If you would like to provide your contact details please add your email address here. Withdrawal of anonymous responses will not be possible. Your details will not be retained once the project report is complete and will not be shared with anyone else.
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