



Rural Refugee Network
www.ruralrefugeenetwork.org
Registered Charity No. 1165796

AN EVALUATION OF THE RURAL REFUGEE NETWORK'S ESOL PROVISION FOR AFGHAN REFUGEES

(March to July 2025)



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND HEARTFELT THANKS

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2016, RRN supports newly arrived refugees as they resettle into local communities through government resettlement schemes. We provide accommodation and essential items, foster community connections and a sense of belonging, and offer English language support through bespoke ESOL courses. We also deliver tailored support to help individuals access education, employment, and training opportunities. For unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, our Youth Discovery Project NEST focuses on wellbeing, language development, and social connection. Additionally, we work to bring the wider community together and raise awareness to build a more inclusive society. Previous (and continuing) initiatives include a 1:1 Employment and Education Programme and, since Summer 2022, English-language support through bespoke ESOL courses. This report aims to evaluate the impact of the ESOL course provided for Afghan refugees from March to July 2025.

The Rural Refugee Network's bespoke ESOL provision was created in response to the arrival of refugees from Ukraine in summer 2022, using our previous experience to respond to the immediate need of individuals for language learning support. Evaluations of our previous programmes can be found on our website.

In August 2021, the Taliban retook control of the city of Kabul. At the end of 2024, 6.1 million Afghans “were refugees, asylum-seekers or otherwise in need of international protection worldwide”.¹ Around 34,000 Afghans have been relocated to the UK through the ARAP and ACRS schemes.² Most Afghans do not have experience with English, and data from 2022 suggests that 62.7% of the population have never learned to read and write in any language (47.9% of men and 77.4% of women).³ The Rural Refugee Network therefore recognised a pronounced need for language training among recent arrivals to our area of operation, and has worked with Two Saints and Hampshire County Council to respond to this and other needs.

In response, we developed a bespoke programme of ESOL classes, funded through the organisation's unrestricted funding. Classes were initially delivered by Hilary Wright, a specialised ESOL teacher who has considerable experience working with refugees, at the Pallant Centre in Havant from 9.30-11.30am; this was changed at the request of some learners to 10.00-12.00am due to childcare restraints. 12 learners attended the classes regularly. Most (70%) were between the ages of 31 and 50, while 2 learners were under 30 and 1 was over 51. None had taken an ESOL class before. There were an equal number of male and female learners in the class. Nadia Potts, the CEO of RRN, reported the following when visiting the class: “The classroom setting is inclusive and welcoming; the men and women sit separately but communicate well between themselves and are supportive of each other.”

The unique needs of this class presented a new challenge for Hilary and the RRN. 50% of the learners were illiterate in Dari as well as in English. Hilary therefore took a different approach to

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/where-we-work/countries/afghanistan>

² <https://www.ruralrefugeenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/RRN-Statement-on-the-closure-of-Afghan-resettlement-schemes.pdf>

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-07-01/hlws761?utm>

³ <https://www.unesco.org/en/fieldoffice/kabul/expertise/education/literacy-learning-possibilities>



previous pre-beginner and beginner ESOL provision she had delivered and designed a 10-week bespoke programme “to reflect the interests and needs of these learners to focus more the students’ immediate needs”. The classes benefitted hugely from the presence of Nadima, who supported Hilary and the learners with translations between Dari and English.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This evaluation aims to capture the impact of this ESOL programme on its learners, making specific reference to the learners’ own aims and the overall aims of the programme. The report will be used to reflect on this provision and inform future programmes organised and run by RRN. Out of 12 regular attendees, 10 learners took part in this evaluation. Most students wrote their answers in Dari, which were subsequently translated into English by Nadima. The brevity of some student responses can be expected to reflect their level of English and/or lack of previous literacy.

This report will measure the outcomes of the ESOL course across two key areas:

1. Improved confidence and competence with English
2. Improved wellbeing, confidence, and belonging in the class and the community.

We will also consider the efficacy of the design, planning, and delivery of the ESOL provision, asking what worked well and what could be done better in future.

This evaluation will draw from student surveys (Appendix 1), Hilary’s written feedback on the impact of the classes, and a reflection from Nadia on her insights into the programme. In the survey, 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 and experience of the classes, including what worked well and how provision could be improved.

Progress in learning and language skill will therefore be assessed through teacher and learner perceptions. While this prevents evaluation against any objective or formal language competency criteria, this allows better access to the learners’ sense of progress and wellbeing, a crucial motivation of RRN’s provision. More extensive evaluation is also not suitable for the level and resource of this provision.

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”.⁴

⁴ Shuayb, M., Sharp, C., Judkins, M., & Hetherington, M. (2009). Using Appreciative Enquiry in Educational Research: Possibilities and Limitations. National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). p2.



LEARNER AIMS AND THE IMPACT OF RRN'S PROVISION FOR AFGHAN LEARNERS

The survey asked learners about why they needed these classes. All participants reported that the following four motivations informed their decision to attend:

1. To communicate in everyday life
2. To get a job
3. To make friends here
4. I can't get to other classes

Other aims mentioned by learners included the desire to be a better speaker, reinforcing the first statement on communication. Two learners mentioned their desire to find a job when asked what they needed next to improve their English, suggesting that everyday use is a central aim. Another mentioned their desire to support their children with homework, indicating the importance of English in their ability to support their family's transition to the life in the UK. Overall, the learner response to this question supports the decision to focus on both skill and wellbeing in this provision and evaluation. Instead of centring formal qualifications, they wish to improve their ability to develop roots in a new community through learning English and enhance their overall wellbeing.

Feedback from the learners on RRN's provision as a whole indicates the positive impact that the programme had. All strongly agreed that they needed more help with English and expressed their desire for the classes to restart, with most wanting provision to occur twice a week and several calling for classes of 3 hours in length. Nadia reported that the learners "were all extremely thankful for the class and to Hilary and Nadima. They were very keen to know if the class would continue in September".

Language skills

The classes had a positive impact on the learners skill and confidence with English, the primary goal of any ESOL provision. Nine learners strongly agreed that their English had improved as a result of the classes.⁵ 90% of students agreed that their *understanding* of English had improved; 50% noted that their understanding improved 'a lot'. When considering specific language skills, all learners except one agreed that the classes had helped improve their speaking (40% a lot). 60% of students reported that the classes helped them improve their reading and writing (50% a lot). 40% of the students therefore reported not much progress in these skills, though learner responses to other questions suggests a consistent view across the group that they have made progress with the foundational skills of English. Most importantly, several students mentioned their confidence with the alphabet ("now it is easy for me"). Hilary's report noted, "in reading and writing they can now hear and identify some sounds, they are beginning to make connections between the phoneme grapheme correspondence and are becoming more familiar with signs and notices".

⁵ One learner did not answer this question.



Overall, this evaluation finds a predominantly positive response from learners about whether the class had helped them improve their language skills. Although this progress was not universal across all learners or all four key language skills, this can be reasonably assumed to reflect the total unfamiliarity of all the learners with English prior to the course and the additional barriers to immediate progress that a lack of literacy in any language can present. Overall, much more progress was reported in speaking and understanding than in reading and writing. This matches the learners' aims of communicating in everyday life, and the insights from analysis of previous RRN ESOL provision where learners requested focus on the former skills.

Wellbeing, confidence, and community

The ESOL programme also had a highly positive impact on the learners' wellbeing, sense of belonging, and confidence in using English. RRN aims to support our beneficiaries holistically, offering depth across multiple interlocking areas of their life rather than focusing on one specific facet of experience. This is reflected in our ESOL provision, which is considered as a route to these more intangible/less measurable benefits at least as much as they aim to improve practical skill with the English language.

All learners agreed that the classes helped improve their wellbeing, 80% agreeing strongly. Nadia mentions a discussion she held with the learners about what wellbeing meant to them, reporting "they all agreed that the class has helped them to give them a purpose and better confidence". All respondents strongly agreed that they felt welcomed and said that the classes improved their feeling of belonging.⁶ Nadia "found the group to be very supportive of each other" and reported that the learners "also all agree that the class allowed them to make new friends which they valued very much - it makes them happier."

Nadia contextualises her comments with the consideration that "these are newly arrived families; some join the class not long after arriving in a new area." All learners also strongly agreed that they felt more connected to the local community as a result of the classes. An extended quote from Hilary's report indicates her effort to centre this outcome in the programme's design and content.

"Topics included: 'I live in Havant' which focused on the looking at Havant on a map and locating Havant in the UK, as well as where the UK is on a world map; 'Going shopping' which focused on role play with real food; 'Clothes' which used on a large quantity of donated children's clothes; and 'Making an Appointment' which focused on knowing and saying name and address and phone number.

Their understanding of British culture, customs and life in the UK has also been supported through practical language activities; four students (4 men and 1 woman) bought bikes from the Liss Men's Shed and took their bikes back to Havant on the train. This included (with support),

⁶ 100% of respondents also strongly agreed with the statement, 'I feel I belong'.



trying and buying the bikes, buying a train ticket from a machine, listening to British Rail announcements and knowing where to get off! One of the women students is now attending ESOL conversation classes at Havant Library and also volunteering at a charity shop and helping with the gardening and watering at the Pallant House garden."

This indicates both the measures taken to make the classes applicable to everyday life for the learners, and a powerful mechanism in their process of settling into a new culture and community. The students' engagement with the Men's Shed, Havant Library conversation classes, Pallant House, and charity shop demonstrate the positive impact of the classes in this regard, and the learners' increased confidence with using English. This is supported by the surveys, in which the learners reported a universal sense of progress in their confidence: 70% stated that the classes increased their confidence a lot; 30% stated this increased 'quite a bit'. 9/10 learners strongly agreed that they felt more confident to talk in English (1/10 agreed moderately). Nadia reported that she "really noticed the difference when I met them the first time (a gap of approx. 8 weeks) in terms of their confidence in engaging/communicating with me and with each other", demonstrating this improvement in confidence and its impact for their engagement within and beyond those sharing their experience. Hilary's report noted a comparable improvement in the learners' confidence when approaching the lessons and its content:

"I think that they feel that they are able to ask for help when they don't understand, make mistakes and take risks with speaking and they will be listened to and encouraged to try again, feel that learning can be fun and not too daunting."

This can be considered one of the most important of the programme's outcomes, as it will support the learners in all future efforts of learning.

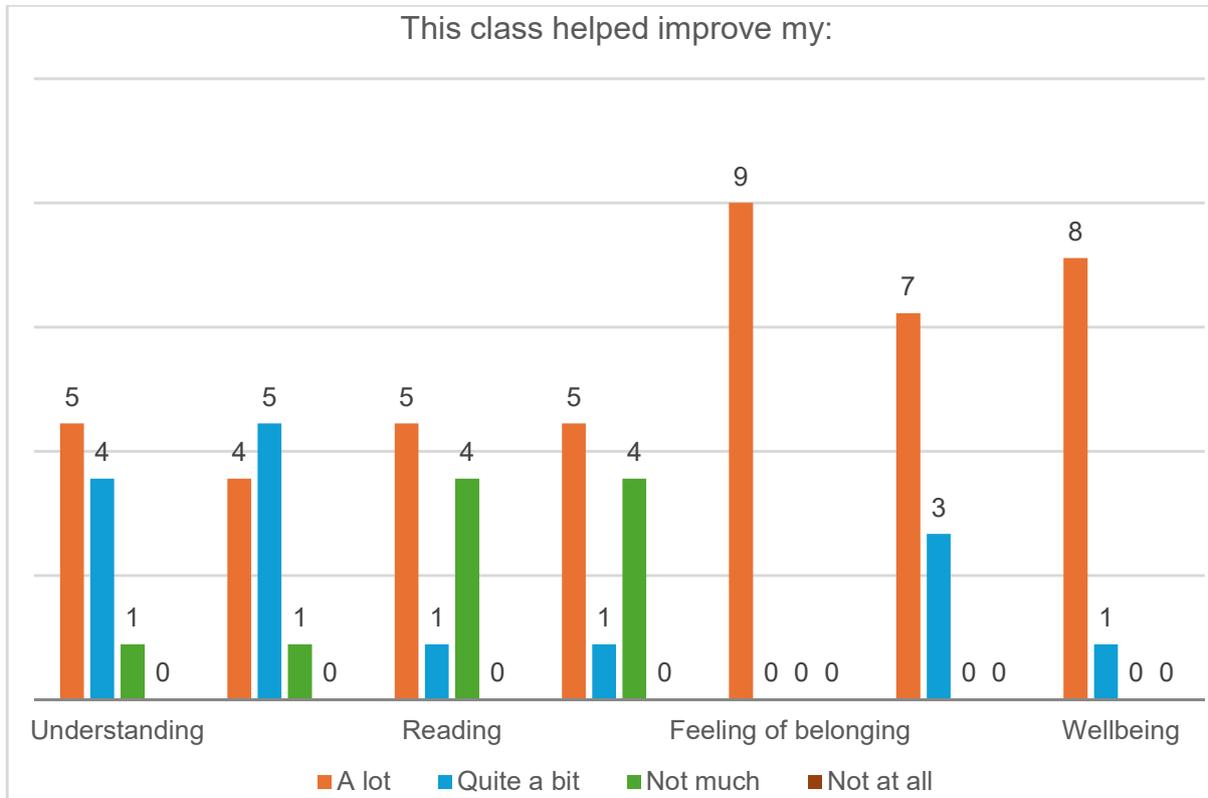


Figure 1

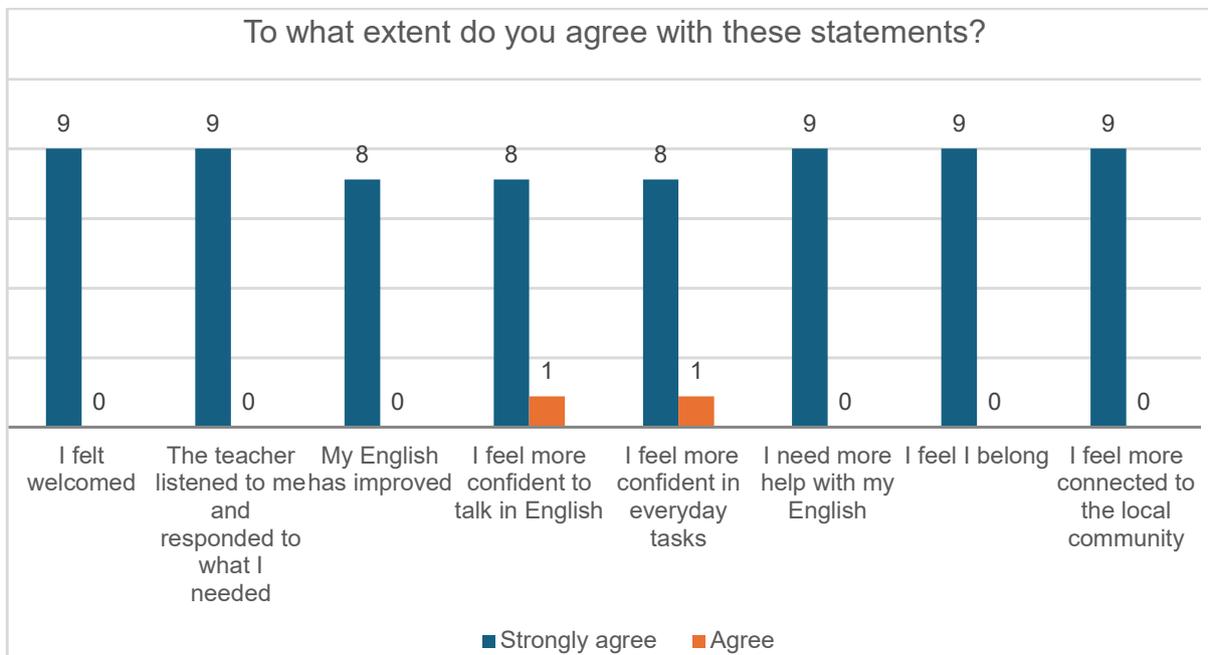


Figure 2



STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

This evaluation will also consider the logistics, set up, and delivery of this ESOL programme. This reflection will consider how the aims of the class were delivered and what lessons this provision can provide for future RRN ESOL programmes.

Hilary's report noted the adjustments she made to the programme in the face of the unique needs of the learners. In contrast to previous provision, and her plans for this programme, she did not use a textbook, recognising its inapplicability to pre-beginner learners without literacy in any language. Redesigning the programme, she focused on key basic skills such as "letter formation and handwriting, simple phonics, new vocabulary, simple reading text and basic grammar and very simple dialogue for everyday contexts". The positive impact of this for the learners has already been discussed.

The evaluation consistently revealed the learners' positive opinion of Hilary's skill as an ESOL teacher. 100% of respondents strongly agreed that she listened to them and responded to what they needed, and many left individual comments on her teaching style and the positive atmosphere she created in the class. The students were also asked to reflect on specific activities or resources that helped them learn. Letter charts, flashcards, whiteboards, pictures repetition of phonetic sounds, speaking practice, and children's books in English were mentioned by many. Nadima, the translator teaching assistant, was often included in praise about the class teachers.

"Nadima and Hilary my teachers were kind and they teach English very well. I am happy if my class start again."

"I am very happy if class could start again. Teachers were very kind and helped a lot to us."

Hilary's report also emphasises Nadima's importance to the classes' success. She writes:

"Afghan native Nadima has been an invaluable assistant and is respected by all students, adding to the motivating class atmosphere. She is used to translate, answer questions, support 1:1 students and explain cultural differences."



CONCLUSION

This evaluation concludes that RRN's ESOL programme for Afghan learners in Summer 2025 had an overwhelmingly positive impact on the learners and achieved its aims. While self-reported progress in the four key language skills (reading, writing, understanding, and speaking) was moderate, the classes saw a near-universal improvement in the learners' foundational skills, confidence, wellbeing, and sense of belonging. In the context of many of the learners' pre-beginner status and recent arrival to the UK, this impact can be considered the best possible and most important outcome of the classes. Hilary's report summarises this impact as follows:

"I think that this 10-week course has contributed to the learners' sense of confidence in understanding and speaking English, they have learnt new words and phrases, which helps them feel more positive and confident as they take the first steps toward starting life in a new community."

This reflects the universal sense of progress reported by the learners, and the consideration among the students that the classes provide a necessary and meaningful mechanism for the achievement of their aims in their new life.

Hilary proved herself, yet again, as an adaptable, energetic and compassionate teacher, and the classes were hugely benefitted by the presence of Nadima. Nadima's work and the high emphasis on speaking practice were the aspects of the class most commonly mentioned by the students, as well as Hilary's skill. Nadia, Hilary, and the learners agree that their progress was remarkable, and that this programme has provided a crucial opportunity for the learners to begin their new life in the UK with agency, understanding, and community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this evaluation suggest the following recommendations for future RRN provision.

- The provision should continue from September for a least a weekly session of 2 hours. Learners have demonstrated that they need to continue their journey of learning English.
- Further provision should build on their learning and continue to provide a space to build confidence and provide community.
- Further provision should necessarily include a translator teaching assistant.
- Knowledge of UK customs and cultural differences is important to the learners alongside language skill and should be included in all future provision.



APPENDIX 1: LEARNER SURVEY

RRN ESOL programme, Afghan feedback survey | Summer 2025

Thank you for helping us understand your experience of the English programme you have attended. 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 may do so by contacting research@ruralrefugeenetwork.org

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

YES

2. What is your age group?

18-30	
31-50	
51+	

3. What is your gender ?

4. When did you join the class?

5. Have you attended an ESOL class before?

YES

NO

6. Why did you need these classes (select all that apply)

To communicate in everyday life	
To get a job	
To make friends here	
I can't get to other classes	
Other (please explain below)	



Other: _____

7. Was there anything about how we organised the classes that made it easy or difficult for you to attend the class?

8. This class helped improve my:

Please mark the box that applies in each row.

	<i>Not at all</i>	<i>Not much</i>	<i>Quite a bit</i>	<i>A lot</i>
Understanding				
Speaking				
Reading				
Writing				
Feeling of belonging				
Confidence in using English				
Wellbeing				



9. To what extent do you agree with these statements?

Please mark the box that applies in each row.

	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
I felt welcomed					
The teacher listened to me and responded to what I needed					
My English has improved					
I feel more confident to talk in English					
I feel more confident in everyday tasks					
I need more help with my English					
I feel I belong					
I feel more connected to the local community					

10. What did the teacher do that helped you learn well? Can you give examples?



11. What do you feel you need next to help you improve your English?

12. What aspects of the course were most useful and valuable to you? It will help us if you explain why and give examples



13. What activities helped you learn best?

14. What about the classes could be changed to improve your experience of the course?



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