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# Functions, Forms, and Accessibility of English as a Second Language Courses in South-Central Kentucky

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FUNCTIONS, FORMS, AND ACCESSIBILITY OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND  
LANGUAGE COURSES IN SOUTH-CENTRAL KENTUCKY

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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May 2017

\*\*\*\*\*

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2017

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Rebecca and Joey Todd. Thank you for supporting me in all my wildest ambitions and adventures.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Another special thank you to Heath Ray, Refugee Programs Coordinator at Community Action of Southern Kentucky, and my personal mentor. You did not know me at all when I first approached Community Action asking for volunteer hours. I appreciate that you accepted me as part of the staff at this agency and for all of the valuable experiences I have had while working there.

Lastly, I want to thank my parents for supporting me in all of my random ventures. My life thus far has been far from typical and I am so happy that you have encouraged me to keep achieving and exploring, every step of the way.

## ABSTRACT

In the South-Central region of Kentucky there are several facilities that teach English as Second Language (ESL) courses. This thesis examines the forms and styles of these classes, as well as problems refugee students face in the classroom and the functions the classes may serve beyond the teaching of English. To accomplish this, I used anthropological field work methods, including semi-structured interviews with local ESL teachers, volunteers, and professionals in refugee services and participant observation. I will focus on the interviews I have conducted; what content has been collected, structure of the interviews, and what questions were asked. This paper will share valuable insights gained through ethnographic field methods on refugee interactions in English as a Second Language classes in the South-Central region of Kentucky. This thesis will also serve to fill the gap in information on ESL classes in this area of Kentucky, including training needed to teach the classes and the specific needs of refugee students. The project will act as a resource for local ESL teachers that are in the process of learning how to teach refugee students.

Keywords: South-Central Kentucky, English as a Second Language, refugees, participant observation, ethnographic field methods

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## **Background**

Refugees face many obstacles upon arriving in the U.S. that range include finding housing, securing employment, and adjusting to a new culture. Simultaneously, refugees endure the trauma of escaping their native countries and leaving friends and family behind. Of these, one of the most formidable obstacles refugees face is learning English. My research focuses primarily on English as a Second Language classes that serve refugee students within the South-Central region of Kentucky. This thesis will delve into the structures classes take in order to accommodate refugee students, functions these classes may serve other than teaching English, and obstacles students may face in the accessing their education. The thesis will be divided up into six sections, consisting of an overview of refugee services in the South-Central area of Kentucky, a review of existing literature on English as a Second Language classes for refugees, the methods used in my research, descriptions of these ESL classes based on the information gathered from interview informants, interpretation of findings, and discussion of future research.

This Capstone Thesis combines several passions of mine: language, culture, and humanitarianism. Originally, I began volunteering in the ESL classroom at the International Center and helped to jump start the greenhouse program at this facility. As a part of a class project, my group and I were tasked with growing plants and enlisting the ESL students to help us. There the ESL students had the opportunity to grow a variety of fruits and vegetables and use different gardening tools. My group and I created lesson plans and educational activities to teach the ESL class about the fruits and vegetables they were planting, as well as the gardening tools they were using.

Encouraged by this experience, I became involved in the refugee family mentorship program at the International Center. In this program, I was paired with a refugee family from Somalia and tasked with acclimating them to American life. This included helping them seek employment, arranging doctor's visits, accessing social services, and learning English. After working closely with this family, I could see the obstacles that they faced when trying to learn this language. Especially for the parents of the family, learning English proved to be quite difficult as they were not literate in their native language (Somali) and had never had formal classroom experience. I would later learn that this is the case with several refugees coming to the U.S. This meant that they struggled with the concepts of memorizing the alphabet, personal phone numbers, and home address. This experience gave me first hand insight into how difficult it was to learn English as a refugee, especially without any prior formal schooling.

Around the same time, I became an intern at Community Action of Southern Kentucky: Refugee Services. This was something that I enjoyed, not because I thought I was making a huge difference, but because I could make someone's life a little bit easier day by day. As an intern at this facility my main tasks were helping clients choose jobs to apply to, assisting them in filling out job applications, and providing tips on career building. These tips included interview skills, resume writing, and adapting to the American work place. In this position I learned more about the other critical obstacle that refugees face, finding employment. Yet again, the ability to speak English played a crucial role in being able to find and hold gainful employment. It was much more difficult for clients with little knowledge of English to be hired than for clients that were more adept in the language. My time as an intern at Community Action of Southern

Kentucky provided me with valuable insight and further queries that led me to develop this thesis.

## Summary of the Refugee Resettlement Process

While there are many determinants that can cause someone to emigrate from one country to another, refugees are often forced by dangerous circumstances to flee their homelands. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.”<sup>1</sup> Underneath the classification of refugee, some people can be labeled as either asylum seekers or have Special Immigrant Visas (SIV). An asylum seeker refers to people who, “flee their own country and seek sanctuary in another country, they apply for asylum – the right to be recognized as a refugee and receive legal protection and material assistance. An asylum seeker must demonstrate that his or her fear of persecution in his or her home country is well-founded.”<sup>2</sup> The case is quite similar for those refugees who are listed under SIV status. This status is usually granted to refugee citizens that have been of service to the United States government. As of late, SIV status has usually been granted to Iraqi and Afghani translators who assisted the U.S. military in various capacities.

Once awarded refugee status and classified by the UNHCR, refugees undergo a lengthy process in order to be resettled in another country. Less than 80,000 refugees were resettled in the U.S. last year due to the difficult resettlement process and recent immigration restrictions. According to the U.S. Committee for Refugees and

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<sup>1</sup> "What is a Refugee? Definition and Meaning," USA for UNHCR, accessed April 18, 2017, <http://www.unrefugees.org/what-is-a-refugee/>.

<sup>2</sup> “What is a Refugee?”

Immigrants, only refugees referred by the UNHCR or by the U.S. embassy in the country of origin are eligible to participate in the U.S. resettlement program. Refugees are then interviewed by U.S. officials, if they meet the criteria of refugee status and obtain approval they are then matched with a U.S. refugee resettlement agency.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, being matched with a refugee resettlement agency is only the beginning of the complicated process of coming to the U.S. Refugees must undergo thorough medical clearance conducted by a health care worker representing the U.S. government to ensure that they are free of contagious disease or other serious conditions. Additionally, refugees must pass a comprehensive background check to ensure that they have no past involvement with terrorist organizations nor any criminal offenses. Lastly, refugees must undergo cultural orientation programs to begin adjusting to the American lifestyle. These orientations also emphasize the importance of being self-sufficient once moving to the U.S. All of these vital requirements must be completed before the refugee relocates to the U.S. Upon arrival, the refugee must complete numerous tasks within the first 30 days that include: applying for a Social Security number, registering refugee children for school, receiving additional medical evaluations, and beginning English training. While completing all of these tasks, refugees must begin looking for employment within six months of arrival. After one year, refugees are expected to apply for Permanent Resident Alien status and can apply for U.S. citizenship after five years.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. Accessed April 18, 2017. <http://refugees.org/explore-the-issues/our-work-with-refugees/refugeeresettlementprocess/>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants.

As of March 2017, approximately 40,000 individuals have been resettled in the United States this year.<sup>5</sup> Of this amount, 933 refugees have been resettled in Kentucky.<sup>6</sup> The primary refugee resettlement agency in Kentucky is the Kentucky Office for Refugees, a department of the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) that was established in 2006. The ORR is a federal agency within the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services that provides cash, medical assistance, and social services for eligible refugees.<sup>7</sup> There is also the Catholic Charities of Louisville organization, which provides a variety of resettlement services to refugees that arrive in Kentucky. These include case management, supportive services, English language training, and employment services.<sup>8</sup> Another similar agency is Kentucky Refugee Ministries (KRM), a non-profit refugee resettlement agency opened in 1990, that provides resettlement services to refugees through faith-based sponsorship in order to promote self-sufficiency and integration into the local community.<sup>9</sup> The Western Kentucky Refugee Mutual Assistance program, hosted by the International Center of Bowling Green, Kentucky, provides the same services as the refugee resettlement agencies above. Each of these agencies provide similar services, but serve different regions of the state to ensure that the needs of all refugee communities in Kentucky are being addressed.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) provides funds to resettlement agencies of Kentucky through programs like TAG and Wilson Fish. The Wilson Fish

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<sup>5</sup> "Admissions & Arrivals." Refugee Processing Center. Accessed April 18, 2017.

<http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/>, this number excludes SIV status individuals

<sup>6</sup> "Admissions & Arrivals."

<sup>7</sup> "Kentucky Office for Refugees." Catholic Charities of Louisville. Accessed April 18, 2017.

<http://cclou.org/kor/>.

<sup>8</sup> "Migration & Refugee Services." Catholic Charities of Louisville. Accessed April 18, 2017.

<http://cclou.org/mrs/>.

<sup>9</sup> "Resettlement History." Kentucky Refugee Ministries, Inc. Accessed April 18, 2017.

<https://kyrm.org/about/resettlement-history/>.

program is an alternative to traditional state administered refugee resettlement programs for providing assistance (cash and medical) and social services to refugees and funds programs in 13 states, including Kentucky.<sup>10</sup> The Targeted Assistance Program (TAG) helps refugees obtain employment within one year of participation in the program in order to achieve self-sufficiency.<sup>11</sup> These two programs provide a large amount of funding to support the refugee resettlement agencies within Kentucky.

Judging by its otherwise homogenous population, many people would not expect the South-Central region of Kentucky to be a hub of refugee resettlement. The cities of Bowling Green and Owensboro are now home to refugees from a variety of cultures, religions, and backgrounds. Since the 1980's over 10,000 refugees have made their way to this area of Kentucky. Currently, most of them come from the countries of Iraq, Somalia, Burma, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Burundi, although a smaller number come from other countries.<sup>12</sup> As more refugees have arrived in the South-Central area of Kentucky, organizations have been founded and developed to meet the needs of incoming communities. These organizations include the International Center of Kentucky, Community Action of Southern Kentucky, Southern Kentucky Career and Technical Colleges, and the International Communities Liaison of Bowling Green, Kentucky.

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<sup>10</sup> "About Wilson/Fish." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Accessed April 19, 2017. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/programs/wilson-fish/about>.

<sup>11</sup> "Targeted Assistance." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Accessed April 19, 2017. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.5054/tq.2010.232338/pdf>.

<sup>12</sup>International Center of Kentucky. Accessed April 19, 2017. <http://icofky.org/>

## **Overview of Refugee Services in South-Central Kentucky**

As mentioned above, there are several services that exist in the South-Central region of Kentucky that aid refugees in resettlement. Each of these facilities either provide an English as a second language class or have professionals with experience in this area. The refugee service agencies in South-central Kentucky are the International Center of Kentucky, Community Action of Southern Kentucky: Refugee Services, the Southern Kentucky Career and Technical Colleges English as a second language classes, and the International Communities Liaison position. As a part of my research, I conducted an interview with one or more individuals from each of these agencies.

The bulk of all refugees coming to South-Central Kentucky are received and resettled by the International Center of Kentucky, which has offices in Bowling Green and Owensboro. The agency was founded in 1981 by Marty Deputy in an effort to assist refugees fleeing the Vietnam War and the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia. Since then, the International Center has resettled over 10,000 refugees. The IC hosts a wide variety of services for refugees and are available to them within the first eight months of arrival to the U.S. These include advanced and beginning English classes, job preparation skills, immigration services, training on cultural expectations, citizenship classes, and interpretation and translation services.<sup>13</sup> According to Shanika Chappell, an ESL teacher at the International Center, the agency has received a grant to begin a gardening program where refugee clients can grow produce using traditional methods and learn how to sell these goods at the local farmers market. As the largest agency of its kind in this region of

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<sup>13</sup> International Center of Kentucky. Accessed April 19, 2017. <http://icofky.org/>

Kentucky, the International Center remains a solid source of help for refugees and has a variety of resources to assist clients in adjusting to their new homes smoothly.

Another refugee assistance program in South-Central Kentucky is Community Action of Southern Kentucky: Refugee Services (CASOKY). While Community Action is a larger umbrella non-profit that encompasses a senior center, low-income head start, and other programs, they provide a program specifically designed to assist refugees. This department of Community Action aims to assist refugees that have been in the U.S. less than 5 years but longer than 8 months. They also help refugees adjust to the culture of the American work place and learn what will be required of them in various jobs. The program offers employment counseling, resume pointers, job interview skills, and referrals to other organizations in the community. Ultimately, Community Action: Refugee Services seeks to connect refugee clients to places of employment within the Bowling Green area.<sup>14</sup>

Although the Southern Kentucky Career and Technical Colleges is not an organization dedicated to serving solely refugees, the system of post-secondary schools offer ESL and citizenship preparation classes that are largely attended by refugee students. Both the SKYCTC branches in Bowling Green and Owensboro offer ESL classes that teach students to read, write, speak, and comprehend English. Some important topics that are covered include how to talk to doctors, meet with children's teachers, apply for jobs, and teach American customs. The ESL classes range from a basic level, such as learning the alphabet, all the way to preparing students to take the

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<sup>14</sup> "CASOKY - Refugee Employment Program." Community Action of Southern Kentucky. Accessed April 19, 2017. <http://www.casoky.org/refugee>.

GED. The citizenship classes at SKYCTC prepare students to become naturalized citizens of the U.S. This includes learning about concepts related to American government, how to pass the citizenship test, and an overview of important documents in the U.S. legal system such as the Constitution and Declaration of Independence.<sup>15</sup> This thesis will demonstrate that these services have proven to be a great asset to the refugee community in the South-Central region of Kentucky.

The last service for refugees in South-Central Kentucky is the International Communities Liaison program of Bowling Green, Kentucky. This program was created by the City of Bowling Green in order to communicate more effectively with the international groups, including international students, migrants, and refugees, in the city. Part of the purpose of this organization is to educate international persons living in Bowling Green on how to be a responsible citizen and properly use city services. The International Communities Liaison, Leyda Becker, functions as an advocate for international communities and limited English proficiency speakers. The program encompasses several services for international persons like the Academy for New Americans, which prepares participants for gaining citizenship, a collection of translated community resources, and the City of Bowling Green International Communities Advisory Council. This council represents a diverse group of nationalities and seeks to

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<sup>15</sup> "English As A Second Language." English As A Second Language | SKYCTC. Accessed April 19, 2017. [http://www.bowlinggreen.kctcs.edu/Workforce\\_Solutions/~/\\_link.aspx?\\_id=DE1C8A48ADF7453FA2A1768E327FDD93&\\_z=z](http://www.bowlinggreen.kctcs.edu/Workforce_Solutions/~/_link.aspx?_id=DE1C8A48ADF7453FA2A1768E327FDD93&_z=z).

advise Leyda Becker on the needs of international residents within the international community.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "The City of Bowling Green, KY." International Communities - Neighborhood & Community Services - Bowling Green, KY - Official Municipal Web site. Accessed April 19, 2017. <https://www2.bgky.org/ncs/icl.php>.

## Literature Review

### *History of English as a Second Language Programs*

There is a wealth of information available about English as a Second Language classes, but significantly less can be found about ESL classes structured specifically for refugee students. In order to aptly describe how English as a Second Language classes can be tailored for refugees, I will begin with an overview of how ESL classes began in the United States and what structures and methods are commonly used. This will segue into a consideration of obstacles for students in these classes and social dynamics that typically take place within them. Overall, this literature review will provide a comprehensive background as a context to the information gathered and analyzed for this project.

Although the process of teaching immigrants the English language and attempting to acculturate<sup>17</sup> them into American society has been in practice for decades, the actual discipline of teaching English as a Second Language was developed more recently. Especially after the U.S. received a large influx of immigrants after World War II, the government began to develop more structured programs to teach English. During this time U.S. educators and linguists put more emphasis on researching language, language learning, language teaching, and created a variety of ESL teaching methods that are still in use today. The push to create established programs was in part spurred by the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, which, for the first time, provided funding to students with

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<sup>17</sup> Acculturation is the change in an individual or a culturally similar group that results from contact with a different culture.

Limited English Speaking Ability.<sup>18</sup> There were also several court cases like *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) and *Aspira of New York vs. Board of Education* (1975) that cited a lack of resources for non-natives to learn English within the education system and pushed for specialized English as a Second Language learner courses.<sup>19</sup>

Out of the concerns to create structured English as a Second Language programs came the establishment of TESOL or Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages in 1966. According to the founders of the TESOL, “the organization was created out of professional concern over the lack of a single, all-inclusive professional organization that might bring together teachers and administrators at all educational levels with an interest in teaching English to speakers of other languages.”<sup>20</sup> The TESOL was created to address three major issues within the discipline of teaching English as a Second Language: the need for a professional organization solely dedicated to teaching English to non-native speakers, the need for a unified, pedagogical journal, and the need for a register of specialists certified in teaching ESL to act as a resource for other agencies.<sup>21</sup> The creation of the TESOL was a hallmark in solidifying English as a Second Language education as a respected discipline and has been a crucial resource for ESL teachers in a variety of programs.

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<sup>18</sup> "Bilingual Education Act of 1968." Immigration to the United States. Accessed April 19, 2017. <http://immigrationtounitedstates.org/379-bilingual-education-act-of-1968.html>.

<sup>19</sup>“Bilingual Education Act of 1968.”

<sup>20</sup> "The Early History of TESOL." Tesol international association. Accessed April 19, 2017.

<http://www.tesol.org/about-tesol/association-governance/tesol%27s-history/the-early-history-of-tesol>.

<sup>21</sup> “The Early History of TESOL.”

## *Obstacles to Refugees in ESL Education*

Since the beginning of English as a Second Language courses, classes have been created to specifically target the needs of refugee populations. Especially amongst adult learners, refugees have a completely different set of needs than that of typical ESL students like migrants or international students. Often times refugees are unschooled or may have severely interrupted schooling. Some language acquisition theorists even posit that there is a correlation between native language literacy and second language acquisition, meaning, that learning English may be more difficult for the individuals that have not been exposed to formal education.<sup>22</sup> Adult refugees are expected to simultaneously learn a completely new language, adapt to a new culture, and find employment. These expectations coupled with changing social behaviors within family units and enduring the trauma of fleeing their home countries can present considerable obstacles to refugees learning English.

A study conducted by Dr. Jennifer McBrien of the University of South Florida discusses several of these factors in her work “Educational Needs and Barriers for Refugee Students in the United States.” Dr. McBrien notes that, “Once settled, refugee children tend to acquire conversational ability in the language of their new country faster than their parents.”<sup>23</sup> This can create a significant rift in the social dynamics of refugee families, as refugee children have to interpret for their parents at doctors’ appointments, school meetings and other important events. Refugee parents may sense a loss of their

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<sup>22</sup> Gail Weinstein. "Literacy and Second Language Acquisition: Issues and Perspectives." *TESOL Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1984): 474. doi:10.2307/3586715

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer McBrien "Educational Needs and Barriers for Refugee Students in the United States: A Review of the Literature." *Review of Educational Research* 75, no. 3 (2005): 330. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3515985>.

authority and power in the household. In some cases, this has been documented within the ESL classroom, as refugee parents feel more reservations toward learning English adapting to American culture than their children in general. These role reversals between parents and children also create identity confusion and inter-generational conflicts that hinder the learning process further for both parties.<sup>24</sup> This same source also cites that the stress caused by family conflict can leave refugee parents unable to provide emotional support for their children, let alone helping them complete homework.<sup>25</sup> Intergenerational conflict also makes it much more difficult for refugee parents to transition in to ESL classes themselves.

A significant impediment to many refugees who are learning English is processing the trauma endured in their country of origin and during their transition to the U.S. In general, trauma experienced by refugees in their home country, during flight, and in refugee camps have left many refugees distrustful of authority.<sup>26</sup> During this transition period, some refugees have developed posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other trauma-related mental disorders. According to the American Psychological Association, PTSD and related disorders can cause flashbacks, nightmares, difficulty concentrating, difficulty beginning new tasks, eroded self-confidence, depression, and a variety of other symptoms.<sup>27</sup> A combination of these symptoms can seriously inhibit language acquisition and learning for a refugee student. As noted by the Canadian Center for Victims of Torture, “Language learning demands control, connection, and meaning, and adults experiencing effects of past or current trauma are particularly challenged with

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> McBrien, “Educational Needs and Barriers,” 344.

<sup>27</sup> “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” American Psychological Association. Accessed April 19, 2017. <http://www.apa.org/topics/ptsd/>.

learning a new language.”<sup>28</sup> These factors force ESL educators to rethink how to more effectively approach and educate refugee students.

Accessibility to ESL classes can be a major barrier to learning English. Nearly all refugees are eager to begin taking ESL classes, as learning English is the first major step to integrating into American society and achieving greater economic security. However, many refugees find that having access to an ESL class may be extremely difficult for several reasons. For some refugee learners, the times that ESL classes are offered simply do not work with their schedules. A study conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation cites that, “It takes time to learn English. There are very few schools that offer English classes and many times the schedules are not compatible.”<sup>29</sup> Upon arriving to the U.S. refugees face a constant pressure to first obtain employment,<sup>30</sup> provide for their families, and become self-sufficient. Accomplishing all of these tasks, in combination with attending ESL classes during the week, can be next to impossible. Most ESL classes take place during day time weekday hours, the exact same time that refugees are expected to be working at their new jobs.

Even if refugees are able to attend ESL classes at these specific hours, many are unable to find transportation to get to class. Not all resettled refugee populations are located in metropolitan areas with extensive and reliable public transportation. Many refugees are also strapped for cash and may be unable to afford buying a car or even coming up with the funds to buy a bus pass. One Somali refugee who was resettled in

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<sup>28</sup> H.B. Finn. “Overcoming Barriers: Adult Refugee Trauma Survivors in a Learning Community,” *TESOL Quarterly*, 44 (2010):587 Accessed April 19,2017. doi:10.5054/tq.2010.232338

<sup>29</sup> "Living In America: Challenges Facing New Immigrants and Refugees." Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. August 2006. Accessed April 19, 2017.  
[http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/reports/2006/rwjf13807.p. 6.](http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/reports/2006/rwjf13807.p.6)

<sup>30</sup> Refugees encouraged to find employment four to six months upon arriving to the U.S.

Minneapolis, Minnesota remarked that he would, “walk every day to school in the winter [in order to attend ESL class.]”<sup>31</sup> These conditions can be hazardous for refugees and can be quite discouraging for those making an effort to attend English as a Second Language classes.

Along with the socio-economic obstacles that refugees face in attending ESL classes, there are also several economic factors that make it difficult for refugees to go to ESL class and learn while there. Many refugees find that there are not jobs available that have livable wages, decent working conditions, and normal hours because of their lack of education and limited English proficiency. If refugee students are able to make it to class despite lengthy work schedules, they are often tired mentally and physically and are unable to gain much from being in class. Unfortunately, many employed refugees have to choose between foregoing work to come to class to learn English instead. Another economic hardship for refugees is finding affordable, safe, and sanitary housing on their low incomes, as many are not eligible for public assistance. As mentioned in the “Living in America: Challenges Facing New Immigrants and Refugees,” report, “Many [refugee] families do not qualify for public housing assistance, with incomes slightly above the income limits because both parents work at least one job. If they do qualify, they report being put on waiting lists up to one year long.”<sup>32</sup> Crowded and dangerous housing environments do not provide refugee families with the tools to lead successful lives and function happily in American society. They also present hardships that make the learning process even more difficult, as poor quality of housing does not allow refugees to have a space to study and develop their language skills.

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<sup>31</sup>“Living In America: Challenges Facing New Immigrants and Refugees,” pg.6.

<sup>32</sup> “Living In America: Challenges Facing New Immigrants and Refugees,” pg. 10.

### *Approaches and Issues to Shaping ESL for Refugees' Programs*

Due to these specific needs, it has become increasingly pertinent for institutions to create ESL programs only for refugee learners. One study in particular, conducted by Prof. Kristen Perry of the University of Kentucky, examines how ESL educators are prepared for instructing refugee populations and what areas should be strengthened in order to improve ESL instruction for refugees. For this study, Perry and her team questioned participants from several organizations that offered ESL programs for refugees on the structure of the program, prerequisites required for educators, and prior training the educators had. A surprising finding from Perry's study was that certification in teaching ESL is generally not required. This meant that many refugee populations are taught by instructors with little or no prior training, which could unintentionally hinder refugee students' learning. Several participants in this study cited that they rely on self-education and on the job learning to prepare themselves for working with refugees.<sup>33</sup> This self-education can take many forms, from seeking online resources and literature to learn about the political situations that created waves of refugees, to accessing professional journals like TESOL<sup>34</sup> to review methods that have already been used. Other instructors had been working with refugee populations for so long that they had gradually perfected their methods over time through trial and error processes.

Another study, published in *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, describes the unique methods of an elementary school ESL program in Florida. This program sought to create a curriculum that incorporates students' languages and cultures into the ESL

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<sup>33</sup> Kristen Perry and Susan Hart, "'I'm Just Kind of Winging It' Preparing and Supporting Educators of Adult Refugee Educators." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 56, no. 2 (2012): 115. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23367717>.

<sup>34</sup> Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

classroom. Educators at this facility believe that by focusing on students' strengths they "create opportunities for students to perceive the significance of what they have and know with what their new school, language, and culture offers them."<sup>35</sup> This program also stresses the importance of talking and interaction in learning English and encourages students to feel comfortable in the classroom. To entice students to participate in class, teachers begin by choosing topics that are familiar to students or subjects pertaining to their culture and work on building vocabulary to talk about these subjects.<sup>36</sup> These methods have proven to be effective because rather than forcing students to assimilate into American culture and adhere to American standards, they allow students to learn in the terms of their own experiences and culture.

Similar methods have been successful within the refugee ESL program at the Urban Hospital Program for Survivors of Torture (UHPSOT) in New York. This program specifically targets the obstacles that refugees suffering from trauma face in the classroom. As aforementioned, many refugee survivors that suffer from PTSD and other mental disorders deal with a host of behavioral symptoms and can be distrustful of authority<sup>37</sup>. To combat this issue in particular, the UHPSOT program instructs teachers to reinforce trust between themselves and the students and create a physical learning environment that is open and non-chaotic. The UHPSOT ESL classes also stress the importance of "authentic instruction"<sup>38</sup> or instruction that is culturally relevant and meaningful for the students. By teaching material that relates to their lives and

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<sup>35</sup> Gisela Ernst. "Beyond Language: The Many Dimensions of an ESL Program." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1994): 321. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3195849>.

<sup>36</sup> Ernst. "Beyond Language," 322.

<sup>37</sup> Finn. "Overcoming Barriers," 590.

<sup>38</sup> Finn. "Overcoming Barriers," 591.

background, refugees are able to meaningfully participate in discussion and contribute in class about the subjects that they are already aware of. UHPSOT is very successful in teaching ESL classes that address the mental wellbeing of refugee students and work to alleviate the burden of mental trauma.

Present literature clearly documents the many barriers that refugees face in learning English and in the ESL classroom. There are also numerous case studies present from around the country that provide positive methods for integrating, acculturating, and educating refugees in a way that respects their cultural backgrounds. The existing literature shows that while there are several programs that are effective, adequate training for ESL teachers is still a prominent issue. Until the present, there is still a lack of information in existence about refugees specifically living in the South-Central region of Kentucky. In addition, any information that analyzes the ESL classes present for these groups is nearly non-existent. My capstone thesis project seeks to fill gaps in existing literature by presenting a record of the structures (forms) of English as a Second Language classes in South-Central Kentucky, the unique obstacles or issues in accessibility that students in these courses face, and the functions that these classes serve other than teaching English.

## Methods

In order to collect the information necessary for this thesis, I employed anthropological ethnographic research methods. In the discipline of Anthropology, ethnography is viewed as “the act of participating in the lives of others, observing and documenting people and events, taking field notes, conducting interviews. Ethnographers organize, interpret, and inscribe this collected information.”<sup>39</sup> Through using ethnographic methods, I gathered data on the accessibility, forms, and functions English as a Second Language classes in South-Central Kentucky, analyzed the results and drew conclusions based on these findings. I used anthropological ethnographic fieldwork methods in my thesis, which included semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

Prior to beginning research, I submitted a research proposal that was reviewed and approved by Western Kentucky University’s Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. I was also required to renew my certificate of training from the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative to ensure I was qualified to conduct interviews. Following this, I completed a literature review on English as Second Language classes that included a brief history of these programs in the U.S., varying structures and functions of ESL classes, and approaches that some educators have taken in instructing refugees. This review also included descriptions of refugee hardships upon arriving to the U.S., and obstacles to education.

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<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Campbell and Luke Lassiter, *Doing Ethnography Today: Theories, Methods, Exercises* ((Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).1.

## *Interviews*

A critically important part of the methodology for this thesis was conducting semi-structured interviews with individuals from ESL programs and refugee services. In total, I conducted seven interviews that lasted from a range of thirty minutes to an hour each. Interviewees were asked to sign an informed consent document that entailed the purpose of this project and what basic questions they would be asked. It also outlined the possible risks of participating in my research, confidentiality agreements, and their rights to remain anonymous in my final publication. To be clear, I also informed them that the interview would be audio recorded.

Due to time constraints, I was unable to interview any refugee clients for this thesis project. Under by-laws enacted by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative, the institution that oversees research conducted at Western Kentucky University, refugees fall under a special category of “educationally disadvantaged individuals” or “at-risk individuals” who can only be interviewed after an extensive review by the Institutional Review Board.<sup>40</sup> Obtaining permission to interview refugees, especially those with limited English proficiency, is a lengthy process and can take up to two months to gain permission in some cases. After waiting this period of time, I would have had to translate all required documents and had an interpreter present with the informant at the interview, which would have been costly. For financial reasons and time constraints, I decided to focus on gaining the perspectives of ESL teachers to examine the

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<sup>40</sup> "Module: Research with Protected Populations- Vulnerable Subjects: An Overview."  
[https://www.mcw.edu/CE-Repository-Files/Train-the-Trainer-Community-CITI/VPI\\_CITI\\_Module-VulnerablePopulations\\_2011-07-18.pdf](https://www.mcw.edu/CE-Repository-Files/Train-the-Trainer-Community-CITI/VPI_CITI_Module-VulnerablePopulations_2011-07-18.pdf).

forms, functions, and accessibility of these classes. Although this limitation did alter my original plans for this thesis, I was still able to gain valuable insight on ESL classes for refugees from ESL teachers and professionals from refugee service agencies.

As aforementioned, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews in my research. I define them as such, because while I created a base list of questions that I asked nearly all of the participants, I added more questions and comments as conversation naturally flowed during the interview and depending on how the participant responded. This base list consisted of fourteen questions, which I created to refer to each tenet of my thesis. I asked questions like, “What social interactions take place in your classroom?” and, “What is the social dynamic amongst students in your class?” to gain information on the various functions the class may have. I also asked questions like, “What teaching methods do you typically use?” and “What subjects do you think are most important to teach?” to understand how that ESL class is set up. Throughout the entire interview, I blended in questions to reveal the obstacles refugee students faced in the classroom. For example, if a teacher named a specific topic he or she taught the students, I would ask, “Did the students have any issue understanding this concept? If so, why do you think this was the case?” I crafted my questions and conducted the interviews in this manner to gain information that was pertinent to my thesis.

Additionally, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews for the level of comfort they gave to potential interviewees. Some of my informants were hesitant to participate in this thesis project because they were unsure of what questions they would be asked. After reviewing the following set of general interview questions, all of my informants agreed to be interviewed. To many of the informants, having a list of

questions in hand was assuring and gave them the time to consider some of their responses. At the same time, conducting semi-structured interviews gave me the freedom to follow relevant leads that strayed from the topic at hand and discover different aspects of a question that I had not previously considered.

## General Interview Questions

1. How long have you been an instructor at \_\_\_\_?
2. How did you come to be employed at \_\_\_\_?
3. What experiences did you have that led you to become an ESL teacher?
4. Could you describe what the physical space of your classroom looks like?
5. Could you describe the makeup of students (i.e. how many students are there, what are their ages and backgrounds) in your classroom?
6. Could you describe the actions/social interactions of your students during class time?
7. Could you describe an average day at \_\_\_\_?
8. What are the social dynamics within your classroom? Who usually sits by who?
9. What teaching methods do you typically use?
10. What subjects do you think are most important to teach?
11. What would you say have been your most effective teaching methods/ most understood concepts?
12. What related services does your facility have? (Does this facility also offer citizenship classes, employment classes, interpreting training, etc.)
13. What have been your most valuable experiences with teaching this class?
14. Is there anything else you would like to add?

My interviewees included an ESL teacher and two former volunteers from the International Center of Kentucky, one ESL teacher from SKYCTC-Bowling Green Campus, and one ESL teacher from SKYCTC-Owensboro campus. I also interviewed the Refugee Program Coordinator from Community Action of Southern Kentucky: Refugee Services and the International Communities Liaison of the City of Bowling Green, Kentucky. While the Refugee Services Program Coordinator and International Communities Liaison do not currently teach ESL classes, they both had prior experience doing so and work with refugees on a daily basis in different capacities. I selected these informants specifically to give a wide variety of perspectives on the accessibility, forms, and functions of ESL class in South-Central Kentucky, despite this region being relatively small. From these interviews, I hoped to gain more information on the concrete structure of the ESL classes and what training the teachers had received. I also hoped to gain additional perspectives on the social dynamics that are present in these classrooms. With the wide variety of informants, I wanted to capture how ones' perception of the ESL classroom can differ based on the agency, educational background, and position within the agency itself.

For the last interviews I met with Heath Ray and Leyda Becker, the Refugee Programs Coordinator and the International Communities Liaison. I changed the questions of these interviews slightly; still keeping basic aspects such as name, name of agency, and responsibilities of respected positions, but following that I asked more questions tailored to the interviewee's line of work and in what capacities they interact with refugees at their current place of employment. Both Leyda and Heath had prior experience teaching with ESL, so I asked questions about how they taught those classes

and how that experience influenced actions at their current employment. Additionally, I delved into what issues they perceived were obstacles to refugees in South-Central Kentucky. I chose to interview these two individuals to display how working in other sectors of refugee services can provide valuable experience and aid in teaching ESL classes. I also wanted to show how other refugee services and the ESL classes for refugees interacted and connected within the South-Central area of Kentucky.

Compared to many research projects, my sample size of informants was quite small. Several factors accounted for this situation. The most apparent being that the number of ESL classes in South-Central Kentucky itself is small as well. The International Center is the only refugee resettlement agency in this region of Kentucky, and I interviewed three people that had worked or volunteered in the ESL class at this location. Additionally, the SKYCTC campuses in Bowling Green and Owensboro are the only accredited institutions in the South-Central region that have ESL classes open to refugees. For instance, there is an English as a Second Language education program that partners with Western Kentucky University, but this is only open to international students and not community members. In order to diversify the perspectives in my interviews and fully flesh out the state of refugee programs in this region, I chose to interview Heath Ray and Leyda Becker who hold positions in other refugee programs in the area. In gathering interviews for this thesis, I was ultimately more concerned with the quality of my interviews, than the quantity. Like many examples of qualitative research, I sought to find evidence that was rich in detail rather than a shallower briefing from several individuals.

During all of the interviews, I took notes to record important details, in addition to my audio recordings. These served as the basis of my field notes, which are a collection

of documented factual data and thoughts, ideas, and questions that I had throughout the interview.<sup>41</sup> Each informant would sign the interview liability waiver and receive a copy of the fourteen general interview questions listed above. I then began by stating the name of the interviewee, their agency, position, the date, time, and location. Immediately after each interview, I would type the set of notes that I took during the interview and then type a separate set of reflections. Then I would listen to the recording of the interview and create a verbatim transcription. I took great care to ensure that the transcriptions were nearly word for word, in an attempt to fully capture the interviewee's speaking style and the full meaning of their words. The transcriptions needed to be extremely precise, as I referenced them frequently in other sections of this thesis and want to represent the thoughts of my interviewees accurately.

### *Participant Observation and Field Notes*

Another vital method I used to collect data was participant observation. While this method can take various forms, it is best defined a method in which an observer takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of people being studied as a means of learning the explicit and implicit aspects of their culture.<sup>42</sup> To use this method, I drew on my personal experiences volunteering in ESL programs and observations in Shanika Chappell's beginner ESL class at the International Center of Bowling Green. I chose to conduct participant observation as a way of gathering an immense amount of primary data that had not been interpreted by other researchers. Although I was able

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<sup>41</sup> "Research Guides: Organizing Your Social Sciences Research Paper: Writing Field Notes." Writing Field Notes - Organizing Your Social Sciences Research Paper - Research Guides at University of Southern California. Accessed April 20, 2017. <http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/fieldnotes>.

<sup>42</sup>Kathleen Dewalt and Billie Dewalt. *Participant observation: a guide for fieldworkers*. (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2011).263.

record a variety of perspectives from the informants in my semi-structured interviews, I needed to supplement this information with first-hand accounts. The information gathered during participant observation activities can be a more realistic and candid representation of the activities that go on within the ESL classroom. Whether intentionally or not, interviewees tend to respond to interview questions with some level of bias.

A vital tenet of recording participant observation is keeping detailed field notes. Officially, field notes are notes recorded by researchers in the course of conducting fieldwork, during or after their observation of a specific phenomenon they are studying. The notes are intended to be read as evidence that gives meaning and aids in the understanding of the phenomenon.<sup>43</sup> All effectively written field notes should include the following pieces of information: date, time, place of observation, details of what happens at the site, sensory impressions (sights, sounds, smells, etc.), phrases of insider language, and questions about people or behaviors at the site for further investigation.<sup>44</sup> If all of these facets are addressed and recorded within the field notes, this collection of information becomes a valuable tool in providing primary data to support a research topic. Throughout my experience with participant observation in Shanika Chappell's ESL class at the International Center, I took great care to address all of these points.

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<sup>43</sup> Robert Emerso, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw 1995 *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

## Findings

### *Southern Kentucky Career and Technical College: Bowling Green Campus*

On Nov. 21<sup>st</sup> 2016, I met with Cynthia Garrett, ELL teacher<sup>45</sup> in the adult education program at the SKYCTC Bowling Green campus. We interviewed for approximately one hour in her classroom. During this time, I asked her nearly all of the questions listed on my “general interview questions” list and added more inquires as needed. Garrett informed me that she had been teaching at SKYCTC from almost six years. She received her bachelor’s degree in English, specializing in Adult Education, from Western Kentucky University. After graduating, Garrett spent a significant amount of time as a substitute teacher in the adult education program at SKYCTC. As a result, when there was an opening in the ESL department at the community college, several of her mentors and colleagues encouraged her to apply for the position. Cynthia started out only working part time in the ESL class room and gradually this would increase into a full-time position. Although Cynthia has no formal training in teaching ESL, or specifically teaching refugees, she assures me that she has gained vast amounts of knowledge just from hands-on experience.

Prior to beginning her work in English as a Second Language classes, Cynthia had no experience working with refugees and was largely unaware of refugee issues. To make up for this knowledge gap, Garrett engaged in personal research to educate herself on where refugees were originally from before coming to South-Central Kentucky and the political situations that caused them to flee to the U.S. In her classroom, Cynthia teaches

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<sup>45</sup> ESL changed to ELL (English Language Learners), specifically at this facility

both immigrant and refugee students from a wide variety of backgrounds. As far as the refugee population, most of her students are from Burma, the Congo, Cuba, and some from Somalia. She also teaches immigrant students from China, Thailand, Germany, Japan, Colombia, and several other countries. Her students vary greatly in age, from 18 years old to people in their upper 60's.

Currently SKYCTC offers five levels of English as a Second Language courses. Cynthia teaches the third, fourth, and fifth level courses. Cynthia created nearly all of her teaching materials over the course of her six years as an ESL teacher at this facility. She considers the most important topics to teach to be practical vocabulary that can be used on a daily basis and American cultural practices. Upon arrival to the U.S., refugees are immediately pressured to find a job, find housing, and pay their bills. Cynthia wants to ensure that her students learn the vocabulary necessary to perform all of these tasks. She stresses that her classes have a practical function, by teaching her students the language needed to pay bills, speak to doctors, converse with their children's teachers, and navigate a new city.

Additionally, Cynthia feels that it is vital to teach her students about American culture and the importance of diversity. She works toward this goal by using several methods, such as creating handouts that list popular American greetings and customs for her students to study. Cynthia also holds "Talk Tuesdays" in which she asks students their opinion on current events and U.S. politics. This encourages the students to become more comfortable speaking and helps them gain greater understanding of the American political system. Cynthia feels that it is important to teach American slang and idioms, so that students can understand everyday language that other people may use in the work

place. To an extent, Cynthia tries to instill in her students a level of cultural tolerance and respect towards all the groups present in her classroom. At times there have been tensions between different cultural groups, for example between East Asian and Arabs, over religious principles or viewpoints on political topics. Cynthia tries to encourage healthy discourse on these topics and foster respectful social dynamics between the differing viewpoints. Overall, Cynthia emphasizes that it is important to prepare her students for real life and to remain as practical as possible, but ultimately it is up to them to apply and practice the skills they have learned in class.

Cynthia has encountered some obstacles to teaching refugee students during her time as an ESL teacher at SKYCTC. Many refugee students, particularly from Burma and Somali, are illiterate and have no formal education in their native languages. This presents a host of difficulties, because these students are completely unfamiliar with classroom culture or behavior. Cynthia remarked that some students were unaware of how to use pencil and paper correctly. Some students have no experience taking notes, knowing how to study, and basic time management skills, all aspects that are needed to be successful in the classroom. She admits that this makes instruction somewhat more difficult, as she has to start from the very beginning with these students.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, some of Cynthia's students are highly educated and have master's degrees or Phd's in their native countries. Occasionally, some of these students have harbored resentment and were discouraged because their degrees were not honored in the U.S. and resulted in a lack of opportunity for them. These individuals were highly knowledgeable in their fields, but needed the English skills to be able to work in the U.S. In the same token, many educated individuals began taking ESL

classes in order to increase their marketability in the workforce and often up business opportunities. Cynthia cited that the rare students who did have a resentful attitude were harder to work with in the classroom, but they adjusted over time.

*Southern Kentucky Career and Technical College: Owensboro Campus*

To add greater depth to the classes offered at SKYCTC colleges, I interviewed Meredith Bowers, ELL coordinator and teacher, at the campus located in Owensboro, KY. On Oct. 12, 2016 I interviewed Meredith for approximately one half-hour in the office adjacent to her classroom. Bowers has been an ELL teacher at SKYCTC-Owensboro for nearly four years and recently became the coordinator of the program. As an undergraduate at Western Kentucky University, she majored in Spanish but decided later that she did not want to teach or translate the language. At that time SKYCTC had an opening for a night teacher in adult education and was desperately seeking to fill the position. Meredith applied and received this position, which later expanded into teaching ESL during the day. After receiving her masters', Meredith became the coordinator for the ELL program.

Meredith had no educational background in teaching English as a Second Language. Her only experiences were her time spent studying Spanish abroad and being able to empathize with people who were attempting to learn another language. Meredith developed much of her teaching methods through trial and error. Currently SKYCTC-Owensboro offers ESL classes specifically for refugees four days a week, and Meredith personally teaches two of them. Most refugees are required to attend 12 hours of ESL classes within the first 120 to 240 days of arrival to the U.S., which is why these ESL

courses are offered so frequently during the week. Meredith further explained that for two of the days the ESL class is restricted to newly arrived refugees only and the other two days are open to everyone, including other immigrants in the community or longer-term refugees.<sup>46</sup> These classes are held at the Bellevue Baptist Church, where there is more room for the larger class and a day care facility to care for the students' children. Typically, these classes are three hours long and are offered in four levels, with the top being intermediate. Currently Meredith teaches the 2<sup>nd</sup> level, the low beginner class, which has about sixteen regular attendees. After passing level four, refugee students are expected to continue on to adult education classes with native speakers and begin studying to obtain their General Education Development (GED) diplomas.

Like many refugee ESL classrooms, Meredith's classroom at SKYCTC-Owensboro is quite diverse. Although the city of Owensboro has only been resettling refugees since 2010, there is already a significant amount of refugees living in the area. The largest population of refugees in Owensboro are from Burma, which encompasses several ethnicities such as Karen, Karenni, Haka Chin, Ka Chin, and other groups. More recently, Meredith remarked that the city has been receiving an influx of Somali refugees. Most of Meredith's class is made up of women, because many of the men in the refugee population of Owensboro work at the local Tyson chicken factory. These shifts are often very long and are usually six days a week, so many of the refugee men either do not have the time or are too exhausted to attend ESL class. There is an extensive range of ages present in the class: the youngest students are 18 and the oldest in their 60's. Generally, most of the people in the class are in their mid-20's to early 30's. As was the case in

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<sup>46</sup> Refugees that have lived in the U.S. for over 8 months

several other ESL classes, some refugees had never been enrolled in formal education before. Meredith remarked that some students began with no knowledge of how to write and would sign their names with an X.

A typical class day for Meredith begins with asking the students to log in to the computer to track their attendance. Then Meredith likes to start by reviewing the material that was covered the day before, in order to refresh her students' minds and catch up with students that may have missed class. She then checks students' homework and begins on new subject material. Because the classes are three hours long, Meredith prefers to have a small break in the middle so that students have a chance to recharge. In the last hour she does stations, in which she has one group focusing on reading a passage while her volunteer is reviewing material with another group.

As a part of the curriculum at SKYCTC-Owensboro, Meredith requires that all teachers include lessons on housing, shopping, employment, and health. To teach these subjects, Meredith uses the ESL textbook "*Future for English Results.*" This resource acts as the basis for many of her lessons, but Meredith prefers to adapt her own approaches from the content in this book. She includes sections on public transportation in Owensboro, appropriate clothing, and time management skills. Meredith wants to ensure that the class is life skills based and that all aspects of learning English are integrated into the course. For example, if the class is doing a reading activity, they will incorporate listening, writing, and speaking as well. She strives to include plenty of interactive lessons that encourage discussion and student participation. One activity that her students really enjoy is called "information gap." In this exercise, each student has the same piece of paper, but student A is missing some of the information. In another part of

the room, student B has the paper with the missing information. This requires the students to negotiate with one another to figure out the meaning of their information and what pieces will fit together. They interact with one another by asking questions like, “What time does this bus get here?” While another student will answer, “Oh, the bus will arrive at 9:00 p.m.” According to Meredith, these types of activity encourage critical thinking and strengthen listening and speaking skills.

*International Center of Bowling Green, KY*

I gathered data from multiple sources on the nature of ESL classes at the International Center through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and my own experiences volunteering in this program. For the semi-structured interviews, I met with Shanika Chappell, ESL teacher, and former volunteers Rachel Wyatt and Drew Shackelford. The section detailing ESL classes at the International Center is larger than that of the other ESL classes, as this is the largest refugee resettlement agency in the South-Central area of Kentucky and services the largest amount of refugees. Additionally, because the facility is much larger I was able to find more participants to share in this study.

Interview 1

For my first interview at the International Center, I met with Shanika Chappell on March 24, 2017. She is currently the beginner level ESL teacher, the ELT (English Language Training) coordinator, citizenship class teacher, and the beginner farmers program leader at the IC. This is Shanika’s fourth year at the International Center, and she was originally hired at the facility to be the preferred communities’ coordinator.

Bowling Green was designated by the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) to be a preferred community for refugee resettlement due to its relatively small size and easy access to social and community services. Under this position, Shanika was in charge of community outreach and connecting refugees with local services. When the grant for this program ended, Shanika transitioned into teaching ESL classes.

Prior to working at the International Center, Shanika did not have any formal training in teaching English as a Second Language courses or working with refugee populations. She obtained her bachelor's degree in environmental health from the University of Louisville, so her degree did not correlate with her current position. Shanika's only prior interactions with refugees stemmed from her childhood growing up in Bowling Green. When she was in high school a large group of Bosnian refugees were resettled in the area and she became friends with some of the people who were her age.

Now, teaches a beginner ESL class that holds around 35 to 40 people from various nationalities, ages, and education levels. There is also an advanced class at the center that is much smaller, but no intermediate class exists at this time. Shanika teaches her beginner class Monday through Thursday from 10:00 a.m to 1:00 p.m. with an hour break for lunch. Most of the students in her class are from the Congo, Somalia, and Burma. There is also one lady from Afghanistan and a man from Iraq. Most of the people in the class are over the age of 25 and the oldest person is 60 years old. Due to the wide variety of ethnicities in the class, Shanika cites that there are several obstacles in teaching to such a diverse group. Many of the students do not share a common language, which makes it much more difficult to communicate one idea to the entire classroom. For some of her students, it is their first time ever being in school. It has been challenging, at

times, for Shanika to teach these individuals how to be students and how to behave in a classroom setting. Many of her students are unaware of behaviors that are considered rude in American classroom culture and so she spends time correcting these actions. However, Shanika found it to be quite interesting that these students could speak multiple languages but had no idea of how to write them.

To establish a sense of normalcy for refugee students, Shanika has established a daily routine for her ESL class. The first five minutes of the class are used for people to sign-in, sharpen pencils, and get classroom materials ready. After this Shanika segues into reviewing material that was covered in the previous class as a refresher. These exercises can include number sequences, days or months of the year, and other basic subjects. After the warm up Shanika transitions into new concepts. If she feels like students have not understood the topics from the day before she will choose to make that a review day instead and not introduce any new topics. Some of the materials Shanika uses in class are visual aids, like Power Point presentations, newspapers, and magazines. She tends to focus on speaking rather than writing, as it is more practical for the students to know first in their daily lives. Some topics that she feels are most important to touch on are personal information (name, address, phone number), health, body parts, food, and the calendar. Along with typical English instruction, Shanika always incorporates practical knowledge about community helpers like police officers, crossing guards, and ambulance drivers.

### Interviews 2 and 3

Many of the sentiments recorded in my interview with Shanika also rang true with the IC volunteers Rachel Wyatt and Drew Shackleford. Both women volunteered with the ESL program at the International Center as part of a class requirement for the Anthropology undergraduate program at Western Kentucky University. I spoke with Drew first about her experiences as a volunteer ESL teacher at the International Center. For her, one of the most difficult aspects about volunteering to teach in the program was the lack of training and materials available. At the time, Shackleford had never worked with refugees before nor had ever taught English. This was also the case with Rachel Wyatt, who had no experience or training in the classroom either. Consequently, the methods Drew and Rachel chose to teach the classes were mostly chosen on a trial and error basis. Like in other ESL classes discussed, both Rachel and Drew remarked that several refugees had never experienced formal education and were unaware of how to be students. In some cases, these students were somewhat resistant to learning and had difficulty adjusting to the classroom routine.

The International Center did provide some handouts and worksheets that the volunteers could print out and use. According to Rachel Wyatt, these sheets were limited in scope and the class soon covered all of the information within them. Drew also found that there were no other resources available to use in instruction after the information in the handout booklets was exhausted. Both volunteers ended up developing unique methods and materials to teach in class for the duration of their volunteer work. To set a rigorous curriculum for the class, Drew attempted to mimic the Rosetta Stone language learning program in her lesson plans. In contrast, Rachel found that bringing treats for

the class encouraged them to participate and pay attention more. Occasionally Rachel would buy donuts for the class, but students would only be given their donut after they answered a question or wrote something on the board.

Both women commented that refugee students within the classroom were generally supportive of one another, but slightly wary at the same time. Within the classroom, some refugees seemed unsure of how to interact with people that looked and spoke so differently from them. Even so, students would attempt to help each other within the class, even if they did not speak a common language.

#### Participant Observation

In addition to interviewing volunteers and teachers at the International Center I also conducted participant observation through observing and teaching in the ESL classroom. During both of these periods, the class hosted a wide variety of ages, ethnicities, and education levels, nearly identical to what Shanika, Rachel, and Drew had mentioned in their interviews. I also witnessed a class set up very similar to what these women had described to me. Due to my status as a temporary volunteer and lack of training in ESL, I mostly relied on handouts and worksheets that were provided by the International Center.

Almost instantly I noticed that many of the students in the classroom were shy and hesitant to participate, possibly because they were still unsure of me. To warm the class up I would start with simple exercises, like counting the numbers or reciting the alphabet. This seemed to jog students' memories and get them ready to start learning a new topic. In particular, students really enjoyed the lesson on fruits and vegetables. This

was an easy topic to teach, as I was able to create several activities to complement it. For example, I would ask the students, “What is your favorite fruit/vegetable?” or “Come up here and write it on the board.” I also printed out pictures of various fruits and vegetables. I asked the class, “Which one these pictures is an apple?” and then called on someone to answer the question. Most of the students liked being asked about their opinion on the subject, as it gave them the opportunity to speak and be involved.

During my participant observation in Shanika’s ESL class, I was able to observe social interactions between the various groups in the class. This was a perspective that I could not gain while teaching. Shanika based her class around handouts, but formulated more questions and activities from this information. On that occasion, the class was practicing adjectives. Some examples were the difference in meaning between “clean” and “dirty” or “wet” and “dry.” When students were reluctant to answer questions, Shanika began asking them what these words were in their own language. She turned to the group of African women, from different countries, but who all spoke Swahili and asked them, “How do you say ‘dirty’ in Swahili?” Surprisingly, each of the women had a different answer. The group of women proceeded to discuss amongst themselves what the correct word was, each insisting that their choice was correct. In this capacity, ESL class serves as an opportunity to network with other cultures and collaborate with others to learn a new language. Even though these women shared a common language, they were still surprised to learn that there were differences in it and used this as an opportunity to help each other learn a new term in English.

Throughout the class Shanika walked around the room to ask each student if they personally understood the subject. She would ask questions like, “Can you tell me...” or

“What do you think .... is?” to engage every student, even if they would not participate otherwise. By following this routine, Shanika developed a trusting relationship with her students that made them feel comfortable and willing to learn. During my observations it seemed that nearly all students really liked Shanika and were thus much more willing to ask questions and take interest in the topic. Establishing a trust between ESL teachers and refugee students is vital, as students were much less willing to participate in the class exercises when I taught. As an unfamiliar face, some students looked weary of me and were not sure of what to say.

*Community Action of Southern Kentucky: Refugee Services*

To gain the perspective of other professionals working with refugees outside of the classroom in the South-Central region of Kentucky, I met with Heath Ray, the Refugee Programs Coordinator at Community Action of Southern Kentucky. This facility currently offers employment services for refugees and helps refugees to find jobs in the area. Some of these services include help with filling out job applications, writing recommendation letters, resume tips, and job interview skills. Although Heath Ray currently works to help refugees find employment in the Bowling Green area, he first began working with refugees in the ESL classroom and at job readiness classes.

Heath first began working with limited English proficiency (LEP) individuals in 2010 when he became the ESL teacher at a local church program. He had not undergone any formal training in ESL, but had some experience from his time volunteering in the Peace Corps. This experience, and his ability to speak Swahili, were what helped him to receive this position. The class that Heath co-taught, with one other congregation

member, consisted of eight couples from Burundi. As a result, Heath played a vital role in the classroom by interpreting for the students as needed. For this class, Heath would prepare a handout and then provide a copy translated into Swahili. Usually the handout centered on the sermon that the preacher would discuss that Sunday. To make the topic relevant, Heath would pick out common words from the scripture lesson and change them to fit into a conversational setting. With this method, Burundian students were able to understand the sermons given during church services and learn practical vocabulary as well.

One of the factors that made ESL instruction much easier for Heath was that he and the students all shared a common language. The entire class spoke Swahili, so it was much similar to make comparisons between this language and English. Instead of trying to explain a foreign concept in a language that the class barely understood, Heath could simply say “this” in American culture is very similar to “that” in Burundian culture and so forth. Sharing a common language also created a more relaxed social dynamic within the classroom. All of the students in the class had known each other prior to coming to the U.S. and were quite comfortable being with one another. Moreover, the fact that Heath spoke their language made them more at ease and willing to joke and converse with him. Heath stressed that it is important to create an environment in which students want to engage and participate, and in order to do this, they must feel comfortable.

Heath’s experience teaching ESL at the local church contrasted slightly with his experience teaching a refugee job skills course. In Bowling Green, all of the ESL classes at various agencies are held from Monday to Thursday. Heath taught his job skills course every Friday, as an effort to supplement the information students were learning in ESL

and to give them practical knowledge on entering the work force. For this course, Heath taught from a textbook called “*World of Work*,” but later simplified its’ content.

Teaching complicated topics was very difficult, as the program was usually unable to find interpreters for the class. Unlike in his previous ESL class, Heath remarked that there was a wide range of nationalities present and all had various levels of English speaking ability. He made sure to stress important topics to the students, such as where to find job openings, who provides employment services, the job application process, interview skills, job orientation details and the culture of the American work force. Essentially this class taught English as a Second Language to prepare refugees for vocabulary and behaviors that are common in the work place.

#### *International Communities Liaison of Bowling Green, Kentucky*

The city of Bowling Green, Kentucky created the International Communities Liaison position to coordinate the city’s role in communicating and working with international populations and limited English proficiency individuals. Leyda Becker was hired for her experience working as a community outreach coordinator for Hope Harbor Inc. and her efforts within the local Hispanic community. She also developed the City of Bowling Green’s Language Access Plan to “establish and provide greater access and participation in public services, programs and activities for residents of the City of Bowling Green with limited or no English proficiency.”<sup>47</sup> Currently, Leyda Becker provides several critical services to the non-native population of Bowling Green. Mostly revolving around community outreach and include connecting internationals to city

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<sup>47</sup>Leyda Becker. "Language Access Plan ." City of Bowling Green, Kentucky Official Municipal Website of Bowling Green, Kentucky. Accessed April 14, 2017. <http://www.kyhousing.org/Conference/2015KAHC/Documents/Presentations/KHCPresentationLeydaBecker.pdf>

services and to let people know what services are available. Leyda also hosts a Spanish-English informational radio show, writes a bilingual resource letter, and developed the international communities advisory board of Bowling Green. Specifically, I was interested in Leyda's work conducting cultural orientations in local ESL classes.

Leyda developed a cultural orientation curriculum, consisting of 13 lessons, that she presents to the ESL classes at the International Center and the Southern Kentucky Career and Technical College-Bowling Green campus. Generally, these presentations are an hour long and Leyda will present them once a week until all of her lessons are covered. The aim of these courses is to teach refugee populations how to access city services, emergency services, and basic legal principles. Some important topics that Leyda teaches are how to call 911 and the purpose of the fire department, police force, and ambulances. She also touches on city regulations, such as keeping your animals under control, managing your trash, and caring for your lawn. In some classes, Leyda will briefly discuss legal issues of which refugees should be aware. She covers the concept of child neglect, school truancy, and age of consent, as these concepts may be unheard of for some refugees.

During her time presenting cultural orientation curricula, Leyda has encountered some obstacles in teaching in the ESL classroom and observed obstacles the students may have with learning. On a good day, Leyda will have around five interpreters in the classroom with her, relaying the message of her materials to each of the language groups present. However, there have been many instances where there were no interpreters present at all. These occasions proved to be quite difficult for Leyda and the students to convey information. For these instances, Leyda took great care to simplify her topics and

use general words that most of the students would likely know. She would also draw scenarios on the board. Some concepts, like explaining renter's rights, were very confusing to students without the aid of an interpreter. To students without a basic foundation in the English language, many topics are difficult to understand without an interpreter translating some of the message. Still, Leyda attempts to explain complex topics with Power Point slides, lots of pictures, and simple activities to demonstrate that they understood the content.

Despite challenges in the classroom, Leyda's cultural orientation curriculum has been successful in educating refugees about city services in Bowling Green and who to contact if they need help. Leyda hopes to expand these presentations in the future by adding new and different topics.

## Interpretation

The purpose of this thesis project was to analyze the accessibility, forms, and functions of English as a Second Language classes in the South-Central regions of Kentucky. In order to research this topic, I employed anthropological ethnographic field methods like semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and detailed field notes. After collecting data through these methods, I was able to see parallels between the accounts of the multiple informants that represented different agencies. Each informant had their own perception of what teaching methods were most effective, what topics to discuss, and what obstacles their students faced to learning English. Surprisingly, these accounts did agree in many points and helped to highlight the complexities of ESL classes in the South-Central area. At the present, there is a lack of research available that has examined ESL classes in this area in great detail. Based on the analyses that I have made in this thesis, I intend to fill this gap in knowledge on the forms, functions, and accessibility of these classes.

Through interviews and participant observation, I first sought to address the accessibility of English as a Second Language courses in the area. The term accessibility can refer to several aspects, but in this context I sought to know if students encountered any obstacles to learning English in the classroom. Nearly all of the teachers and professionals that I interviewed cited obstacles to learning English amongst refugee populations. Shanika Chappell, Rachel Wyatt, Cynthia Garrett, and Meredith Bowers all noted that refugees who had never experienced prior formal training faced greater difficulty in the classroom than their peers. These students had no concept of how to behave in the classroom or how to be a student. Many of my informants, like Shanika

Chappell, Cynthia Garrett, and Meredith Bowers, noticed that the times that ESL classes were held could be a hindrance for some clients. Many refugees, especially the men, work twelve hour shifts for six days a week and had no time available to come to class.

ESL classes in this area fulfill more functions other than just teaching English. For many clients, ESL class becomes a hub of social networking, where students learn how to interact with their peers from other cultures and gain greater respect and understanding for cultural diversity. It is also an opportunity for students with a common native language to band together to help one another to learn English. Nearly all of my informants remarked that refugee students who were eager to help one another fostered relationships within the classroom. In some cases, an unintended function of ESL classes are to create a sense of belonging amongst refugee students and create relationships in a new country where they do not know anyone.

Local ESL teachers and volunteers also use a variety of methods to ensure that ESL classes have practical functions. Some ESL teachers, like Cynthia Garrett, incorporate basic life skills into English learning. She touches on knowing how to pay the bills, schedule doctor's appointments, and talk to their children's teachers. While students are still learning new vocabulary and practicing their listening skills, they also receive valuable information on how to function on a daily basis. The International Communities Liaison, Leyda Becker, provides a useful supplement to ESL classes with her cultural orientation curriculum. This series of lessons teach refugees almost everything they need to know about living in a typical American city: what city services are available, how to use emergency services, building codes, and animal control. These

are all things that do not immediately come to mind for ESL teachers to teach, but are all very important for refugee students to know.

Additionally, Heath Ray's job skills class effectively shows that practical knowledge for the work force can be combined with English instruction. Students in this course learned about American work place culture, interview skills, and job applications all while learning new vocabulary and getting to practice it in a useful way. Ultimately, a refugee's number one goal upon arriving to the U.S. is attaining self-sufficiency. Learning English is a vital part of that, but because refugees are so pushed for time to learn quickly, it is necessary for teachers to explore how ESL class can serve multiple functions at once.

Using all of the previously mentioned ethnographic methods, I sought to examine what forms ESL classes take in the South-Central area of Kentucky. While all of the ESL classes in this area share a similar structure, they exhibit their own slight differences in structure and teaching style. Both teachers at SKYCTC-Bowling Green and the International Center base their classes on handouts and worksheets, deriving class activities off of these materials. Cynthia Garrett at SKYCTC-Bowling Green also created a collection of her own class materials. Other programs, like SKYCTC-Owensboro and Heath Ray's job skills class, take lessons from a textbook. In the case of Leyda Becker, some teachers have chosen their own topics and built their own corresponding curriculum.

In each program, educators employed unique methods to create engaging activities for their students. For example, Meredith Bowers of SKYCTC-Owensboro

enjoyed using “information gaps,” in which one student would hold a note card with an unfinished sentence written on it, while another student held a note card with the information missing on it. Bowers cited that activities similar to these encouraged student participation, developed speaking skills, and helped students to become acquainted with one another. Cynthia Garrett of SKYCTC-Bowling Green also created extra activities to stimulate classroom discussion and strengthen speaking skills. She would hold “Talk Tuesdays” in which students would discuss their opinions on current events and American politics. Not only do these activities strengthen students’ speaking abilities, they aid students in becoming acculturated into American society by being invested in American societal issues. On the surface, the ESL classes in South-Central Kentucky seem to take on similar forms. In actuality, each program has its own creative way of taking mandated teaching material and presenting it in a manner that is fun, engaging, and practical.

Some of the greatest strengths of these teachers involve taking mundane information and spinning it into something riveting that can engage a class of refugees with completely different nationalities, languages, ages, and education levels. It can be incredibly challenging to communicate on a single topic, in one language, to a room full of people who have no knowledge of that language or even how to behave in a classroom. Another amazing feat that ESL teachers in the South-Central region have accomplished is integrating English instruction with practical knowledge. In these classes, refugees are exposed to more skills on how to operate in American society than in any other program they may participate. The ESL instructors working in this area of Kentucky realize that refugees are expected to become self-sufficient in a short amount of

time and create efficient methods to quickly teach a lot of information. The only downfall for many of ESL teachers is their lack of formal education in teaching English as a Second language. What the teachers lack is formal education on teaching English as a Second Language, however, they make up for this gap in training with ingenuity and a lot of hard-work. Many of the ESL teachers that I interviewed developed much of their curricula, chose their own methods, and essentially taught themselves how to teach.

## **Future Research**

Current literature on English as a Second Language classes for refugees does not encompass all ESL programs within the state of Kentucky. This is an unfortunate reality, the population of resettled refugees in Kentucky has steadily grown. To meet the needs of the growing refugee population, more information should be available on how to develop ESL classes to accommodate them. In its present state, my thesis seeks to fill the information gap on the accessibility, forms, and structures of ESL classes found within the South-Central region of Kentucky. If given the opportunity, I would expand this research in this region further to address the ESL programs located statewide.

The cities of Louisville and Lexington host larger refugee resettlement agencies and numerous English as a Second Language classes to supplement them. Being able to interview instructors and volunteers at these facilities would allow more insight on how accessibility can differ from region to region and to reaffirm or disprove information that I have already gathered. Also, because the agencies in both cities are much larger than those found in Bowling Green and Owensboro there would be a greater number of people available for interview and a wider variety of responses to record. Conducting participant observation in this region would also be useful, as I have no prior knowledge of how the classes in these cities operate and my observations would be free from bias.

Additionally, I would expand my current research by interviewing refugees that have graduated from the English as a Second Language program. If a refugee student were able to graduate from the ESL program, this would demonstrate that the student speaks a high enough level of English to be interviewed. Adding this research to the

project could be somewhat controversial, as graduating from an ESL program does not necessarily equate with being fluent in English. I also found at some refugee agencies that there was not an accurate record of names and contact information of the students that had graduated from their programs. It would be challenge to even identify refugees in the community that had graduated from ESL and then to coerce them into being interviewed. Thus, continuing my research in this manner would be quite complex.

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