

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

International Journal of Intercultural Relations

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel

“Because even us, Arabs, now speak English”: Syrian refugee teachers’ investment in English as a foreign language

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Syrian refugees
Investment
English as a foreign language
Lebanon
Non-formal education

ABSTRACT

Framed within [Darvin and Norton's \(2015\)](#) model of investment, this study examined a group of Syrian refugee teachers’ ideologies and challenges regarding teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to Syrian refugee students with interrupted or no prior formal education in three non-formal education (NFE) centers in Lebanon. A qualitative approach using interview data alongside field observations and questionnaire responses was employed to gain a nuanced understanding of the teachers’ experiences. Findings from this study suggest that teachers acknowledged the importance of teaching English to their students and did so despite a host of curricular, linguistic, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural obstacles. We suggest that when teachers of refugee students in Education in Emergency (EIE) contexts are invested in teaching EFL, they can assume an agentive role in devising innovative solutions to problems.

Introduction

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), we live in “an era in which the scale of global forced displacement as well as the response required is now clearly dwarfing anything seen before” ([UNHCR, 2015a, p. 3](#)). Nowhere is this more evident than in Syria and the refugee crisis that the war has generated. Since its onset in 2011, more than 470,000 Syrians have been killed, the economy has lost around \$254.7 billion, and school non-attendance rate has reached 42.5% ([Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2016](#)). With more than 50% of the population forced to flee their homes, and over 4.8 million refugees in foreign countries, the Syrian displacement crisis is considered the largest globally ([UNHCR, 2016](#)). Neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey have been under immense pressure to accommodate the waves of Syrian refugees seeking safety. For example, in Lebanon refugees (over one million from Syria and almost half a million from Palestine) number more than one third of the overall Lebanese population. Seventy percent of the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon lives in poverty on “less than \$3.84 per person per day” ([UNHCR, 2016](#)). This has placed significant pressure on the country’s infrastructure, security situation, economy, and educational sector.

Although education in Lebanon is highly valued, authorities face many challenges in responding to the influx of school-aged Syrian refugee students ([Jalbout, 2015](#)). This study describes the experiences of a group of Syrian refugee teachers in non-formal education (NFE) contexts and how they face the challenge of teaching a new curriculum and English as a foreign language (EFL). Whereas Arabic is the primary language of instruction in Syria, curricula in Lebanon are diverse (e.g., secular and religious curricula) with Arabic, French, and English as major languages of instruction ([Zakharia, 2014](#)). This creates a formidable barrier to the

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education of Syrian refugee students who have not previously been taught in English and requires teachers of refugee children to modify instruction and reshape curricula. This is particularly the case for teachers who are themselves Syrian refugees with limited or in most cases no training on teaching the Lebanese curriculum, working with children in NFE contexts, or incorporating EFL strategies in their teaching. In addition, Syrian refugee teachers are newcomers who are also trying to adapt to a new country and new working environments with different requirements and expectations (e.g., teaching EFL).

Research suggests that teachers' beliefs and ideologies can influence both how and what students learn (e.g., Hall, 2005; Handsfield, Crumpler, & Dean, 2010; Pajares, 1992; Razfar, 2012; Staub & Stern, 2002; Vetter, Myers, & Hester, 2014). In addition, ideology is an important construct that can influence learners' investment in acquiring a new language (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Darvin and Norton (2015, p. 44) explain that "ideologies are dominant ways of thinking that organize and stabilize societies while simultaneously determining modes of inclusion and exclusion, and the privileging and marginalization of ideas, people, and relations." Thus, it is important to learn more about teachers' ideologies – more specifically how teachers' ideologies relate to their teaching English as a foreign language to refugee students in emergency contexts. Framed within Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment and identity theory (Norton, 2013), this study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What are Syrian refugee teachers' ideologies regarding teaching EFL to refugee students with interrupted or no prior formal education in three non-formal education centers in Lebanon?
- 2) What obstacles do Syrian refugee teachers face in teaching EFL, and how do they overcome (or not) these obstacles?

In the following sections, we provide an overview of relevant literature on refugee education within NFE contexts before describing the Lebanese context specifically and the intercultural and institutional complexities that accompany the acculturation of Syrian refugee students and teachers in their host country. We then proceed to discuss investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013) and other constructs that frame this study, before we describe data collection and analysis methods, followed by our findings. What we ultimately suggest is that Syrian refugee teachers' ideologies and investment in teaching EFL have empowered them to actively seek and devise solutions to linguistic, curricular, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural challenges. The challenges and experiences described in this study involve teachers at three NFE centers in Lebanon, and therefore are not transferable to all contexts in this country or other Education in Emergency (EIE) contexts. However, the nature of these challenges is likely shared by other refugee teachers in Lebanon and other countries in the region. We know little about the experiences and challenges of refugee teachers, especially in EIE/NFE contexts. As such, gaining a better understanding of the obstacles that they face and their ideologies regarding EFL addresses an important gap in the EIE and refugee education literature and can assist government officials and policy makers in Lebanon and neighboring countries, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other teachers of refugee students.

Overview of education in emergencies and refugee education

The field of EIE has gained momentum since 2000 with the founding of the Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), which spurred a wave of scholarship aimed at identifying "best practices" for educational provision and programming in emergency contexts. Refugee education since then has been subsumed under the wider discourse and scholarship on EIE (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). While some early studies on refugee education focus on the issue of access (e.g., Buckland, 2005; Midttun, 2000; Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003; Sommers, 2004; Triplehorn, 2001), others describe and evaluate particular policies' or programs' impact (Crisp, Talbot, & Cipollone, 2001; Kirk, 2007). Dryden-Peterson (2015) highlighted the importance of better understanding students' pre-settlement schooling experiences in countries of first asylum, including limited access to formal schooling, language barriers, low quality instruction, and discriminatory practices. Such experiences remain to date a "black box" (Dryden-Peterson, 2015, p. 3) within the context of resettlement efforts of refugee students in North America, Europe, and Australia where new pedagogic responses to these students' needs have become increasingly important (Dooley, 2009; McBrien, 2005).

Another "black box" in refugee education is NFE, where there "is often a lack of available 'hard' data on the outcomes or effectiveness of the programs" (Baxter & Bethke, 2009, p. 130). For example, a systemic review on the effectiveness of NFE for improving educational outcomes for street children in developing countries found zero studies that adopted rigorous quantitative designs (Shephard, 2014). Some reported benefits of NFE include increasing "the chances of refugees obtaining employment as well as contributing to the manpower needs of their countries of asylum" (Dodds & Inquai, 1983, p. 55). NFE is characterized by its flexibility, and thereby its ability to address learners' diverse needs (INEE, 2010). However, this flexibility can sometimes be problematic as teachers in NFE contexts may not be qualified to address students' wide range of developmental abilities and ages (Baxter & Bethke, 2009). Other challenges include sustainability of NFE programs due to funding issues, inadequate assessment of students' progress, teacher recruitment (ibid), and certification of student attainment (Talbot, 2013). In Lebanon, NFE programming fills a major gap "by providing access to education for thousands of children who otherwise would be on the streets" (Ahmadzadeh, Çorabatır, Al Husseini, Hashem, & Wahby, 2014, p. 47). As such, it becomes important to learn more about NFE programming, particularly as we know little about teachers' experiences in implementing NFE programming in Lebanon, especially in relation to the teaching and learning of language.

Lebanon: education of Syrian refugee students

In recent decades, Lebanon has been in "a protracted state of emergency" (Zakharia, 2014, p. 7) due to various episodes of unrest including a civil war (1975–1990); military occupation (e.g., the Israeli occupation of Lebanon between 1982 and 2000); political

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