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**Title: Think digital! Get in the game! The experiences of integrating digital skills within the lower- level (Entry 1) ESOL curriculum at Denton College*.**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Sunderland for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Sunderland
School of Education

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## Abstract

**Think digital! Get in the game! The experiences of integrating digital skills within the lower- level (Entry 1) ESOL curriculum at Denton College.**

Digital inequalities are closely linked to broader social and economic disadvantage (White, 2016; Good Things Foundation, 2019). It has been reported that over 11 million adults in the UK lack essential digital skills considered necessary for life and work, with an estimated 4 million adults having no digital skills at all (Stone, Rae-Evans and Maye, 2020). However, such figures require critical consideration in relation to differing contexts and definitions of digital competence. For individuals with limited English proficiency, digital exclusion may be further intensified, as much of the internet relies on English for navigation and comprehension. This 'digital divide' can create difficulties for students from various cultural backgrounds and ESOL learners are especially at risk of being digitally excluded (The Education and Training Foundation, 2021).

Existing literature suggests that much of the research on digital tools in ESOL contexts has focused on challenges emerging during the COVID-19 pandemic, with less attention given to pedagogical approaches that effectively integrate both language development and digital skills. Teaching digital skills to ESOL students at a lower level received even less attention. This study explores the potential for culturally inclusive basic digital learning opportunities that are flexible, adaptive and responsive to the needs of lower-level ESOL learners. It adopts an interpretivist, qualitative research design. Data were collected through baseline interviews, semi-structured interviews and participant observations conducted during classroom-based interventions. Participants' individual journeys were examined as narrative case studies, the detailed accounts of each learner's developing relationship with digital tools, drawn from interview data and observation. This approach was chosen because it allowed each learner's experience to be traced across the baseline, intervention and post-intervention phases, capturing the individualised, situated and evolving nature of digital skills development.

The findings suggest that the development of digital skills can support language acquisition, enhance learner autonomy and enable greater participation in digital and social life. At the same time, the study highlights the complexities involved in integrating digital practices within ESOL contexts. The thesis therefore proposes an exploration of the possibilities for extending learning beyond guided learning hours through digital means, while recognising the need for pedagogical approaches that are inclusive and responsive to learners' linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds.

**Keywords:** ESOL, digital skills, digital technology, experiences, ESOL students, barriers

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## Chapter 1: Problem and Context

### Introduction:

It was the wee hours of Monday morning, the 18th of March 2020, when I looked at the dreaded email from my manager that all face-to-face learning is suspended and all learning will take place online/remotely until further notice. Having taught ESL online for over five years, I had adequate digital pedagogy, but the idea of going online threw me into a tizzy. I had three groups of beginners/pre-entry ESOL learners with limited literacy/communication skills and digital skills, not to mention the lack of appropriate IT devices and internet connection at home. As I embarked on the challenging journey of teaching pre-entry ESOL and Entry 1 ESOL learners remotely/online, I decided to investigate this in my MA short course research project, which looked at the perceptions/experiences of pre-entry students and teachers towards remote learning during the Covid-19 lockdown. The research revealed that lower-level adult ESOL learners are less likely to engage in remote and online learning. This is either due to their low ICT/digital or literacy skills and unavailability of proper ICT equipment and resources at home, like laptops/smartphones and good internet connections, etc., which presented unique challenges during the lockdown.

This study further builds on the small-scale research and focuses on the ways to improve remote /online learning of lower-level ESOL learners who are primarily marginalised and had interrupted learning during the lockdown that had knocked them back further in their learning. I am focusing on improving and incorporating digital skills within the lower-level ESOL classes so that they do not get left behind in this increasingly digital world and future pandemic-like situations.

### Setting and Aim of the research:

This study is placed within the ESOL community setting in Denton College*. The research participants are the Entry 1 ESOL students at Denton College. The research area focuses on improving English language skills by incorporating digital tools relevant to the needs of the learners. The wider context of the research focuses on ESOL learners' migration and identity, embedding digital skills and barriers and the stories of possibility and identity reconstruction.

This study is guided by three separate but related research questions:

Research Question One: How do Entry 1 ESOL learners develop basic digital skills to support their language learning?

Research Question Two: In what ways do basic digital skills enable Entry 1 ESOL learners to access and navigate everyday services more independently, and how does this relate to their autonomy?

Research Question Three: How does the development of basic digital skills shape Entry 1 ESOL learners' confidence, integration and sense of belonging within their new social environment?

### Key Concepts and Terminology

#### Digital Concepts

**Basic Digital Skills** are the foundational abilities required to use everyday digital devices, tools and online platforms with confidence. In this study, basic digital skills refer to the competencies developed by Entry 1 ESOL learners over a 14-week intervention, including

using Outlook, MS Teams, Flipgrid, Padlet, Wordwall, Liveworksheets and PowerPoint for language learning purposes.

**Everyday Digital Services** refers to the online platforms and digital tools that individuals use to manage and navigate daily life independently. In this study, everyday digital services include accessing the council website, online shopping and ClassDojo etc.

**Digital literacies** extend beyond functional skills to include the social, cultural and communicative practices through which individuals make meaning, participate and interact in digital environments.

**Digital practices** are the everyday ways people use digital tools and technologies such as smartphones, apps and online platforms to do real-world tasks, communicate and participate in social life.

**Digital inclusion** is understood as equitable access to digital technologies, alongside the skills, confidence and opportunities needed to use them meaningfully. In contrast, **digital exclusion** refers to limited or no access to digital tools, skills, or participation.

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**Learner Development and Experience**

**Confidence** is the growing belief among Entry 1 ESOL learners in their own ability to use basic digital tools and communicate in English independently, developed through sustained engagement with digital practices over the 14-week intervention.

**Autonomy** refers to learners' capacity to take control of their learning and to act independently in navigating both educational and everyday contexts.

**Agency** extends the concept of autonomy, referring to learners' ability to make choices, act intentionally and influence their own learning and life circumstances.

**Identity** relates to how learners perceive and position themselves within social, cultural and learning contexts, particularly in relation to language use and participation.

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**Social and Cultural Concepts**

**Belonging** refers to a sense of feeling accepted, valued and connected within a new social environment. In this study, belonging refers to how engagement with basic digital skills contributes to Entry 1 ESOL learners feeling more included within their classroom, local community or wider UK society.

**Integration** is the process by which ESOL learners gradually become active participants in their new society, engaging with local services, institutions and communities both practically and socially. In this study, it is viewed from the perspective of learners lived experiences rather than as a measurable outcome.

**Assimilation** by contrast, refers to the expectation that individuals adopt the dominant culture, often at the expense of their own linguistic and cultural identities.

**Participation** refers to active engagement in social, educational and digital practices, moving beyond mere access to meaningful involvement.

**Social context** is the immediate environment of relationships, institutions and cultural norms within which learners are situated including the classroom, local community, workplace and broader host society.

**Access** encompasses not only physical access to digital tools, but also linguistic, social and institutional access that enables participation.

**Power** is considered in relation to access, voice and the ability to participate meaningfully within educational and digital contexts.

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**Educational and ESOL Context**

**Lower-level ESOL learners** in this study refers to adult learners enrolled at pre-Entry and Entry 1 levels, who may have limited prior educational experience and emerging skills in English.

**Lower linguistic capital** draws on sociological perspectives and refers to learners who have limited access to dominant language resources, which may affect their participation in both educational and digital contexts.

**Curriculum** is understood not only as prescribed content, but as a dynamic and responsive process shaped by learners' needs, experiences and contexts.

**Assessment** includes both formal and informal processes, with particular emphasis on formative practices that support ongoing learning and development.

**Everyday literacy practices** refer to the use of reading, writing and communication skills in real-life contexts, such as accessing services, completing forms and engaging with digital platforms.

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**Language and Pedagogy**

**Translanguaging** refers to the ways in which multilingual learners draw on their full linguistic repertoires to make meaning, rather than treating languages as separate and bounded systems.

**Digital pedagogy** refers to the use of digital technologies to support teaching and learning, not only as tools for delivery but as practices that shape how knowledge is constructed, accessed and shared. In this study, digital pedagogy is understood as the integration of digital tools within ESOL teaching to support both language development and learners' participation in digital environments.

**Classroom pedagogy** refers to the strategies, methods and practices employed by teachers to facilitate learning within the classroom. It includes decisions around interaction, task design, language use and the ways in which learners are supported to engage with content.

**Culturally inclusive pedagogy** refers to teaching approaches that recognise, value and incorporate learners' diverse cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds. It seeks to create equitable learning environments where learners' identities and experiences are acknowledged as resources rather than barriers.

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**Methodological Concepts**

**Interpretivism** underpins this study, emphasising the understanding of learners lived experiences and the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participants.

**Qualitative research** is used to explore participants' perspectives in depth, focusing on meanings, experiences and social contexts rather than quantifiable outcomes.

**Case study** refers to an in-depth exploration of a small number of participants in this study, allowing for detailed understanding of their experiences.

**Semi-structured interviews** involve guided but flexible questioning, enabling participants to express their perspectives in their own terms.

**Participant observation** involves the researcher observing and engaging within the learning environment to gain contextual insights.

**Practitioner research** refers to research conducted by educators within their own professional context, with the aim of improving practice.

**Action research** is reflected in the iterative and reflective nature of the study, where teaching practices are explored and adapted in response to learners' needs.

## Literature Search Strategy

I carried out a structured keyword search to identify literature that aligns with the focus of this study. I used databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC and institutional library resources to ensure a broad and relevant range of sources. I used key search terms including *digital literacy, digital practices and ESOL, digital skills and adult language learning, ESOL learners and belonging, ESOL autonomy and identity, ESOL and integration, translanguaging in adult ESOL, Participatory ESOL etc* adapting and refining these combinations as patterns began to emerge in the literature.

I selected studies based on their relevance to adult ESOL learners, particularly those situated within lower-level language learning contexts and those addressing issues of digital inclusion, participation and pedagogy. As I reviewed the literature, I grouped the selected studies into key thematic areas, including the relationship between digital skills and language development, the role of digital practices in supporting learner participation and independence and the importance of inclusive and responsive pedagogical approaches.

## Clarification of Context: England and the UK

*It is important to note that while migration and demographic data in this study draw on UK-wide statistics, the ESOL context referred to throughout is specifically that of England. ESOL provision, policy and funding in England is governed by the Department for Education and*

*differs from provision in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This study was conducted at Denton College in England and therefore reflects the English ESOL context specifically.*

## ESOL learners and the UK's history of Migration

*Every day, all over the world, people make one of the most difficult decisions in their lives: to leave their homes in search of a safer, better life.* (Amnesty International, 2016)

The demand for ESOL classes in the UK has always been shaped by Britain's migratory history. Inward migration has affected the demand for ESOL, and its patterns have altered over time in response to national and international events and influences. (Rolfe and Stevenson, 2021) The origins of ESOL may be traced back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when Huguenots migrated to this nation as "the first identifiable refugees". Around 50,000 Huguenots sought refuge in the UK after they faced persecution in France amidst the longstanding clash between Protestants and Catholics. Rosenberg (2007) claims that at that time, most refugees sought English language instructions in London and the South-East. (ZHANG, Z., 2020)

According to the article published on Imperial War Museums (Imperial War Museums, n.d.), refugees from allied powers continued to arrive in the UK during the first half of the 20th century. During the First World War, thousands of Belgian refugees fled conflict in their country and sought refuge in the UK and helped strengthen the British Army. There were certain temporary provisions in place for these newly arrived refugees to help acquire English skills, but until the year 1939, there was no nationally recognised programme for newly arrived refugees to learn English. They had to pay to learn English either at a private institution or enrolling themselves in evening English classes. As per the article 'Reconstructing Britain after World War Two' (BBC Bitesize, n.d.). At this time, Britain also encouraged Commonwealth countries to emigrate following the 1948 British Nationality Act which allowed people from the Commonwealth countries to acquire British passports and live and work in the UK. This was mostly to help rebuild the country, as there was a labour shortage at that time. People from the West Indies, South Asia and Cyprus were among the first to arrive. During this time, teachers of English as a Second Language (ESOL) played a key role in helping adult immigrants in settling in by equipping them with the language skills and cultural awareness to navigate the new society that they were living in. According to the World Migration Report, 2020 (Bauloz, Vathi and Acosta, 2020), as the British economy bloomed between the 1950s to 1960s, prospective workers and potential ESOL students from Commonwealth countries such as India, East and West Pakistan, Cyprus, Ghana, Kenya, etc arrived in the UK. To fulfil the needs of these new settlers, refugees and migratory workers, ESOL provision was set up. The funding from the Home Office was intended to help with basic settlement requirements, but a major percentage of it went towards English language learning for both adults and children (GLA, 2022).

The Immigration Act (IA) 1971 marked a major shift in immigration policy. It's important in the history of British citizenship and nationality for two main reasons: first, it reflected the British government's move away from the Commonwealth; and second, it introduced a clear distinction between those considered 'patrial' (with the right to live in the UK) and 'non-patrial' (without that right) (Ameer, S. 2017).

The 1975 Right to Read literacy campaign did not include ESOL, in fact, ESOL had no representation at the national policy level for several years. The immigrants who arrived in the UK during this period learnt English for specific purposes rather than for day-to-day living. The ESOL provision spread to colleges, communities and voluntary organisations during this time. (ZHANG, Z., 2020)

Since the late 1980s, the United Kingdom has seen an upsurge in asylum and refugee applications from countries such as Sri Lanka, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, the former Yugoslavia, etc. Hamilton and Hillier pointed out that the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit was expanded to include ESOL in the year 1984, and since then the fate of ESOL has been linked to adult literacy and numeracy in national policy in England and Wales. Although it was unable to improve ESOL provision much over the next 15 years, it published some reports pointing out the need for development in the ESOL provision. (Hamilton and Hillier, 2007)

Many migrants in the latter half of the twentieth century came from Commonwealth nations where English is extensively spoken, such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh but most of the people who migrated from these countries usually had poor proficiency in English and hence were required to learn English. According to the journal “Brexit and the Impact of Immigration on the UK” (Wadsworth et al., 2016), this century and particularly the previous 10-15 years have seen a continuous increase and a demographic change in migration. Between 1995 and 2015, the number of immigrants from other EU countries living in the UK tripled from 0.9 million to 3.3 million. The share of EU nationals grew from 1.5% to 5.3% of the total population and from 1.8% to 6.3% of the working-age population. The opening of the United Kingdom's labour market to citizens from the 8 Eastern European Union countries in 2004 and to a lesser extent, Bulgarian and Romanian nationals in 2007, resulted in significant East European migration to the UK.

As per the West Africa and Development’s Pre-Entry ESOL project report, “Around 80% of working-age Eastern European migrants who arrived after 2004 spoke a language other than English at home, compared with about 40% for other groups. This had consequences for their job prospects. About a quarter had work-related language difficulties, compared with about 6% for other immigrants.” This emphasises the necessity of English language instruction for East European migrants as a means of improving their job prospects. The increase in demand for ESOL made it necessary for ESOL provision to extend beyond mainstream colleges to community centres, small-scale volunteer-run centres, training providers and informal arrangements like local churches and other places of worship. (ESOL for refugees: A toolkit for commissioners and practitioners Contents, n.d.)

## Migration and ESOL: Present and Future Context

Burns and Roberts (2010) assert that socio-political, economic and environmental fluctuations in the twenty-first century are causing massive movements of people as well as greater resettlements of immigrants and refugees internationally. The truth is that today's people are multicultural, multi-ethnic, multiracial and multilingual in most nations around the world. In addition, the experience of globalisation has been conceptualised as a space-time compression in which relocations and dislocations are experienced alongside long-term connections with global diasporas (Burns and Roberts, 2010).

Considering this, learning the English language is a key measure for the successful integration of immigrants and refugees and for the country's overall economic development. However, adult immigration and refugee resettlement projects have grown distinguishably complex and considerably more difficult than in the past. As per the report published by Refugee Action (Refugee Action, n.d), the barriers to ESOL provision are growing. These issues are thought to result from significant government funding cuts in recent years, making it impossible to meet the high demand. Despite the need to bolster ESOL provision, the adult ESOL funding budget has shrunk dramatically over the past few years from £212.3m in 2008 to £105m in 2018 – a cut of more than 60%. These findings resonated with the survey carried out by the National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA) in 2014, which revealed that 80 % of ESOL providers in Birmingham, Bolton, Leeds, Liverpool, London, Manchester and Nottingham have long waiting lists of up to 1,000 potential ESOL learners. Despite efforts to continue providing services by reducing resources, many ESOL learners

must wait for several years before getting a place in an ESOL class. This long wait adds to the stress and amplifies feelings of loneliness and discouragement among refugees and newly arrived (ibid).

**Key Policy Shifts (2016–2019)**

The focus on ESOL as a tool for integration was formalised through several high-profile government initiatives between the years 2016-2019.
The 2016 Casey Review highlighted growing concerns about social division and inequality within communities in Great Britain, especially in areas experiencing rapid population change. It identified increasing ethnic segregation, limited interaction between groups and persistent inequalities, especially affecting women in some communities. (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2016). The report called for a comprehensive national integration plan to address these challenges, emphasising the need for greater social mixing, improved access to English language education and increased opportunities for participation in economic and civic life.

Integrated Communities Strategy (2018) conceptualised integration as a process through which individuals live, work and participate together in society, highlighting the importance of interaction and shared opportunities (Equally Ours, 2018). A key focus of the toolkit is encouraging community engagement and dialogue, asking organisations and groups to hold discussions and contribute their views to inform government policy. It provided practical guidance on how to organise these discussions, who to involve and how to gather and submit feedback.

The UK government published the Integrated Communities Action Plan for England the following year in 2019, outlining its commitment to building stronger, more confident and integrated communities. The plan emphasises collaboration between local authorities, voluntary organisations, businesses, schools and faith groups to address issues of community cohesion. It allocated £50 million to support targeted initiatives aimed at improving integration outcomes.
Key programmes included the Integration Area Programme, which focused on specific local authorities facing integration challenges, including Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Peterborough, Walsall and Waltham Forest.
The plan also introduced the Integrated Communities Innovation Fund, which supports new and creative approaches to fostering integration, alongside an English language programme aimed at improving language skills among individuals with low levels of English proficiency. Overall, the action plan reflected a policy-driven approach that links integration to language development, local engagement and targeted funding interventions (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019).

Although these policies recognise the importance of English language and access to opportunities, they tend to adopt a top-down approach that prioritises measurable outcomes and policy objectives. As a result, they may overlook the lived experiences of ESOL learners, whose sense of belonging and participation develops through everyday practices and individual contexts.

**Post -Brexit: Shifting Learner Demographics**

On the 31st of January 2020, the United Kingdom formally exited the European Union, entering a "transition phase" that remained until the 31st of December 2020. As per the ONS report published in 2021 (Office for National Statistics, 2021), immigration was significantly lower in 2020 compared to previous years, likely due to a combination of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the impact of Brexit. Net migration in 2020 for EU nationals was negative, with 94,000 more EU nationals estimated to have left the UK than to have arrived.

This might explain why there was a huge labour shortage in the UK during the pandemic, as industries such as retail and hospitality rely largely on EU employees. The number of European students seeking ESOL classes at my workplace (Denton College) declined during this time; however, the overall migration didn't go down and ESOL learners from other countries such as Iran and Kurdistan kept coming to the UK.

According to the report published by the New Humanitarian in 2021 (Connelly, 2021) Iran, Albania, Iraq and Eritrea accounted for the majority of asylum seekers that entered the UK in 2020. The most popular grounds for seeking asylum in the United Kingdom were family and community links, English language proficiency and often strict refugee policies in other areas of Europe. Following the withdrawal of British and US soldiers from Afghanistan and the Taliban's ascension to power in the summer of 2021, the number of forcefully displaced people increased dramatically. According to the article published by the Migration Observatory (Walsh and Sumption, 2021), "the UK evacuated 17,000 people from Afghanistan from 1 April to 1 September 2021. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has said that the 20,000 refugees who would be placed under the ACRS will be in addition to those who will be resettled via the UK's existing worldwide refugee resettlement programme, the United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme (UKRS)." As part of the government's Operation Warm Welcome, the Department of Education has promised free ESOL courses for Afghan refugees to help them resettle and integrate into UK society.

As per the Learning and Work Institute's paper, Migration and English Language Learning after Brexit (Rolfe and Stevenson, 2021), demand for ESOL will increase in the coming years but the balance between basic and higher-level English language demands may shift as learners' circumstances change. Future migration trends to the UK are expected to remain as complicated as they have always been, as the UK will be home to varied nationals with varying English proficiency levels. More nations have been included in the Youth Mobility Programme, and Hong Kong nationals with the status of Overseas Nationals have recently been granted the ability to live and work in the United Kingdom. (ibid)
According to the above study, post-Brexit, free movement in Europe has been replaced by a new "point-based" immigration system with new rules and classifications, including revisions to work visas that would make learning English a legal necessity. It also states that with the end of free movement, more economic migrants will arrive via the skilled visa path than in the past to work in the UK. There may be a demand for advanced ESOL classes depending on the demand for skilled visas. This might include ESOL specialised for certain jobs and sectors as well as ESOL delivered in the workplace.

**Post-Pandemic ESOL Provision**

Recent developments in ESOL provision following the COVID-19 pandemic highlight significant structural challenges related to curriculum, funding, access, along with changing immigration requirements. The Bell Foundation (2023) argues that current ESOL qualifications and curriculum frameworks remain overly rigid and insufficiently responsive to the diverse needs of learners. It asserts that standardised assessment practices often prioritise formal outcomes over everyday language use.

At the same time, demand for ESOL has increased and continues to reach only a small proportion of those in need (Association of Colleges, 2025), reflecting ongoing funding constraints and long-term reductions in adult education spending. According to the 2021 Census data for England and Wales, 5.1 million people self-identified as not having English as their first language. Of these, 77 per cent of women and 83 per cent of men indicated that they spoke English well or very well; 19 per cent of females and 15 per cent of males stated that they did not speak English well; and 4 per cent of females and 2 per cent of males reported that they did not speak English at all. This indicates that over 1 million, 621,000 females and 414,000 males, could not speak English well or at all, a substantial increase from the 726,000 recorded in 2011. The census data are self-reported and the number of adults needing

language provision in England and Wales may in fact be much higher. There is also evidence that second and third generations born in the UK may lack sufficient English language skills to handle day-to-day communication and find employment beyond casual work (The Bell Foundation, 2024).

These pressures have intensified further in the context of recent immigration reforms, which have raised English language requirements for key visa routes from CEFR B1 to B2 from January 2026, requiring applicants to demonstrate a higher level of linguistic competence across speaking, listening, reading and writing (Home Office, 2026).

This shift positions English language proficiency not only as a tool for communication but as a gatekeeping mechanism for employment and settlement, reinforcing the growing importance of ESOL provision while simultaneously increasing the challenges faced by lower-level ESOL learners. It also suggests that demand for ESOL provision will continue to rise, while colleges and community providers are likely to face more challenges in meeting this demand.

## ESOL and Migrant identities:

***"The identity cannot be compartmentalised; it cannot be split into halves or thirds, nor have any clearly defined set of boundaries. I do not have several identities, I only have one, made of all the elements that have shaped its unique proportions."*** **(Amin Maalouf)**

Our identities are a curious composite of various elements, influences and allegiances – national, religious, ethnic and social; the list goes on. It is not easy to define the boundaries of identity, much less ascribe it to a universal definition. Nonetheless, each component of our identity intersects and combines in a unique way to give us each a distinctiveness that makes us who we are.

When I think about my identity, I often reflect on my migratory experience as a first-generation South Asian Muslim migrant in the United Kingdom (UK). As a migrant, one constantly negotiates one's identity and belongingness in a new environment. In doing so, a unique identity construction takes place – one embedded in a new culture but significantly influenced by a continued relationship with the ethnic homeland.

Through my own experience, I have come to realise that identity formation and identifying a sense of self is a continuous process for a migrant – one that is constantly evolving – impacted often by a loss of religious or cultural values, a familiar social support system and the process of adjusting to a new milieu. My migration to the UK was personal and economically motivated, as I came here to join my husband and gain better employment opportunities – very different from the ESOL learners I teach. Most of my students are refugees and asylum seekers from Kurdistan, Sudan, Syria and Iran who fled war, violence or human rights violations in their home countries and for whom this political and economic turmoil back home renders it difficult, often impossible, for them to return.

One of my ESOL learners Alam came to the UK as a 17-year-old leaving behind his big family of five brothers, six sisters and parents in South Sudan***. "I left my country and people because I didn't feel safe. I almost escaped death while I was leaving Sudan***". Another learner from Kurdistan, who prefers to remain anonymous, who came to the UK with his two children said "***I first came to Germany as an asylum seeker but found the asylum process to be very difficult…I later came to the UK with my children, I have many friends from my community here and I feel that my children will not lose their identity and culture here."***

James Simpson in his paper "Identity alignment on an ESOL class blog" (Simpson, 2012) states that adult migrants in an ESOL class come from a range of backgrounds transcending geographical boundaries which include asylum seekers, refugees, economic migrants and people reuniting with their families. Identity is far from being an inconsequential issue for such

adult migrant language learners. He further says that although some academics have taken interest in migrants' linguistic experiences and identity construction, the diverse backgrounds of migrant English learners are neither well appreciated nor understood in policy and practice, let alone the nature of their emergent linguistic and language learning identities.

ESOL students usually have multiple identities such as that of a mother/a father, learner, or worker. However, despite coming from different countries and backgrounds, most ESOL learners invest their time in ESOL courses as it is closely tied to how they envision their future and how they hope to participate in the community in which they belong to. One of my ESOL learners Gloria from Congo said, ***"I want to finish my ESOL course, get a certificate, go to University, get a better job and provide a better life to my daughter***". Simpson in his paper "Telling tales: Discursive space and narratives in ESOL classrooms" (Simpson, 2011) says that identity is how a person views their relationship to the world and how the individual understands future possibilities. Every time a person interacts in the target language, they are constructing and negotiating their own identity. As a result, we enter the arena of language learning in many contexts (social, cultural and historical).
However, categorising all ESOL students as the same or having similar motivation for learning is risky because it ignores their individual experiences and needs because sometimes learning a new language may also result in frustration, alienation and loss of confidence. Lukasz came to the UK from Poland about 16 years ago and after an initial negative experience of learning English, he stopped trying to learn it for a long time "***I felt scared to learn English when I moved to the UK, I felt people would make fun of me…the place that I work at, don't require any English, everyone can speak my language but after living in this country for 15 years I can speak some English but not reading and writing, now I feel if I want a better job than an ESOL course will help me".***

As ESOL learners try to come to terms with a new way of living in a new setting, a new identity emerges. Some may call it a 'modified' identity – a departure from their old self but not a severance of ties from who they were. This identity develops with time as the learners participate in the communities of practice. According to Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004), "Identity can be imposed and thus not negotiable, assumed and accepted but still not negotiated, or negotiable and thus changed by the language learner." The current socio-political situation often assumes ESOL learners' identity as low-skilled migrants belonging to lower socio-economic groups who will eventually take up low-wage labour work. However, ESOL learners have the ability to refute or negotiate this perception. They can create and reconstruct a conceptual understanding of who they are throughout the language acquisition process. Little and Erickson argue that the current view of education "as a process of "person shaping" designed to extend and perhaps in some ways modify learners' identity". (Little and Erickson, 2015, p. 121)

## Embedding Language, Learning and Literacy (LLN) in the adult learning programmes

According to the 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey, the UK had lower literacy and numeracy rates than other OECD nations. Adult basic skill instruction was underfunded and marginalised. A significant government project to improve the language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills of the adult population was launched in 2001 because of the inquiry into the alleged basic skills crisis conducted by Sir Claus Moser's working group. The National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (ALN) was established in 2002, marking the beginning of the first systematic research programme for examining adult literacy and numeracy (ALN). As a result, efforts to professionalise teaching and learning practices and to present solid data on ALN have just lately received government funding. (Vorhaus et al., 2011). The development of literacy, language and numeracy is combined with the acquisition of practical and other skills in embedded teaching and learning. The learnt skills

provide students the self-assurance, skill and drive they need to advance, get credentials and thrive in life and at work.

Embedded courses are more than just classes that mix literacy, language and maths skills with job training. When learners struggle in these areas, it can stop them from reaching their goals. That's why all teachers need to understand the literacy, language, maths and computer skills their students need to succeed in their field. These courses help learners take on new roles like becoming a construction worker, NHS nurse, or childcare worker. Learners do best when literacy, language and maths are taught alongside their job skills. The Skills for Life strategy was created because improving adults' basic skills helps not only the learners but also their families and society. Better literacy and maths skills are important for improving Britain's education rankings, encouraging social involvement and mobility and supporting economic growth and the country's ability to compete globally (Excellence Gateway Toolkit, n.d.).

According to the journal published by the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (Casey et al., 2006), many students are driven to acquire a set of vocational skills to find employment, but they are far less driven to enhance their LLN. They often do not want to go back to learning Maths or English since they may equate such subjects with unpleasant school experiences. Additionally, many vocational credentials demand that students take and pass Maths and English exams. Many practitioners agree that the most effective way of providing learners with effective LLN learning opportunities is to embed or integrate LLN teaching and learning within vocational study and practice. But this practice has not been systematically developed or supported.

The impacts of integrating the teaching of literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) in Level 1 and Level 2 vocational programmes on learner achievement were investigated in a research project by NRDC, the 1916 learners who participated in the research were studying one of the five vocational qualifications. The project focused on the effects of embedding approaches to literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) on 79 vocational programmes. The courses were taught at 15 further education institutes and a sizable training organisation spread over five different English regions. To distinguish between courses where LLN was not embedded and those in which it was fully embedded, a four-point scale was developed. The findings revealed that retention in the embedded courses was 16% higher than in the non-embedded courses. 43% more students passed the literacy qualification on the fully embedded courses. 93% of students doing embedded courses passed the numeracy qualification compared to 70% of students taking non-embedded courses who had an identified numeracy requirement. Additionally, the embedded courses outperformed the non-embedded ones in terms of success rates (ibid).

Although an increasing body of research shows that developing reading and numeracy abilities have a major positive impact on learners taking vocational qualifications. Some, nevertheless, are still poorly understood, or formal evaluations frequently ignore them. This is either because, although substantial, these impacts are not huge, or the current instruments are not designed to appropriately capture them or because they take a long time to manifest. A complete organisational attitude and dedication to adult literacy and numeracy, skilled instructors and trainers, consistent finance and infrastructure and enough time for students to develop and solidify their skills and knowledge are required for effective provision. Understanding the entire spectrum of beneficial impacts and developing programmes and assessments that are best suited to promote and capture these skills should be made a priority. (Review of Research and Evaluation on Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills, 2011)

## Inclusion of digital literacy/ICT in the minimal core standards

Although there is extensive literature on the impact of the digital age on 21st-century education, there is still no single, agreed-upon definition of digital literacy. This is partly due to the ever-changing nature of digital literacies, as people continue to adapt to new tools, often learning informally and applying these skills in everyday contexts without deliberate instruction. Many adult learners engage with modern technology primarily for communication and entertainment, which are not skills they typically associate with formal education.

There is growing concern that digital technology has led to a decline in traditional literacy standards, raising questions about how much control learners have over their literacy development. However, McKeown et al. (2010) challenge this perspective, suggesting that individuals with limited formal education may be inspired by digital tools. The use of digital media such as integrating text, images, icons and audio can offer meaningful support for adults struggling with conventional reading methods (Ferriday, Freeman and Mullan, 2011).
Although the concept of digital literacy is still being developed, it is widely acknowledged that it refers to having the abilities necessary to live, learn and work in a society where access to information and communication is increasingly mediated by digital technology (WSU, 2019). People with inadequate computer literacy abilities may find it difficult to find a job, be unable to advance in their current positions, take advantage of educational opportunities, or even struggle to do basic everyday chores.

To assist awarding organisations and teacher education programmes in providing all trainee teachers with the tools they need to develop inclusive approaches to addressing the literacy, language and numeracy needs of their students, the minimum core of literacy, language and numeracy for inclusion in post-16 teacher education programmes was first developed in 2004. Key stakeholders, teacher training teams and subject experts in literacy, language and maths guided further development of the minimal core, which included the integration of ICT, in 2007. (LLUK, 2013). The use of ICT to enhance the delivery of basic skills was one of the key components of the plan outlined in the Moser report. The report claimed that ICT is a great tool to increase literacy and numeracy skills and computers and multimedia applications offer appealing methods to study. The greatest resources and the most engaging learning possibilities are accessible through the Web. ICT gives individuals who are resuming their education a fresh start. Additionally, students who use ICT for fundamental skills quadruple the value of their study time by simultaneously learning two sets of abilities. In the White Paper, 21st Century Skills: Realising Our Potential, ICT skills were for the first time included within the Skills for Life programme. “Literacy and numeracy have only been considered to be fundamental abilities up to this point.” By 2003, ICT was itself beginning to be viewed as a "Skill for life.” It is crucial for everyone to be able to use information and communications technology (ICT) today, especially at work. (Kambouri, Mellar and Logan, 2006)

A draft of the ICT Skills for Life Curriculum and the ICT Skills for Life Pathfinders initiative was developed because of a pilot project that examined the application of digital literacies. The current UK government has made a number of changes because of the recognition that technology can play a significant role in finding solutions to each of the three major problems that globalisation is posing to contemporary governments: improving economic productivity, advancing social justice and reforming public services. However, it has not been properly addressed how to teach ICT skills in adult education. When teaching ICT skills, tutors who use a variety of tactics to help students improve their literacy and numeracy might use a purely didactic style of instruction or, alternatively, a time-consuming strategy of one-on-one instruction (ibid).

The challenge for the tutors is to include these digital literacy techniques in their instruction and expand on adult students' informal learning. Gaining the learners' confidence and

empowering them to take charge of their own learning should come through showing them the usefulness of these abilities and how they may be applied in a variety of contexts.

## Adult learners' Digital skills and covid-19 pandemic

The Covid -19 pandemic not only showed that as a society our health and well-being is entwined but also that we are not "all in it together". (EFA London Annual Report and financial statements, 2020) According to the Learning through Lockdown: Findings from the 2020 Adult Participation in Learning Survey report, more than two out of every five persons – around 22 million people – engaged in some form of learning activity during the lockdown in 2020 but the individuals who were unemployed or in the lower socioeconomic categories were less likely to participate in learning. Those who participated in online learning often reported poor internet connections and a lack of interaction with fellow learners as significant challenges (The Education and Training Foundation, 2021). Digital inequalities reflect and intersect with broader social inequalities. Consequently, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and racial or ethnic minority groups tend to have lower internet usage rates compared to those from more advantaged socioeconomic and racial or ethnic groups (Robinson et al., 2015; Witte and Mannon, 2010, cited in NTIA, 2013). The full extent of digital inequity is no mystery. A 2019 report by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) revealed that, although declining, the number of "internet non-users" is still large in the UK. However, many organisations, including governments, continue to act as though internet access is already universal. According to Kira Allman, Research Fellow in Media Law and Policy at Oxford University's Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, the closure of public libraries and online learning centres has had a negative impact on adults belonging to low socioeconomic groups. They are important for people without access to digital technology or with low digital skills. Their role in what she calls "the front line" of the struggle to overcome the digital divide is currently being lost. (Oxford University, n.d.)

The pandemic has shown just how harmful digital inequality can be, especially in education. It has changed how education works and will keep changing it. When schools, colleges and universities closed suddenly because of COVID-19, educators had to quickly switch to working from home. Many of us also became home schoolers or carers at the same time. Our working hours aren't normal anymore—they've gotten much longer. We worry that students are losing interest in online learning and about their emotional health. We're also concerned about how to support them beyond academics, and that many non-traditional students might drop out. We're worried about our own mental health too and feeling tired from too much screen time. But despite these challenges, there's a chance to work closely with learners, give them more control and help them become confident digital citizens. (Crick, 2021)

Results from my MA short course (Khan, 2021) study showed that disadvantaged low-level ESOL students were less likely to fully engage in remote learning for several reasons, including digital poverty (broadband access and/or lack of laptops/desktops), home learning environments not being conducive to study and reduced skills in independent learning due to language barriers. However, both teachers and students reported significant improvement in digital pedagogy and digital literacy respectively, during the lockdown. In response to the pandemic, the ETF also launched an EdTech offer that embeds the use of digital technology in teaching so that learners build skills and confidence in using technology to study, live and work in a digital society.

## Why do ESOL learners need digital literacy: Identity Negotiation

How many of your daily tasks involve using technology? Like sending an email to a coworker, paying bills online, finding directions, checking your kid's school calendar, looking at medical test results, or ordering groceries?

The same is also required of adult learners in our ESOL programmes. They must be able to obtain correct health information, interact and cooperate online for school or employment, communicate with their children's schools and apply for jobs, among other things. Having basic digital skills is more important than ever and yet one in five adults in the UK do not have the basic digital skills that many of us take for granted. This is cutting many people off from so many opportunities from accessing new jobs, further study and being able to stay in touch with friends and family. Simon Parkinson, the General Secretary and Chief Executive at WEA-Adult learning organisation, said that the Covid-19 pandemic had particularly affected ESOL learners who "have struggled most to engage digitally, particularly at entry-level, because they are at the start of their journey". Dr Pember agreed that ESOL is "a worry area at the moment because those particular learners are not presenting themselves at centres" (Foster, D. and Bolton, P; 2017).

ESOL learners have several identities inside and outside the classroom. In both policy and practice, the field of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) often presents students with limited and deficit identities, seeing them as immigrants, skills trainees, or future workers in low-paid jobs. This means that educators need to understand how social processes influence and relate to the way individuals negotiate their identities. ESOL students should be given chances to explore and shape their own identities, challenging the limited or imposed roles often assigned to them by policies. Simpson and Gresswell, in their article **ESOL Learners** : **'New media as a site of identity negotiation** 'reiterate that ESOL classrooms are prime sites of identity work: ESOL learners undergoing the migration process have lost many of the familiar social, cultural, and linguistic resources that enable the construction of identity. To make sense of who they are and to remake themselves in their new environment, they must use new linguistic and other semiotic resources. An appropriately broad range of pedagogic experiences including engagement with digital technologies in class can provide them with access to such resources. By using new literacy technologies in classroom settings, they can claim identity positions that extend beyond the limited ones offered to them by policy and institutions (Simpson and Gresswell, 2012).

Digital literacy can be deployed in ways that afford the repositioning of the self and the renegotiation of identity. If we look more closely at the relationship between the ESOL learner's low literacy skills and digital skills, we see that it is a story of both exclusion and possibility. (Dobransky and Hargittai, 2016). Simpsons and Gresswell (2012) argue that when learners are given the ability to claim a greater range of identity positions through the use of new technology, their language development and identity, creating and remaking opportunities expand as well. Literacy practices that emerge at the interface of new technology, language learning and global culture have a place in pedagogy. It would be interesting to explore how digital pedagogy can be embedded in the lower-level ESOL provision using a range of digital tools to investigate how ESOL learners negotiate their identities through digital literacy.

## The local context: Adult education provision in Denton*

Denton* is a diverse city in terms of both geography and economy. It extends southward to Leicestershire and northward to the border with Manchester and Sheffield. Compared to the national average of 92.0 per cent, Denton* City has a lower percentage of English speakers, at 90.5 per cent. However, this is to be expected given that 14% of city residents were born

outside of England. More than 20,000 part-time adult learners in the city are served by a range of providers from the commercial, volunteer and statutory sectors. With three ESOL providers delivering in five areas, the city has a good level of provision. However, four of these localities are in the DE23 postcode region, which supports a community where 32.7% of the local residents are from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups. (Lindsay and Seredyńska-Abou-Eid, 2019)

Over several years, Denton College* has supported the delivery of adult education by entering into franchising agreements with regional suppliers. With around a third of its expenditure going towards this provision, ESOL is its largest single subject area. Nevertheless, for many years it was thought to be insufficient to meet the demands of the growing number of ESOL students in the city. However, after consulting with the county's adult education service, which operates adult education centres throughout the county, the problem of operating capacity was resolved to some extent. They expanded and established additional programmes by utilising Denton College's experienced tutors, hired new tutors and subcontracted tutors from Denton*-based non-profit organisations that assist refugees. Initially, three courses were set up in three different places. As the number of re-established families grew, the availability of services was expanded. At present, the programmes are currently provided in eight sites around the county. Since the majority of students are pursuing grant-eligible courses, DCC combined VPRS (Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme). Adult Education Services and ESFA money to make this possible. The VPRS money and the traditional learner support budget have split the expenses of learners' travel and childcare costs. (Short, n.d.)

### The impact of Covid-19 lockdown on ESOL provision at Denton College*:

At present, there are about 600 adult ESOL students enrolled at Denton College* studying at levels ranging from Beginners (Pre-Entry) to Level 2 at three community centres across Denton*. Apart from this, there are learners who are on the waiting list or cannot do face-to-face classes; they are offered to do a 16-week online Journey to Basic Skills programme (Beginners) and a Journey to English programme (Entry 2-Entry 3).

During the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020-2021, national evidence emerged that disadvantaged students were less likely to engage in remote learning for several reasons, including digital poverty (broadband access and/or lack of device), home learning environments not being conducive to study, motivation/reduced skills in independent learning for low-level students and language barriers. The impact on progress for disadvantaged students has been significant. This is true of the Pre-entry and Entry level ESOL provision at Denton College which mostly comprises refugees and asylum seekers.

Teachers of pre-Entry ESOL Learners at Denton College* could avail themselves of limited remote teaching resources as opposed to the vast array of synchronous and asynchronous tools available to other teachers and students. This is either due to the learners' low ICT/digital or literacy skills or the learner's unavailability of proper ICT equipment and resources at home like laptops /smartphones or good internet connection etc which presented unique challenges during the lockdown.

Through my MA short course research project (Khan, 2021) which was conducted over a period of 5 months, I tried to gauge the experiences and perceptions of low-level ESOL learners and their teachers at Denton College* towards remote teaching and learning during the first Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020.

The **four major themes** that were identified from the data analysis and triangulation of information were: barriers, support, facilitators and pedagogy. One of the key themes identified throughout the comment is the' barriers' that students and teachers experienced in remote

teaching and learning during the first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020. This could be further divided into four sub-themes:

a) barriers due to learner's lack of ICT resources

b) barriers due to learner's lack of ICT Skills

c) barrier due to lack of transparency in learner's work

d) barriers to creating digital resources

Teachers felt that tasks that did not require any technology like sending homework packs to students' homes worked best in engaging learners during the lockdown followed by phone calls and sending links to live worksheets/ Kahoot quizzes. The majority of student respondents also found homework packs most engaging followed by links to YouTube videos. One student respondent said, ***"I recommend teacher for more paper homework and YouTube videos"***

It almost goes without saying that for practical remote teaching and learning experience, the **digital pedagogy** needs to be of a standard to effectively support this and this has also been identified as one of the major themes in the survey comments***.***

Support in the form of college supporting teachers to develop their digital pedagogy during the lockdown and the support students are receiving from their teachers also arose as a major theme in the data analysis. The majority of the students were satisfied with the way their teachers supported them during the lockdown ***"I would like to thank my teacher for helping us".*** Another respondent said, ***"Finally I said Thank you Teacher for your support".***

Most of the teacher respondents agreed that they would benefit from more ***"Specific, extensive and quality training and support from the college.".*** (Khan, 2021)

Through this research project, I would like to investigate if basic digital skills have a positive impact on lower-level ESOL learners' language acquisition process. I would further like to explore the teaching methods, materials and resources that can successfully combine language acquisition, information literacy and digital technology that can empower ESOL students to become effective digital citizens. The following is a reiteration of my research questions that this research seeks to address:

Research Question One: How do Entry 1 ESOL learners develop basic digital skills to support their language learning?

Research Question Two: In what ways do basic digital skills enable Entry 1 ESOL learners to access and navigate everyday services more independently, and how does this relate to their autonomy?

Research Question Three: How does the development of basic digital skills shape Entry 1 ESOL learners' confidence, integration and sense of belonging within their new social environment?

## Conclusion

This chapter has established the context, aims and significance of my research, outlining the key themes that shape the study. I have introduced my research questions and provided an overview of ESOL learners, migration history in the UK and the evolving landscape of English language learning. By examining past, present and future migration trends, I have highlighted the shifting needs of ESOL provision and the role of language in shaping migrant identities. The discussion on embedding literacy, language and learning in adult education has shown

how ESOL programmes support social and economic integration. The inclusion of digital literacy in the Minimum Core Standards and the impact of COVID-19 on digital skills further emphasise how technology has become an essential part of ESOL learning. This foundation sets the stage for the next chapter, where I will examine the theoretical frameworks underpinning my research, providing a lens through which I will analyse my findings.

**The names of places have been anonymised to protect the identity of the participants.*

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

This study is concerned with exploring the experience of embedding basic digital skills within ESOL teaching in the context of lower -level ESOL learners. My research questions focus on Entry 1 ESOL students' experiences of digital skills development and how it impacts their language learning, confidence, autonomy, sense of belonging and integration. The literature for each of these topics will firstly be examined from a general theoretical perspective. The review will then move on to how these theories relate to education in general and lastly, it will focus on specific areas which will include an exploration of English language learners and basic digital skills.

For the literature review, the focus will be on the concept of learners' autonomy which is the 'ability of the learners to take charge of one's own learning independently or in collaboration with others'(Holec, 1980). Participatory Approach to English language learning which "puts the learner at the centre of their own learning and recognises what they bring into the classroom in terms of life experiences and identities" (British Council, 2014). Second Language Acquisition theories will also form a framework for embedding digital skills in ESOL classes. The focus on sociolinguistics will look at how language and society are related. Sociolinguistics studies how variables including race, gender, status and age, among others, contribute to variances in linguistic variety among social groups (Snell, 2014). There will be a focus on the constructivism learning theory which implies that people can make connections between new knowledge and existing knowledge by engaging in interactive activities. (Main, n.d.)

### No person is free who is not master of himself- Epictetus,

Learner autonomy has long been a hot topic in language study and research, and as a language teacher and researcher, I am quite mindful of it in my teaching philosophy. However, I was not given enough opportunities to develop my skills as an autonomous learner when I was a student. I only realised how crucial learner autonomy is while completing my initial teacher training course CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) in the year 2013. In the CELTA course, we were highly encouraged to develop teaching strategies that promote a learner-centred approach as opposed to a more teacher-centred one. We were demonstrated how to create opportunities for engaging our students in the learning process and show them the ways that can help develop their autonomy. Growing up in a global south nation like India as a primary school student in the late 1990s and early 2000, I recall a classroom environment where students' autonomy was hardly encouraged. Since most teachers were unfamiliar with the idea of "learner autonomy," they were unable to assist learners in making decisions given the constraints of time, course delivery and prescribed

textbooks. Unfortunately, there was a tendency towards teacher-centred learning in which learners were seen as merely passive receivers of information.

Nevertheless, the idea of learner autonomy crept into teaching during my high school years, presumably as a result of the increased use of new technologies that lead to us taking an active participatory role in our own learning through presentations, reflection diaries and project-based learning.

## "Do it yourself" -What is Learner autonomy?

Holec has defined learner autonomy as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning", noting that this ability "is not inborn but must be acquired either by 'natural' means or by formal learning, i.e., in a systematic, deliberate way". He further pointed out that "to take charge of one's learning is to have […] the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" (Little, n.d.). According to Camilleri, who provides a more thorough definition of learner autonomy, autonomous learners are expected to take responsibility for their own learning, negotiate and collaborate with one another and the teacher in selecting goals and methods of achieving them, share their knowledge, experiences and feelings while respecting the individuality of others and evaluating their own progress. (Atasoyi, 2014).

Borg (2012) in his research paper 'Learner Autonomy: English Language Teachers' Beliefs and Practices, has mentioned 13 aspects of learner autonomy suggested by Sinclair which has been broadly recognised by language teaching professionals all over the world. The 13 aspects of autonomy are as follows:

- Autonomy is an expression of capacity.
- The ability to assume personal responsibility for one's learning is a key component of autonomy.
- Students may not always be born with the ability or willingness to accept such responsibilities.
- It is idealistic to pursue total independence.
- There are varying levels of autonomy.
- Placement of learners in circumstances where they must be independent is not the only way to foster autonomy.
- Self-awareness of the learning process, as well as intentional consideration and decision-making, are necessary for the development of autonomy.
- It takes more than just effective teaching methods and strategies to encourage autonomy.
- Autonomy is possible, both in the classroom and outside of it.
- There are both social and economic aspects of autonomy.
- Autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures. (Sinclair, 2000:in Borg 2012, p.5)

These aspects support the notion that learner autonomy attempts to give learners the capacity to assume more responsibility for their own learning. Additionally, it gives learners the freedom to choose for themselves what and how to learn. These aspects further imply that to foster an autonomous learning environment, educators should provide opportunities for learners to develop self-awareness, take ownership of their learning, establish goals and reflect on their learning. It is also highlighted that autonomy could mean different things in different cultures. If different societies have different sets of values and beliefs, people in them are highly likely to consider different criteria for autonomy.

However, learners' autonomy doesn't necessarily mean that learning is taking place without a teacher or that teachers' role has been devalued. These characteristics described by Sinclair take time to develop, and teachers do play an important role in facilitating this process. Learners need help from the teachers to develop and support their autonomous learning skills. David Little (Little, 1995) says that learners' autonomy does not decrease the need for teachers but their roles and the role of teaching in the learning process, changes. Thanasoul supports this by writing that learner autonomy does not mean that the teacher has become redundant, abdicating his/her control over what is transpiring in the language learning process. (Thanasoulas, 2000)

Little (1995) in his article, "Learning as dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy", states that the foundation of learner autonomy is the learner taking ownership of their learning. This acceptance of responsibility has socio affective as well as cognitive ramifications since it simultaneously fosters a positive learning attitude and the capacity to reflect on the nature and process of learning with the goal of bringing them under conscious control. Genuinely successful students have always been independent in formal educational settings. Therefore, the purpose is not to encourage new forms of learning, but rather to assist more learners by pursuing learner autonomy as an explicit goal. (Little, 1995).

### Does the future really belong to the autonomous learners?

David Little (Little, 2003) emphasises that there are two general justifications for attempting to develop learners' autonomy. Firstly, if the learners are reflectively engaged in their learning, then they are more likely to be efficient and effective because that way their learning is more personalised and targeted. Secondly, even though learners may not always feel positively about every aspect of their learning, autonomous learners have developed the reflective and attitudinal resources to move past their brief motivational setbacks. If learners are proactively committed to their learning, the problem of motivation is solved up to a great extent. (Little, 2003)

Little and Dam in their article, "Learner autonomy: What and why?" (Little and Dam, 1995) further expand that a significant corpus of empirical social psychology research suggests that autonomy, or "feeling free and volitional in one's activities," is a fundamental human desire. Our innate motivation and active interest in the world around us feed it, which in turn feeds it back. This justifies how learner autonomy addresses the motivational issue for students. When autonomous learners commit to developing the abilities of reflective self-management in learning and take ownership of their own learning, they draw on their intrinsic motivation. This intrinsic motivation often leads to their success in learning. (Little and Dam, 1995).

On this note, Sara Cotterall (1995) in her journal, "Developing a course strategy for learner autonomy", asserts that promoting learner autonomy can also be justified on the basis of sound pedagogical principles, as it has been shown that adults learn more efficiently when they are involved in decisions regarding things like the pace, order, mode of instruction and even the subject matter of what they are studying. Learners are also more likely to feel confident in their learning when they are actively involved in making decisions regarding various components of their learning programme. The fact that a teacher might not always be present to help is the most practical justification for encouraging learner autonomy. It is also beneficial in the sense that students do not have to wait for the teacher to help them with their problems or with the resources all the time. (Cotterall, 1995).

### Does autonomy really matter in language learning?

As already mentioned, the idea of autonomy has recently gained some interest in the field of language learning. As a result, focus has turned to the variety of possible interpretations of

the concept of learner autonomy as well as the various ways in which these interpretations are reflected in theory and practice. Borg (2012) writes that claims have been made that autonomy improves the quality of language learning, promotes democratic societies, prepares individuals for life-long learning, is a human right and allows learners to make the best use of learning opportunities in and out of the classroom. (Borg, 2012)

Philip Benson has widely written about language learners' autonomy. He contrasts the technical, psychological and political viewpoints on learner autonomy in language education. An emphasis on the creation of learning techniques from a technical perspective on autonomy is sometimes referred to as "learner training". While a "political" approach emphasises ways to make the learning situation more empowering for the student, a psychological perspective proposes cultivating more universal mental dispositions and skills (Benson in 1997, in Benson 2007). Borg (2012) adds that each of these viewpoints are thought to be supported by various theoretical presumptions. For example, a technical view focuses on the physical places where learning happens, a psychological view looks at the mental abilities needed for independence and a political view focuses on the political environment. On the other hand, a sociocultural approach is particularly interested in how social interaction and engagement contribute to the growth of learner autonomy. (Borg, 2012)

The above facets of autonomy can be extremely powerful for my ESOL students. I mostly work with ESOL students from refugee backgrounds who arrive in England with little to no English. Based on my experience, almost all the students strive to improve their self-perceptions and regain some control over their lives by trying to learn a new language, a new culture and most importantly to become independent learners who will be able to take advantage of educational and employment opportunities in the new country. To overcome some of the impacts of their traumatic past and gain a broader understanding of the world, these students require some support, especially from their teachers.

Simon Borg writes that the idea of learner autonomy in adult education is intimately linked to the objective of breaking down the barriers that frequently separate learning from daily life; it is assumed that successful learners can carry their capacity for autonomous behaviour into the other area of their lives as well. (Borg, 2012).

## How is autonomy achieved?

Dimitrov Thanasoulas says that "autonomous learning is achieved when certain conditions on the part of the learner, such as cognitive and metacognitive strategies; motivation, attitudes and knowledge about language learning, i.e., a kind of metalanguage" are fulfilled. (Thanasoulas, 2000). Language learning starts with cognition, which involves brain functions but also includes other mental processes like metacognition. Metacognition helps learners monitor and manage their thinking. When language learners use metacognition, they take greater control of their learning, becoming more independent and autonomous in the process (Haque, 2019). It is difficult to clearly tell the difference between cognitive and metacognitive strategies. However, Livingstone (1997) explains that cognitive strategies focus on achieving a specific goal, while metacognitive strategies are directed towards ensuring that the cognitive goal has been accomplished (Livingstone, 1997).

Examples of cognitive strategies in a language classroom could be to plan completion of a task, connect ideas, guess the meaning from the context, repetition, translation, summarisation, etc., while metacognitive strategies on the part of the learner would be to self-question and reflect on how to improve learning. Additionally, if language learners are aware

of their language learning process, then they can start to systematically build their knowledge, tick off their progress and become more autonomous.

Although implementing autonomy in our classrooms is highly desirable due to the well-known benefits it brings, equipping language learners to become autonomous is far more complex than it seems. Autonomy also involves the idea of choice, promoting learner responsibility in selecting classroom activities and resources. From my own experience, I have realised that creating autonomous situations like learners choosing the topic and resources that they want to study and use or engaging in independent learning outside the classroom is far more challenging when it comes to beginner- level ESOL learners than with intermediate and advanced level learners. Kumaravadivel has argued, for example, that 'it would be a mistake to try to correlate the initial, intermediary and advanced stages of autonomy ... with the beginning, intermediate and advanced levels of language proficiency', because the stages of autonomy depend more on the linguistic and communicative demands of tasks. (Kumaravadivel in 2003, cited in Benson, 2007).

However, it is important to note that literacy level and level of autonomy are not straightforwardly correlated. A learner operating at a beginner ESOL level may possess higher level of autonomous behaviour shaped by their prior life experience, professional background, cultural practices or strong intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, a higher level ESOL learner may demonstrate relatively low autonomy in their approach to learning. As Kumaravadivel (2003, cited in Benson, 2007) cautions, it would be a mistake to correlate stages of autonomy with levels of language proficiency, since the development of autonomy depends more on the linguistic and communicative demands of tasks than on language proficiency level. Autonomy and literacy therefore operate as independent variables, and this study proceeds on that basis: participants' capacity for autonomous learning will not be assumed from their ESOL level alone, but explored in relation to their individual experiences, beliefs and digital practices.

The practical challenges of fostering autonomy with beginner-level learners such as limited familiarity with learner-centred approaches or restricted access to digital resources are therefore understood here as contextual barriers rather than as evidence of inherently lower autonomous capacity. Littlewood (1999) similarly distinguishes between a learner's ability to take responsibility for their learning and their willingness to do so, suggesting that what may appear as low autonomy is often a conditioned response to prior educational experience rather than a fixed characteristic of the learner.

Apart from this, learner attitudes and beliefs are the other components that need to be considered when it comes to autonomy. I've noticed that many of my learners, especially those at lower ESOL levels, often come with cultural expectations about the roles of teachers and students. For them, the teacher's job is to deliver knowledge, while their role as learners is to understand and memorise what they're taught. (Smith 2001:70: in Benson, Chik and Lim, 2003). Cotterall (1995, cited in Takagi and Chu, 2010) explains that learners hold certain beliefs about the roles of teachers and students and these beliefs can influence how open they are to different ideas and activities in a language classroom. This is especially true when the teaching approach is new or unfamiliar to them. Learners from diverse cultures and societies might perceive autonomy differently. They might prefer the teachers playing an active role in their learning. Since Riley's (1988) paper on the "ethnography of autonomy", discussions on autonomy and culture have centred on the relevance of the 'Western' idea of autonomy for 'non-Western' learners (Riley, 1988:in Benson, Chik and Lim, 2003). Smith (2001: 70) highlights an ongoing debate on its validity in Asian settings, where learners are often seen as shaped by collectivism, conformity and respect for authority. This has led to

questions about the cultural appropriateness of emphasising individual development, prompting proposals for autonomy based on ‘autonomous interdependence’.

Little points out that the behaviour of autonomous learners ‘can take numerous different forms, depending on their age, how far they have progressed with their learning, what they perceive their immediate learning needs to be and so on. (Little in 1991, cited in Benson 2007). Therefore, it is important to gradually prepare ESOL learners to become autonomous and reap any benefits from using autonomous methods of learning. Takagi and Chu (2010) add that it may not be easy for the students to adjust to their new role as autonomous learners in a learner-centred class. Therefore, it is important to first understand what learners currently want in terms of autonomy, so that teachers can gradually introduce activities that match those needs and help strengthen their independence over time.

## Ways to foster autonomy in ESOL

Language teachers play a crucial role in fostering autonomy among ESOL learners; hence it is of utmost importance that they are equipped with the necessary background knowledge on how to become more autonomous. There are several ways in which we can help our learners gain more control over their learning. First, we can assist them in making choices about what and how to learn, selecting materials and deciding how to work (individually, in pairs, or in groups). Additionally, we can encourage them to reflect on their learning, engage in self-assessment and participate in peer assessment.

Ade-Ojo (2005) points out that ESOL students may have a negative predisposition towards the concept of autonomy. To foster autonomy in the ESOL classroom, it is important to involve students in decision-making processes. They should have a say in what is to be taught and learnt, participate in decisions regarding assessment methods and contribute to discussions on how to teach. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to express their preferences for different teaching methods and understand the benefits of working independently. (Ade-Ojo, 2005).

According to Lewandowski (2022), teachers can employ a variety of learner-centred classroom management techniques to encourage autonomy in the classroom. This includes pair and group work, self and peer correction, peer support and teaching before introducing more independent learning activities. These tasks could include project work, preparing a report and other things. (Lewandowski, 2022)

An important component of autonomous learning is that learners should be able to plan, organise and reflect on their learning. Some of the activities suggested by Thanasoulas (2000) for this purpose are diaries and evaluation sheets. Diaries give students a way to plan, track and reflect on their learning, while evaluation sheets help them check whether the goals they set at the start of a course have been met by the end (Thanasoulas+9-, 2000).

## Autonomy and Digital skills

Researchers have increasingly focused on the connection between learner autonomy and digital skills (Benson and Reinders, 2011). The capacity to maintain knowledge and control over one's own affairs in the digital realm is known as "Digital Autonomy”. If adult ESOL learners lack the requisite knowledge and abilities, this is a concern especially at this time when more and more public and private services are transitioning to an entirely digital delivery paradigm. Because of this, they can end up needing help from others to manage their relationships in the digital space. This diminution in their authority will put their autonomy, financial security and physical health at jeopardy. It is important that these learners are equipped with the necessary digital skills. This can help them learn more independently

because they do not need to rely on their teachers for guidance or practise. It offers students the chance to learn outside of the classroom and develop greater independence.

Learner autonomy has changed in the digital age, according to Alice Chick's article "Learner autonomy and Digital practices." Over time, we are beginning to accumulate knowledge about what learners do, particularly outside of the classroom where personal and language-learning-friendly digital activities are prevalent. Recent edited volumes on how students learn outside of the classroom and how teachers might make use of these affordances include discussion of engagement with digital practices (Chik, 2018).

However, lack of information about available technical resources and inadequate understanding of how to access digital resources, could prove to be a barrier to utilising them. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a sudden and major change in education, with all teaching moving online within days. This rapid shift created significant challenges for many teachers in preparing and delivering quality lessons remotely. My lower level ESOL students were not able to fully engage in remote learning for several reasons, including digital poverty, home learning environments not being conducive to study and language barriers etc.

However, on the plus side, most of them were able to gain some confidence in terms of using digital tools. On this note, Nafisah Graham Brown reports that many ESOL teachers who were members of the Facebook group "Digital Pedagogy for ESOL Teachers" created during the pandemic to share good practices claimed that their students' digital skills have significantly improved during the pandemic and that there is now more learner autonomy and less spoon-feeding. (Graham-Brown, 2021)

Autonomous language learners must select suitable learning materials that match their proficiency levels and learning objectives (Işık and Balçıkanlı, 2020). According to Chik (2018) a learner must choose from among millions of search results, for instance, a selection of materials for beginning learners or focused language exercises. Additionally, a learner may favour multimedia resources over grammatical drills, or vice versa. Another student might like to start with subjects they are interested in, like sports, food, or fashion. It is unquestionably true that when there is an excess of learning resources available online, it is much more crucial that a learner has the skills necessary to select the resources in accordance with their needs. Given the limitless options for language learning outside of the classroom, many language learners are turning their outside-of-class digital activities into learning activities. (Chik, 2018).

Considering this, it is crucial for educators to help students make decisions about when and how often to use different digital tools, as well as develop awareness of how to utilise them. If learners are aware of how a tool can best help them, they can use it more wisely. This will make it easier for them to accomplish their objectives. Giving learners options to choose from can increase their motivation while enabling them to assume some responsibility for their learning since not all students enjoy using the same digital tools. The key to unlocking classroom pedagogy and the development of learner autonomy can be found in gaining a better understanding of how participation in digital activities leads to learner autonomy.

Motivation in language learning is a complicated and nuanced concept; however, it can be promoted through autonomy by providing learners with the opportunity to select the tasks themselves. It is highly likely that learners will be more motivated when they value the task they have selected. Some simple techniques that can facilitate autonomy in a language classroom are assisting learners in reflecting on what they are doing, presenting self-directed and self-paced learning situations in the classroom and collecting feedback and updating the teaching strategy and resources accordingly.

## Motivation and autonomy

Although the relationship between motivation and autonomy is self-evident as both are centrally concerned with students' active involvement in learning, yet it has only been systematically studied in the last ten years. The 1990s saw a rebirth of interest in motivation and the investigation of alternative paradigms, particularly "attribution theory" and "self-determination theory," which have added components to L2 motivation theory that are obviously pertinent to autonomy. According to these new perspectives, Dickinson and Ushioda were among the pioneers in exploring the relationship between autonomy and motivation. Subsequent research has developed the premise that increased motivation is dependent on students taking ownership of their own learning. (Zareian and Jodaei, 2015). Feldman (2015, p. 287) defined motivation as “the factors that direct and energise the behaviour of humans and other organisms” Motivations are primarily separated into two categories: extrinsic and intrinsic. The difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation has been crucial in terms of both developmental and educational processes. To be motivated, according to Ryan and Deci (2000), is to feel compelled to perform an action. Unmotivated people are those who lack the urge or inspiration to act, whereas motivated people are those who are energised or activated in the direction of their goals (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 54).

Additionally, Ryan and Deci (2000) point out that motivation is not really a homogeneous phenomenon. Not only do people differ in their levels of drive, but also in the types of motivation they possess. Extrinsic motivation refers to the act of doing something because it results in a separate outcome from the action itself, as opposed to intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable. (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Technically intrinsic motivation pertains to activities done “for their own sake,” or for their inherent interest and enjoyment. Intrinsic motivation is motivation that occurs when factors like a desire for a sense of accomplishment are at play. Activities such as play, exploration and curiosity-driven tasks are great examples of behaviours motivated by intrinsic factors. These activities do not depend on external rewards or pressure but provide enjoyment and satisfaction from within. The term extrinsic motivation refers to the performance of an activity to attain some separable outcome and, thus, contrasts with intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing an activity for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself. (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p.70)

Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) proposes a continuum of motivation, ranging from amotivation to intrinsic motivation with various forms of extrinsic motivation in between. To the extreme left is amotivation, when a person is fully non-autonomous, has no drive and struggles to meet their needs. We have various extrinsic motivation levels in the middle. One step to the right is external regulation which holds that motivation is solely regulated by compliance, conformity, external rewards and punishments. The next level of extrinsic motivation is introjected regulation which is driven by self-control, ego protection and internal rewards and punishments. Internal motivation comes from conscious ideals and personal priorities in identified regulation. Extrinsic motivation ends with integrated regulation, when intrinsic sources and self-awareness guide behaviour.

On the right is a person driven solely by internal factors. In intrinsic regulation, the person is self-motivated and driven by interest, delight and satisfaction in the behaviour or activity. Self-determination is the objective for most people, although external motivation is not terrible. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation strongly influence our behaviour and drive us to achieve the SDT model's three core needs- autonomy, competence and relatedness. (Ackerman, 2018).

## Motivation and learning English as a second language.

Motivation is certainly one of the most decisive factors when it comes to successful language learning. Oxford and Shearin (1994) maintained that motivation is crucial to second language learning, because it provides the primary drive to initiate the learning process and persistence through mastering the language (Oxford and Shearin, 1994).

Gardner and Lambert's theory of motivation focused on two important motivational constructs, integrative and instrumental motivation. Hudson describes integrative motivation as the desire to learn a target language to become part of one's host language community and culture (Hedge 2000, Ellis 1997, Cook 2001, cited in Hudson 2017, p.2).

The majority of my adult ESOL learners report that their primary motivation for learning English is to find employment or improve their job prospects, help children with homework, talk to their doctor/child's teachers without the need of an interpreter or to interact with native English speakers or classmates and colleagues at work who do not speak the same language as them**.** This suggests that both integrative and instrumental motivation play a big part in ESOL learners' second language learning experience.

Hudson (2017) in his article, "Integrative motivation and second language learning" states that a major motivation for L2 learners is the desire to use English in daily life**.** Some also wish to learn about, and be a part of, English speaking culture. A study conducted by Hudson at New College Lanarkshire to find out why ESOL students wanted to learn English in the UK revealed that the majority (95%) wanted to learn the language to improve their ability to communicate with English speakers and to better understand the media, including TV, radio and the press. Majority of the students reported that becoming part of the English-speaking community inspired them to learn the language. (Hudson, 2017).

When it comes to refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, English plays a crucial role in re-establishing their lives and finding employment in English-speaking nations. A study was conducted by Chamorro et al. (2021) to explore the perspectives of ESOL teachers on the language learning experiences, challenges and motivations that refugees and asylum seekers have when they learn the language of the host country. The respondents rated the importance of the three options provided: Education/jobs, Life in the community (e.g. going to the doctor, shopping, using public transport), Communication (e.g. socialising, making new friends, maintaining relationships).The results revealed that the teachers believed that the main motivations for refugees and asylum seekers to learn English were related to fulfilling basic/practical needs to integrate into the receiving country, such as securing education or work and being part of the community. (Chamorro et al., 2021)

However, understanding language learners' motivation for studying and how this may change over time requires seeing them as more than just pupils but as real individuals with complex lives. This is crucial to remember when examining adult learners, especially in the ESOL environment where they often do not choose on their own to live in a new culture. They are adults with extensive histories or life capital that might be a resource they rely on in class; their past experiences need to be considered. It is risky to generalise that all ESOL students are the same or have the same motivation for learning since it ignores the diversity of their experiences and needs. (Sidaway, 2021). Results from Chamorro et al., (2021) study also revealed that the students may lose motivation to learn English due to difficulty in understanding and issues related to their current situation e.g., education/work, health, living arrangements, immigration status etc. They are also affected by traumatic experiences in their lives.

Ushioda (2016) expanded on this argument in her appeal for a tiny lens approach to language learning motivation research, which does an in-depth examination of a small group of ESOL learners. She found out that the motivations of these learners did not align with the requirements of the course, which calls for pupils to pass their exams and advance through the ESOL levels. Examinations are not the top concern for many ESOL students and may possibly even demotivate them. Here, an alternative to an external exam board is needed, such as personalised learning plans created collaboratively by learners and their teachers and tailored to the learners' current objectives and socioemotional requirements (Ushioda, 2016, cited in Sidaway, 2021). Over the years I have felt that exam conditions put unnecessary pressure on learners who would get really nervous and anxious during the exams but otherwise perform well in an everyday classroom learning activity. On the other hand, there are some learners for whom passing the exams and moving on to the next level is the only motivation to attend ESOL classes and hence they do not focus much on improving their language skills. Although exams can be useful for determining whether an ESOL student is ready to progress to the next level of language instruction or for demonstrating language proficiency to potential employers, a more holistic approach to language learning that emphasises practical usage of the language may be more effective than focusing solely on exam preparation.

Coming back to motivation, Hudson (2017) notes that while students enrol in English classes for various reasons, some may have lived in the UK for an extended period but were unable to attend classes due to personal or family commitments, or work-related challenges. Consequently, their level of motivation may differ from that of newcomers who have recently arrived in the country. (Hudson, 2017). Cooke considers associations as the “long-term stable attitudes in the learners' minds," emphasising the functions of integrative and instrumental motivation. Cook asserts that the more the admiration the learners have for English-speaking society the better they’ll perform in an English language classroom. (Cooke, 2001, cited in Hudson, 2017).

In my opinion, a student who has admiration for the English-speaking community might be more driven to learn the language and show an interest in its culture. This can result in a more favourable attitude towards the language and a higher level of engagement with the subject matter, which might enhance performance in the classroom. However, it is crucial to remember that appreciation for one culture or community does not represent the only factor that affects language acquisition. Additional elements, like a learner's prior language proficiency, learning preferences and the standard of instruction, are also equally important.

## Motivation and digital skills

Lack of digital literacy limits opportunities for people outside of their social lives as about 90% of the newly created job advertisements call for some level of digital proficiency. Yet in the UK, 12.6 million adults lack even the most fundamental digital abilities. According to a report by Good Things Foundation (2019), 3.88 million adults in the UK think that the internet is 'not for them'. For people to really become more digitally included, they must have the motivation to invest their time and effort in becoming digitally literate, even if they have complete access to devices and connectivity. (Good things foundation, 2019, cited in Tutin, 2021)

The NYC Department of Education claims that being digitally literate entails more than just being able to use a smartphone and watch YouTube music videos. It entails being knowledgeable about and skilled in using a variety of technological instruments for a range of tasks. A digitally literate individual can strategically use technology to locate and evaluate information, collaborate with others, create and share original content and utilise the Internet

and digital tools to achieve various academic, professional and personal objectives (Mantiri et al., 2019).

There is numerous research on language learning that supports the use of technology as a tool for second language acquisition. Crawford-Thomas and Bloxham, make the case for learners when discussing the overall case for technology, saying that it will be extremely difficult to meet learners' demands if the teachers don't incorporate digital tools into their teaching. (Woulds, 2015). The use of technology in language classes has generally been welcomed since it helps improve student motivation and the language learning process, which in turn can improve students' linguistic and digital competence (Bećirović et al.;2021). According to Stockwell (2013), there may be a positive correlation between language learning motivation and the usage of technology. In other words, a learner who has a strong drive for technology use may also have a high motivation for language learning. Similarly, a person who is highly motivated to learn a language can wish to use technology to achieve his or her objectives. (Stockwell, 2013, cited in Gonulal, 2019).

However, there is a lot to learn when beginning to use digital technology, which can be overwhelming especially for adult learners. To address the challenge of digital motivation in adult learners, educators should identify a 'hook' by tapping into learners' current interests or hobbies, using digital tools that simplify daily tasks and beginning with small steps. Gardening enthusiasts might be drawn to apps for plant ID and tips, while those with limited mobility or caregiving duties may value online cultural content. Helpful platforms like the NHS site, medication alerts, or virtual GP visits can offer rewarding and practical benefits. This method focuses on offering more options rather than imposing digital use. (Tutin, 2021)

Apart from that, educators should also think about the use of language when promoting something digital to beginner digital skills learners that may be unfamiliar to them. Use of digital tools with positive language, emphasising the benefits that accessing digital tools can provide. Pairing the familiar with the unfamiliar can make it more approachable and easier to see the benefit. Instead of stating that people can utilise Zoom, describing it in an approachable manner, such as a video call, may be more appropriate to ward off the initial anxiety. (ibid)

On the basis of the aforementioned studies, one may argue that if digital tools and platforms are appropriately utilised and learners have access to a stable internet outside the classroom then digital tools can provide personalised learning experiences catering to the needs of individual learners which can improve learner motivation and engagement. When it comes to adult ESOL learners, digital tools such as language learning platforms and online resources like live worksheets and ESOLcourses.com may provide learners with additional opportunities to practise their language skills outside of the classroom. These resources can be accessed at any time and from anywhere, allowing learners to fit language practice into their busy schedules. Technology will continue to significantly impact education, especially with the advent of generative AI and the possibility of it taking personalised learning to new heights (Rivero, 2024). However, before considering the integration of technology in the classroom, the focus should be on effective pedagogical approaches, instructional strategies and learning objectives, with technology being used as a tool to enhance and support those aspects of teaching and learning.

## Digital Literacies, Digital Skills and Integration in ESOL Education

What is Digital Literacy?

Digital literacy has been defined in several ways across the literature. USAID (2022) defines digital literacy as the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate

and create information safely and appropriately through digital devices and networked technologies for participation in economic and social life. This definition is particularly significant for the context of this study, as it positions digital literacy not merely as a technical skill but as a social practice that enables participation in everyday life. The European Commission's Digital Competence Framework for Citizens, known as DigComp, provides a common understanding of what digital competence means in practice, offering examples of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that help citizens engage confidently, critically and safely with digital technologies (Vuorikari, Kluzer and Punie, 2022). The DigComp framework organises digital competence into five areas, namely information literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety and problem solving (Vuorikari, Kluzer and Punie, 2022). This framework is directly relevant to the present study, as it underpins the Digital Welcome Methodology that informs the pedagogical approach adopted here and it provides a useful conceptual lens through which to understand the range of digital skills that Entry 1 ESOL learners are developing.

It is important to note that digital literacy and digital skills, while often used interchangeably, carry distinct emphases in the literature. Digital skills tend to refer to the more technical, functional abilities required to operate digital devices and platforms, while digital literacy encompasses a broader critical awareness of how digital tools function within social, economic and cultural contexts (Jones and Hafner, 2021, cited in Tour, Creely and Waterhouse, 2022). For the purposes of this study, both dimensions are relevant, as the research explores not only whether learners can use digital tools but how that use shapes their confidence, independence and sense of belonging.

## Developing Digital Literacies in ESOL Classes

The integration of digital literacy into ESOL teaching has gained increasing attention in recent years, particularly in light of the rapid digitalisation of public services. Research from the Australian Adult Migrant English Programme positions digital literacies as a crucial part of settlement, emphasising that learning digital literacies and English should sit together in identifying key pedagogical principles that connect digital literacy development to the real world of adult learners (Tour, Creely and Waterhouse, 2023). This approach resonates strongly with the ESOL context in England, where refugee and asylum-seeking learners must navigate an increasingly digitalised landscape of services including healthcare, housing, benefits and employment.

However, the development of digital literacies in ESOL settings is not without its challenges. Tour, Creely and Waterhouse (2021) suggest that institutions, leaders and teachers in the adult English as an Additional Language sector often feel uncertain about how digital literacies can be taught to meet the demands of a complex digital environment. The research knowledge about digital literacies in relation to settlement remains very limited. This gap in knowledge and practice is precisely what the present study seeks to address, by examining how Entry 1 ESOL learners experience digital skill development within their language learning context.

## Digital Skills, Independence and Everyday Life

For refugee and asylum-seeking learners, the development of digital skills carries particular significance in relation to independence and access to everyday services. Digital literacy enables people to find, evaluate and communicate information using technology and for refugee populations this translates directly into improved access to job opportunities and community integration (One Digital World, 2021). The ability to independently navigate online services, complete digital forms, communicate with statutory agencies and access information

in English represents a significant step towards self-sufficiency for learners who may otherwise depend on interpreters or support workers for even routine tasks.

Rapidly advancing digital technologies have shifted understandings of literacy beyond traditional conceptions, raising important questions about how learners' existing digital practices can be recognised and built upon within language education (Jones and Hafner, 2021, cited in Tour, Creely and Waterhouse, 2022). This perspective challenges deficit-oriented approaches to digital skills teaching and calls instead for pedagogies that acknowledge and extend what learners already know and do digitally.

## Digital Skills, Confidence and Integration

Beyond independence, the development of digital skills has been shown to have a significant impact on learners' confidence and their sense of belonging within a new social context. Research with Syrian refugees in Vienna demonstrates that digital technologies serve as a key tool not only during migration but upon arrival in a new country, enabling refugees to navigate everyday life, access information independently and engage in language learning and translation activities (Kaufmann, 2018). Kaufmann's study found that digital devices held significant untapped potential for integration processes, supporting refugees in place-making, geographical orientation and maintaining family connections, all of which contribute to a sense of belonging and confidence in a new social context. This finding is directly relevant to my study, as it supports the argument that developing digital skills within ESOL education can extend well beyond the classroom, shaping how learners access services, build social networks and develop their sense of self in a new country.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, community ESOL classes for refugee women and their families in Glasgow were moved online, requiring participants to develop digital literacy alongside their language skills. Third sector organisations rapidly adapted their provision, providing a valuable lifeline and ways to connect with others to combat social isolation during lockdown (Frontiers in Communication, 2022). This experience highlighted both the importance of digital skills for social connection and the barriers that learners face when those skills are absent.

## Integration, Digital Skills and the Refugee Integration Framework

Integration is a concept that features centrally in the third research question of this study, which explores how digital engagement shapes learners' confidence, integration and sense of belonging within a new social context. It is therefore important to establish a clear theoretical understanding of integration at this stage. Although various definitions exist, integration is most usefully understood here as a dynamic, multifaceted process that encompasses employment, housing, education, health, social interactions, cultural knowledge and civic participation (Bryers et al., 2013; Spencer and Charlsey, 2016, cited in Court, 2017). It also involves fostering a sense of belonging and addressing discrimination and inequality (Ager and Strang, 2008, cited in Court, 2017).

English language proficiency is widely recognised as a critical factor in promoting social integration among newly arrived migrants and refugees (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007; Ward, 2008, cited in Pattar, 2010). The UK government's 2018 Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper acknowledged that integration requires the participation of everyone including government, individuals, communities, businesses and organisations and emphasised that integration is not about assimilation but about creating shared opportunities and a sense of belonging. However, while learning English is undeniably

important, it is not the sole factor in successful integration (Gidley and Jayaweera, 2010, cited in Court, 2017). Migrants and refugees face a wide range of challenges including public hostility, insecure housing, unemployment and social exclusion, all of which interact with and often impede language learning (Bryers et al., 2013; Rutter, 2013, cited in Court, 2017).

The refugee integration framework, developed by Potocky (2022), provides a conceptual basis for understanding the ways in which digital skills affect multiple aspects of refugees' lives and resettlement (Alencar, 2018; Eskola et al., 2020, cited in Potocky, 2022). Since the majority of learners in this study are refugees and asylum seekers, this framework is directly relevant. The framework consists of four levels. The foundation level concerns rights and responsibilities, representing the social contract between refugees and host societies, at which level technology serves as a valuable source of information about rights and obligations. The facilitators level encompasses language and communication, culture, digital skills, safety and stability, with digital skills affecting all other domains at this level. In language and communication, refugees benefit from online language learning tools, translation applications and the ability to communicate digitally (Culbertson et al., 2019, cited in Potocky, 2022). The social connections level involves social bonds, social bridges and social links, through which refugees use digital media to maintain family connections, exchange information about the host community and build relationships across cultural boundaries (Maitland, 2020; Pottie et al., 2020, cited in Potocky, 2022). The final level, markers and means, contains five domains: work, housing, education, health and social care and leisure. These domains are both outcome indicators of integration and the means through which broader integration is achieved. Refugees use digital technology to find employment, locate housing, access education and engage in leisure activities, all of which are key indicators of successful resettlement (Culbertson et al., 2019; Patil, 2019, cited in Potocky, 2022).

This framework provides a powerful theoretical lens for this study, as it positions digital skills not as an isolated competency but as integral to multiple dimensions of refugee integration. By examining how Entry 1 ESOL learners develop and use digital skills within their language learning context, this research contributes to a growing body of knowledge about how digital inclusion can support integration, build confidence and foster a sense of belonging among some of the most vulnerable learners in the English education system.

## ESOL and translanguaging practices

As a multilingual ESOL lecturer, I frequently felt like a failure when I had to clarify or explain something to my lower-level ESOL learners in their native language or when they spoke to one another in their native language to clear a doubt or explain a concept. To strengthen their language skills, I believed that my students should exclusively be exposed to English in the classroom. It took a long time for me to realise that language learning is a nuanced process and being able to use my native language can be an invaluable resource in helping my learners to learn and understand English. It is particularly valuable for lower-level learners who may struggle to understand complex concepts in English.

For decades, monolingual approaches have prioritised teaching English to speakers of other languages, with the goal of pushing students to learn English for social and academic purposes while ignoring their linguistic backgrounds (Kleyn and Garcia in 2019, cited in Akbar and Taqi, 2020). According to Cooke, Bryers and Winstanley (2018), English language instruction has generally taken a monolingual approach and 'English Only' policies in ESOL schools and institutions are extremely common. On initial teacher training courses, such as CELTA, trainees are generally told to encourage students not to speak in their native

languages. There are several reasons for this monolingual approach's dominance: It is suggested, for example, that utilising other languages in a linguistically diverse classroom is disrespectful to the teacher and other students who may not comprehend. It is also encouraged that students utilise English solely because the class provides a vital opportunity for practise for pupils who may not have many other possibilities. Finally, there is a widespread notion in English language classrooms that learning is most effective when students are immersed in the target language, and that a classroom that replicates these conditions will be most effective. (Cooke, Bryers and Winstanley, 2018)

Simpson (2020) explains that many ESOL centre managers, alongside teachers, enforce strict policies that require students to use only English during lessons, based on the belief that the 'English Only' approach is the most effective teaching method. These personal, institutional and professional perspectives on 'English Only in the ESOL Classroom' mirror wider public and policy debates about language and migration, which collectively influence the framework of adult migrant language education. (Simpson, 2020). On the other hand, there are strong arguments emerging in favour of adopting a multilingual approach in ESOL: firstly, students use other languages to help their learning processes anyway, often drawing on a range of communicative resources to make meaning with each other and to carry out their classroom activities, whether teachers encourage this or not. (Cooke, Bryers and Winstanley, 2018)

In recent times, translanguaging has become an emergent strategy to develop bilingual or multilingual learners' ESL skills through simultaneous and systematic use of an individual's first language and English in teaching and learning sessions. (Conteh, 2018; Lewis et al., 2012, cited in Ooi and Aziz, 2021).

'Translanguaging' is a word that combines three morphemes; the prefix 'trans' to imply 'transcending', that is, moving beyond; 'language' to imply a tool of communication; 'ing' to imply that the term is a dynamic act rather than a static system. The teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) can be informed by a multilingual perspective, which recognises and values the linguistic and cultural diversity of language learners (Li Wei, 2011, cited in Akbar and Taqi, 2020)

Translanguaging is an approach to language learning that emphasises the use of a student's entire linguistic repertoire, including their first language or languages, in the classroom. Rather than strictly separating languages, translanguaging allows students to use all their linguistic resources to make sense of a new language. It recognises that language is fluid and that individuals often use multiple languages in their daily lives. By allowing students to use their first language, or other languages they are comfortable with, in the language learning process, translanguaging provides a more inclusive and engaging learning environment. It can be effective in helping students develop their language skills and achieve academic success. It can also promote greater intercultural understanding and respect for diverse linguistic and cultural identities.

According to Bell Foundation (n.d.), some of the ways translanguaging can be incorporated in ESOL classrooms are using bilingual resources such as books, dictionaries, glossaries, videos or websites to support learning. This can help students make connections between languages and transfer knowledge from one language to another. If learners are asked to research a topic, they can often do all or part of it in their first language. Taking notes or making summaries in their own language can help them understand the concept more clearly. Other than these, teachers can encourage students to share their culture and language with one another through cultural exchanges. This can assist pupils develop cultural knowledge and appreciation. (Bell Foundation, n.d.)

## Translanguaging, Digital Literacy and Oracy

In the context of this research, translanguaging operates not only as a pedagogical concept but also as a practical methodological tool. The research questions have been translated into Kurdish and Arabic, the first languages of a significant number of participants in this study, to ensure accessibility and informed participation. The translation process is enabled through Google Translate and a learning support assistant, who is well-versed in Kurdish and the learners themselves subsequently verified it. This approach reflects the intersection of translanguaging with digital literacy (RQ1 and RQ2), since using online translation tools requires learners and practitioners to engage critically with digital resources, evaluate their accuracy and use them purposefully (Chik, 2018). The verification process also connects to oracy, as the learners engaged in spoken dialogue, drawing on their full linguistic repertoire to ensure accurate communication of meaning.

Furthermore, this translanguaging approach directly supports the concerns of RQ3, by valuing and incorporating learners' first languages in the research process itself contributes to their sense of inclusion, confidence and belonging. As Cooke, Bryers and Winstanley (2018) argue, recognising learners' existing linguistic resources rather than suppressing them sends a powerful message about their value within an educational and social context. By using participants' first languages as a bridge to comprehension and engagement, this study models a genuinely inclusive digital practice that it seeks to investigate, one that supports independent access to services, builds confidence and fosters a sense of integration within a new social context.

## Participatory approach

In my experience, the ESOL curriculum mostly consists of traditional topics that are meant to assist new immigrants integrate into the English society, which is indeed necessary but many vital problems that the learners deal with such as social justice and racism are left out of the curriculum and are never brought up.

Graham-Brown (2020) argues that ignoring events such as national politics, wars, or terrorist incidents in learners' home countries can suggest a lack of recognition for issues that are often deeply important to them. For the classroom to function democratically, learners should be given space to express their thoughts and concerns, even if this occasionally leads to disagreement or conflict.

ESOL teachers have the realisation that students do not advance quickly as they do not practise their English outside of the classroom. As an ESOL teacher, I believe we are aware of the political ramifications of our instructional decisions, but we often fail to consider how complex it might be for our learners to put those classroom lessons into practice outside of the classroom. Adult ESOL learners face several barriers to engage in English outside the classroom. These include fear of making mistakes, which can lead to reluctance in speaking (Benson, 2001), cultural differences that impact communication and lack of opportunities for real-world practice, especially in areas with fewer English speakers (Rampton, 2006).

The term "education" is typically used in England to refer to formal education and training. When it comes to adult ESOL students, even though they may be highly qualified, some ESOL students' skills and qualifications may not be recognised in England. This is particularly true for refugees and asylum seekers, who may have had extensive disruptions to their formal education because of war or natural disasters (Council, 2014).

Research suggests that every learner develops their own unique learning through their own experiences. When it comes to learning, adults tend to be self-directed and autonomous and

most of their learning is in response to concerns and problems they encounter in their daily lives. Adult learning professionals can work in ways that reflect our understanding of how adults learn by using a participatory learning approach (Council, 2014). The participatory pedagogy involves students in all phases of homework, projects and exams as active participants. The core tenet of PLA is that students create the tasks or questions, carry them out, evaluate and grade the responses. A successful participative strategy fosters community empowerment, promotes learning and emotions of ownership and boosts motivation. (akvopedia.org, 2020).

According to Cooke et al. (2015), in the early 1970s a small number of teachers in the UK started adopting participatory pedagogy, notably when teaching literacy to adult learners. Participatory Approach sees education as a venue for enabling people to gain the skills necessary to properly participate in genuine democratic processes, which need citizens to engage in debate and have their voices heard. Participatory ESOL draws its inspiration from the writings of Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, who used his experience teaching literacy to Brazilian workers to develop radical and ground-breaking concepts about teaching and learning. (Cooke et al., 2015)

In participatory ESOL, knowledge and skills are jointly constructed and traded between students and teachers. Students are regarded as language users, and their already existing linguistic resources are utilised. The teacher gains knowledge about how language functions, how people learn and how to teach as a result of the exchange of language skills. They also gain knowledge about the subject, the area surrounding the classroom and the lives and ideologies of the students. Participatory ESOL aims to challenge and critique hierarchy, be learner-led and inclusive, courteous and reject the education-banking paradigm. Additionally, it is overtly political, delving into questions of power by encouraging teachers and students to put a commitment to social justice into action. (Cooke et al., 2015).

I have recently started following the participatory approach's principles since I have been motivated by critical pedagogies like it. The participatory approach encourages learners to take an active role in their learning by working together with classmates in pairs, small groups, or as a whole group. The topics which are covered in the class are the usual broad topics from the ESOL curriculum, such as employment, health, family, home, etc which leads to the emergence of sub-topics, which is done through a variety of ways. One of the ways is by drawing the learners' attention to pictures projected on the smartboard that correspond to a topic of interest to the learners. To elicit comprehension and responses from the pupils, I then employ a systematic questioning strategy using probing questions like What is happening here? Why is it happening? Have you been in a similar situation etc? This type of activity then leads to some follow up activity like a free writing practice or a group discussion. Students then provide some feedback on the activity. Overall, this approach recognises that all individuals have valuable perspectives and experiences to contribute to the learning process and that learning is most effective when it is relevant and meaningful to the learner.

According to English My Way's article on the participatory approach (2014), this method works especially well with ESOL students because they are viewed as part of the community, and their voices, ideas and identities are valued in the learning environment. Students openly reflect on their actions and even if the outcomes aren't what they expected, they still gain valuable lessons from the experience. (Council, 2014).

## Pedagogy of the oppressed

According to the journal 'Making Sense of Critical Pedagogy in Adult Literacy Education' (Degener, 2001), how programmes can best serve students is a hot topic of discussion in the

field of adult education. A critical pedagogy, offering services that are culturally appropriate, participant-driven and socially empowered, is what some educators and scholars feel adult education programmes should reflect. Many adult education programmes have been criticised by critical theorists for using a "one model fits all" approach, with a predetermined structure and curriculum that rarely considers the specific background and needs of the individuals involved. Critical theorists advocate that education should lead to societal change and provide methods of liberty. Knowledge is created and rebuilt during the educational process and acquiring literacy will by itself cause a major change in the lives of marginalised people. They are of the opinion that teachers should also teach pupils about the political and social injustices that have hindered them from achieving academic achievement thus far, in addition to the subject matter that they are supposed to be teaching. From a critical standpoint, the knowledge we acquire about marginalised learners is meaningless if it has no major impact on our curriculum or how we teach. (Degener, 2001)

As mentioned above, it was the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire who advocated for a participatory approach to education that values the experiences and knowledge of both teachers and students and encourages them to work together to develop critical consciousness and challenge the status quo.

“Pedagogy of the Oppressed" is a book by Paulo Freire that outlines a philosophy of education based on the belief that traditional education often reinforces social inequalities. According to Paulo Freire et al. (2018) English translation of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, oppression and education are intertwined and there are two types of pedagogies: those that serve the oppressors and those that aid the oppressed in understanding and transforming society. He discusses the drawbacks of oppressive education, the benefits of liberating education and the political uses that can be made of educational instruments to advance and uphold freedom in society. The pedagogy of the oppressed is divided into two distinct phases and is humanist and libertarian in nature. The oppressed in the first phase reveal the oppressive system and pledge to change it through action. In the second stage, because oppression has already been changed, this pedagogy is no longer just for the oppressed but becomes a way of teaching for everyone involved in maintaining freedom. At both stages, people actively challenge the culture of dominance through strong and direct action (Paulo Freire et al., 2018).

Freire argued that the traditional "banking" approach to education, in which students are passive recipients of information from teachers, fails to engage them as critical thinkers and instead perpetuates the existing power structures in society. In the banking concept of education, the scope of action allowed the students to extend only as far as receiving, storing, filing the information. A teacher “deposits” facts into the mind of the students, who have to memorise and recall them because knowledge is considered a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider knowing nothing. Learners barely get the opportunity to become the store or catalogue in the banking concept. (Freire, 2012)

Melissa Hasbrook, in her paper "Blah" or Praxis? Reflection in Freirean Pedagogy, explains that Freire’s framework is fundamentally aimed at social justice and liberation. Within this approach, both students and teachers engage in critical reflection on the conditions of their realities with the goal of developing and testing possible solutions—what Freire terms “action.” This process of reflection and action is intertwined and occurs through collaboration and dialogue, which are interdependent and simultaneous, enabling the enactment of praxis. The key in praxis is the on-going partnership between action, reflection and dialogue. Freire is of the opinion that marginalised people and educators should reject the banking model of education in favour of the liberating "problem-posing model," which elevates instructors and

students on an equal footing. Education that poses difficulties exposes students to real-world issues that are relevant to their daily lives and encourages them to consider the causes and effects of those issues. By enabling people to critically examine their circumstances and by promoting communication, the problem -posing or the Freire model, in his opinion, directly combats oppression. This model aims to assist students in challenging and questioning domination, as well as the ideas and customs that are oppressive (Hasbrook, 2002).

Freire's ideas about teaching made me realise that some of the things I was already doing in class were in line with his approach. These included being open to learning with my students, building honest relationships and having real conversations with them. I believe his way of teaching is quite relevant today. Over time, I have naturally started doing more of what he suggested. This includes admitting when I make mistakes, talking with students rather than at them and choosing topics that connect to their everyday lives when teaching English. At the heart of Freire's approach is the belief that education should help people feel stronger and freer rather than simply give them facts.

In the context of ESOL, this means recognising the linguistic and cultural diversity of the adult ESOL learners and valuing their experiences and perspectives. It also means creating a collaborative and supportive learning environment that allows learners to engage in critical reflection and to challenge dominant perspectives and power structures. The teacher can support learner empowerment by creating opportunities for learners to engage in critical reflection and to discuss and challenge power structures in society, such as those related to language and cultural identity. The teacher can also support learner autonomy by encouraging learners to set their own goals, determine their own learning strategies and take ownership of their own learning. In the ESOL classroom, dialogue and collaboration mean creating opportunities for learners to engage in authentic language use and to interact with each other and with the teacher in the target language. This type of interaction can help learners to develop their language skills, as well as to gain a deeper understanding of the culture and society of the target language community. Therefore, teachers need to be able to know the opinions of learners in the educational process, make teaching interactive and find a way out when classroom discussions are interrupted. Teachers also have an important reflective role in creating an open and equal environment; they must engage in deeper self-reflection about their position in the classroom and the implications of their authority.

Now the question remains: how do teachers go about doing this? According to Spener (1990), the two most distinctive features of the Freirean approach are dialogue and problem-posing approach. (Freire, 1973, p. 52) describes *dialogue* as an "I-thou relationship between two subjects" in which both parties confront each other as knowledgeable equals in a situation of genuine two-way communication. The lecture format, where the teacher talks and the students passively receive information, is replaced by the "culture circle" where teachers and students face one another and discuss issues of concern in their own lives. The term "problem posing" is often misunderstood, perhaps because of the negative connotations given the word "problem" and the frequent reference to critical thinking skills in education. In the Freirean approach, cultural themes in the form of open-ended problems are incorporated into materials such as pictures, comics, short stories, songs, video and dramas that are then used to generate discussion. The teacher asks a series of open-ended questions about these materials that encourage students to elaborate upon what they see in them. (Freire, 1973, p. 52; in Spener, 1990)

Problem posing in ESOL refers to the practice of encouraging English learners to identify and articulate issues or challenges they encounter in the language learning process. Such an approach helps learners develop critical thinking skills and promotes engagement in the

learning process. There are several ways in which problem posing can be incorporated into ESOL instruction. For example, teachers can ask students to reflect on the challenges they face when learning new vocabulary or grammar structures and encourage them to brainstorm viable solutions. Teachers can also facilitate group discussions where students share their experiences and work together to identify common problems and possible solutions. Problem posing can also be integrated into project-based learning activities, where students identify real-world problems related to language and culture and work collaboratively to find solutions. A code could be a visual representation of a problem or an issue that has arisen in classroom discussions or that students have raised. Codes can take the form of drawings, stick figures, photographs or even tableaux. Students look at the ‘code’ or a picture depicting a problem. The teacher can then ask a series of structured questions focussing on the order of the questions which would lead to a deeper analysis of the problem. The approach supports language skills and cultural awareness while fostering critical thinking and problem-solving.

However, it is important to note that the effectiveness of problem-posing education may depend on numerous factors, such as the students' prior knowledge and experience, the teacher's pedagogical skills and approach and the cultural and social context in which the learning takes place.

## Social Constructivism

Pedagogy of the oppressed shares some common principles with social constructivism. The social constructivist perspective emphasises the importance of social interaction and teamwork in the learning process. Like Pedagogy of the Oppressed, social constructivism also believes that knowledge is not just transmitted from the teacher to the student but is actively constructed by the learner through social interaction and dialogue with others.

Social constructionism posits that universal truths, moral judgements and ethical standards are not inherently known or fixed. Individuals construct their own universes informed by their perceptions of reality. Language, communication and speech are fundamental constructs within social constructionism, playing a crucial role in the interactive processes through which we understand the world and our identities. The teacher must employ learner-centred and collaborative teaching methods. Students collaborate in groups to exchange ideas, address problems, or generate new contributions to their existing knowledge (Saleem, Kausar and Deeba, 2021).

While social constructivism and pedagogy of the oppressed share a belief in the importance of collaboration and dialogue in learning, the latter places a stronger emphasis on the role of education in promoting social justice and challenging power structures.

The phrase "social construction" first appeared in John Dewey's Pedagogic Creed in 1963. According to Dewey, learning will occur because of the learner's social empowerment. According to him, learning entails being a part of a community and developing the capacity to view oneself from the perspective of the good of the community rather than from an egotistical one. Learners mediate information within a social context in a constructivist-based learning community. Language serves as a conduit between the learner and the outside world in a constructivist context, shaping and extending through communication (Hirtle, 1996).

Using online resources in ESOL may facilitate cooperation, communication and a deeper understanding of the English language among ESOL learners in keeping with social constructivist concepts.

According to Vygotsky, language and culture are the frameworks through which humans experience, communicate and understand reality. Knowledge is not simply constructed; it is

co-constructed. (Berkeley Graduate Division, 2019). More specifically, Vygotsky sees the community as playing an integral role in intellectual development, arguing that it is the people in our lives who influence the way we perceive the world and therefore how and what we learn. (McLeod, 2024)

## Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

One of the core constructs of Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism is the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which emphasises the role of the instructor in an individual's learning. It refers to the gap between what a learner can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with guidance or assistance from a more knowledgeable individual, typically a teacher or a more skilled peer. According to Vygotsky, the ZPD represents the range of tasks or skills that a learner is not yet able to perform on their own but can accomplish with appropriate support. It highlights the potential for learning and development that lies between a learner's current abilities and their potential abilities when provided with guidance. The ZPD recognises that learners can make considerable progress and acquire new skills when they receive structured assistance tailored to their individual needs. It emphasises the importance of social interaction and collaboration in the learning process, as the learner relies on guidance and scaffolding to bridge the gap between their current abilities and their desired level of competence. Knowledge is not simply constructed; it is co-constructed. (Berkeley Graduate Division, 2019). More specifically, Vygotsky sees the community as playing an integral role in intellectual development, arguing that it is the people in our lives who influence the way we perceive the world and therefore how and what we learn. Through guided instruction and collaboration, learners can develop new knowledge and skills, eventually being able to perform the tasks independently (McLeod, 2024).

According to Vygotsky, social and cultural influences on individuals prevent human learning from being understood in a vacuum. He believes that contacts between people from different sociocultural backgrounds are essential to learning. In addition to the physical, cultural and psychological tools that people use to learn and control their behaviour, Vygotsky considered language to be the most crucial one. Due to this, the socio-constructivist learning theory can be considered a collaborative learning theory. In his Zone of Proximal Development theory, Vygotsky described how conceptual and cultural learning develops through discourse. (Schreiber and Valle, 2013).

In an ESOL setting, the teacher can use the concept of the ZPD to determine the learner's language abilities and provide appropriate support and scaffolding to help them progress. For example, a teacher can provide support through modelling language structures, scaffolding or providing written or visual aids, to help the learner understand and use the target language. ZPD is also important for promoting social interaction between language learners and teachers or other more proficient speakers of English, which is essential for language development. The teacher can facilitate language development by creating opportunities for learners to use the target language in social contexts, such as in group discussions, role-plays, or collaborative activities and providing feedback to help them improve.

In the context of digital skills, the ZPD can refer to the gap between a learner's current digital proficiency and the level of proficiency they can attain with appropriate support and resources. For example, a student who is able to use a computer to complete simple tasks such as browsing the web and sending emails but struggles with more complex tasks like creating a CV is operating within their ZPD in these areas. With the help of a teacher or peer who is more proficient in these areas, the student can develop their skills and expand their ZPD. Essential Digital skills can provide ESOL students with valuable opportunities for personal and

professional growth. By recognising and working within their ZPD, individuals can develop their digital proficiency and gain the skills necessary to participate fully in the digital world.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored the key theoretical frameworks that underpin my research, including autonomy, motivation, participatory approaches, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, social constructivism, translanguaging and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Together, these perspectives highlight the complexities of ESOL learning and digital skills acquisition, particularly for ESOL learners.

The discussion on autonomy and motivation advocates for learners gaining control over their learning, particularly through digital tools. Participatory approaches and Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed emphasise the importance of learners' voices and experiences in shaping their education, which is crucial for marginalised groups. Social constructivism reinforces the role of interaction and collaboration in learning, while translanguaging demonstrates how multilingual resources can bridge gaps in understanding. Finally, ZPD provides insight into how learners progress with appropriate scaffolding, whether from teachers, peers, or digital platforms.

These frameworks set the foundation for the methodological choices in my research. The next chapter will discuss interpretivism and positivism as the guiding paradigms, justifying why interpretivism is best suited to capture the lived experiences of ESOL learners and their engagement with digital skills.

## Chapter 3: Methodology and methods

As a 13-year-old, I came across the term "paradigm" while browsing my school library. I immediately thought it was a peculiar word and was intrigued by what it meant. The librarian explained that it simply refers to a model or patterns that tell us how something is done. Although, it is a term that is often used in academic and scientific contexts and its meaning may not be immediately apparent to a 13-year-old. However, growing up, I have come across the word "paradigm" in many discussions about societal and intellectual developments.

### What is a paradigm anyway?

The term paradigm was coined by Thomas Kuhn, in one of the most popular books of the twentieth century, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.

In the book, the Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Kuhn, 1962) Kuhn states that paradigms provide scientists with a set of rules, methods and models for conducting research and solving problems within their respective disciplines. Paradigms determine the questions that are worth asking, the experiments that are conducted and the criteria for evaluating the validity of scientific theories.

Kuhn emphasises that paradigms are not merely scientific theories or models, but rather comprehensive systems that encompass a wide range of elements, including metaphysical assumptions, values and methodologies. They provide a foundation for scientists to understand the world, establish a common language and engage in scientific inquiry.

Furthermore, Kuhn suggests that scientific progress does not occur through a linear accumulation of knowledge within a single paradigm. Instead, scientific development involves shifts or revolutions from one paradigm to another. Paradigm shifts happen when inconsistencies or contradictions build up within the current framework, causing a crisis that results in the development of a new paradigm. This new paradigm provides a more thorough and effective understanding of the phenomena being examined (Kuhn, 1962).

Grix (2004) suggests that if a person wants to conduct clear and precise research, they need to first understand the philosophical underpinnings that inform their choice of research questions, methodology and methods. Thus, how social reality and knowledge is viewed will lead one to go and uncover knowledge of a certain social phenomenon. (Grix in 2004, cited in Al Riyami, 2015)

### The Curious Case of How We Came to Know What We Know!"

Positivism and interpretivism are the two common paradigms used in philosophy for scientific research and analysis. According to Riley (2007), the term positivism carries at least three distinct meanings. First, it can denote a belief in social evolution, as seen in the work of Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim. Second, it may refer to a well-defined philosophical tradition known as logical positivism. Third, it can describe a collection of scientific research methods, often called methodological positivism (Riley, 2007).

Positivism is particularly useful in natural science, physical science and to some extent, in the social sciences, especially where very large sample sizes are involved. Generally, its focus is on the objectivity of the research process (Creswell, 2008, cited in Taylor and Medina, 2023). The positivist paradigm mostly involves quantitative methodology, utilising experimental methods involving experimental and control groups and administration of pre- and post-tests to measure gain scores (Taylor and Medina, 2023).

In positivism, the researcher is independent from the study and the positivist researchers often use very structured methods so that the study can be repeated in the future.

A few examples of positivist research include:

1.A study into the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the equity of fashion brands in North America.

2.An analysis of effects of foreign direct investment in information technology industry on GDP growth

3.A study of the relationship between diffusion of innovation of mobile applications and saturation of applications. (Dudovskiy, 2019, p.3)

In education research, positivist approaches rely on quantitative data collection and statistical analysis to investigate various aspects of the educational landscape. Examples include conducting studies to measure the impact of interventions on academic achievement, administering surveys to assess teachers' effectiveness, analysing standardised test scores to explore achievement gaps and conducting experiments to investigate the effects of technology integration on student outcomes etc.

In each of these examples, the research is conducted in a systematic and objective manner, aiming to gather empirical evidence and draw conclusions based on the observed patterns or relationships.

## "Interpretivism: Discovering the meaning behind our experiences."

Interpretivism is often called the "anti-positivist" paradigm as it was developed as a reaction to positivism. The interpretivist paradigm was heavily influenced by hermeneutics and phenomenology. Hermeneutics is the study of meaning and interpretation in historical texts. It was originally developed to interpret texts, especially religious or philosophical ones. In research, it expanded to mean interpreting human actions, speech and experiences. This meaning-making cyclical process is the basis on which the interpretivist paradigm was established (Ernest, 1994, cited in Mack, 2010)

The central endeavour of the Interpretivist paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human experience (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, cited in Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). This approach tries to 'get into the head of the subjects being studied', to understand and interpret what the subject is thinking or the meaning they are making of the context.

Every effort is made to understand the perspective of the person being observed, rather than that of the observer. The focus is on grasping the individual's interpretation of their world. Therefore, a central idea of the Interpretivist paradigm is that reality is socially constructed (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, cited in Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017).

Maybee (2021) expands upon this narrative by saying that interpretivism emphasises the subjective and contextual nature of human experience. It is often associated with qualitative research methods, which involve collecting non-numerical data through observation, interviews and other methods. A few examples of interpretivist research are:

1)Correspondence Between Delusions and Personal Goals: A Qualitative Analysis

2)Spiritual Beliefs and the Search for Meaning Among Older Adults Following Partner Loss

3)Identity Development During the Transition to Motherhood: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

4)Social Support for Women with Chronic Pelvic Pain: What is Helpful from Whom?

5)The Influence of Dating Violence on Adolescent Girls' Educational Experiences. (Maybee, 2021 p.2)

In each of these examples, the researcher is seeking to understand the subjective meanings and interpretations that people attach to a particular phenomenon. They are not necessarily looking for generalisable patterns or relationships, but rather for insights into the complex social and cultural contexts that shape human experience.

## Ontological and Epistemological Perspectives of Interpretivism

Ontology is defined by Crotty as “the study of being”. Snape and Spencer also define ontology as the nature of the world and what can be known about it. (Snape and Spencer, 2003, cited in Ahmed, 2008) Guba and Lincoln state that the ontological assumptions are those that respond to the questions of ‘what is there that can be known?’ or ‘what is the nature of reality? (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, cited in Ahmed, 2008). ‘Ontology is concerned with identifying the overall nature of existence of a particular phenomenon. When we seek answers to our research questions, we are referring to a particular type of knowledge that exists external to the researcher. It is just the way things are’ (Edirisingha, 2018)

Ontology is highly essential to a paradigm because it helps to provide an understanding of the things that constitute the world (Scott and Usher, 2004, cited in Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). It seeks to determine the real nature or the foundational concepts which constitute themes that we analyse to make sense of the meaning embedded in research data. It makes you ask questions such as: Is there reality out there in the social world or is it a construction, created by one’s own mind? What is the nature of reality? In other words, Is it reality of an objective nature, or the result of individual cognition? What is the nature of the situation being studied? Ontology enables you to examine your underlying belief system and philosophical assumptions as the researcher about the nature of being, existence and reality (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017).

As per the above definition, ontologically interpretivism assumes that there is no objective reality that exists independently of human consciousness. Instead, reality is constructed through the subjective experiences and interpretations of individuals. This perspective recognises that individuals have unique perspectives and understandings of the world that are shaped by their culture, history and social context.

After outlining these definitions of ontology, it is important to clarify the ontology of my research study. This study adopts an ontology that views the world as a social realm of meanings. In this perspective, researchers recognise that the world they study is made up of people who have their own thoughts, interpretations and meanings. The researchers’ investigation of this world is clearly manifested in their use of the different research methods and techniques of the interpretive design such as semi structured interviews and case studies in response to interpreting students’ opinions, feelings, experiences and inner thoughts. In this study, I have assumed that there are some realities i.e., basic digital skills, which exist in the world and may affect the language learning skills of low level ESOL learners.

On the contrary, epistemology is about how we go about uncovering this knowledge and learn about reality. So, it is concerned with questions such as how do we know what is true and how do we distinguish true from false? Crotty defines epistemology as ‘a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know’. (Crotty, 2003, cited in Edirisingha, 2018). Therefore, epistemology is internal to the researcher. (Edirisingha, 2018)

Epistemologically, interpretivism assumes that knowledge is not absolute or universal, but rather it is constructed through social interaction and interpretation. It rejects the idea that

research should strive to be value-free and objective, instead, interpretivists argue that the researcher's own experiences and interpretations are inevitably part of the research process.

In simple terms, ontology refers to assumptions about the nature of reality; epistemology refers to assumptions about how we know the world, how we gain knowledge; methodology refers to a shared understanding of the best means for gaining knowledge about the world and rhetoric refers to a shared understanding of the language of research (Lincoln, 2011, cited in Kaushik and Walsh, 2019).

### "Why I am Giving Positivism the Cold Shoulder in my Methodological stance?"

Positivist paradigm primarily focuses on objective, measurable and quantifiable aspects of research while ESOL classes often involve complex and multifaceted phenomena that cannot be easily quantified or measured. The reasons why interpretivism is the epistemological stance of this study is because as a researcher I am trying to find an answer to the question "How do Entry 1 ESOL learners develop basic digital skills to support their language learning?" This is done by presenting case studies of ESOL learners in the Entry 1 programme at Denton College. The construction of meaning is transmitted within a social context which is exhibited in the interviews, observation and case-studies.

The first of this study's three research questions is how Entry 1 ESOL learners develop basic digital skills to support their language learning. It focusses on ESOL learners' experiences of incorporating digital skills within the ESOL programme. Sofia White (White, 2021) in her research study maintains that accepting a positivist perspective on ESOL learners would mean excluding all experiences and narratives in favour of statistics and hard data that would provide information but not necessarily experiential elements. The key to developing insight about individuals is the context and how we interpret it. In the context of ESOL learners, their experiences with digital skills integration can be highly individualised, influenced by personal backgrounds, motivations and learning styles. A positivist approach may find it difficult to fully capture the depth and complexity of subjective human experiences.
Carminati (2018) says that aiming to find universal laws, the positivist paradigm has made generalisability a crucial criterion for evaluating the rigour of quantitative research (Carminati, 2018). As the positivist approach often focuses on generalisability and universality, this may overlook the specific contextual factors that influence learners' experiences, such as cultural backgrounds, language proficiency levels and socio-economic situations. These factors significantly impact the day-to-day lives, sense of belonging and integration of ESOL learners and require a more nuanced approach.

According to Turner (2014), Positivism is a philosophical paradigm that is centred on the ontological belief that reality is measurable and encompasses only what can be directly observed (Turner, 2014). Keeping that in mind, positivism potentially overlooks the social dynamics and qualitative dimensions involved in ESOL learners' experiences. Understanding the impact on integration requires exploring the learners' interactions, sense of belonging and cultural adaptation, which are best captured through qualitative methods and interpretive frameworks.

The interpretivist approach aims to explain how decisions are formed by participants or "actors" in social contexts during the process of interaction, which they contend is something that a natural scientific methodology seeking definitive answers misses (Hammersley and Elliott, 2001, cited in Burton and Bartlett, 2005). There are various accounts of the same occurrences, according to the interpretivist, rather than a single objective reality that exists outside of the actor's explanations. Pupils, the teachers and other stakeholders in a college have a view of what goes on and act according to how they interpret events. When it comes

to the Interpretivist paradigm, the researcher aims to "understand" these behaviours. Small-scale studies using an interpretivist approach frequently focus on comprehension and detail rather than statistical representation. Although broad conclusions from such studies cannot be drawn, researchers working under this paradigm do their best to be as rigorous as feasible. (ibid).

As an ESOL teacher and researcher, it has always been my intention to interpret ESOL students' voices and concerns as well as make sense of their experiences in learning English as a second language. I started this research journey in education during the pandemic while I was navigating teaching Pre-entry ESOL learners remotely. Given that the pandemic had disrupted their learning, I realised how crucial it was for my ESOL students to acquire the increasingly crucial digital skills so that they don't get left behind in future pandemic like situations. Interpretivism emphasises conducting research from "within," using first-hand descriptions of experience and human observation which is crucial to my research. Although the ESOL students in my class come from similar cultural backgrounds, they all have quite different individual experiences. Their learning processes will surely be impacted by their individual educational background and experiences. Hence it is important to thoroughly review the studies being conducted and speak with individuals doing the research. Language is so directly related to an interviewee's experience and identity that I feel that only qualitative research can be used to explore this research problem. As my research questions theorise the emotions and agency emerging from the participants' subjective lived experiences, it makes the use of an interpretivist approach most appropriate for this research. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the students' experiences and the impact of digital skills, it is essential to engage with learners' narratives, lived experiences and subjective viewpoints, which aligns more with qualitative research approaches. By adopting interpretivism, I can embrace the subjective, contextual and qualitative dimensions involved in exploring the experiences of incorporating digital skills in lower-level ESOL classes and their impact on learners' day-to-day lives, sense of belonging and integration.

### Qualitative Research: Where Insights Speak Louder Than Numbers.

In 2011, I embarked on my first step into qualitative research, although it was more of an informal activity at the time. I teamed up with a friend to explore the effects of a popular American musical show, 'Glee,' within our hostel. While our study was not part of any official academic study, it did ignite a spark of curiosity in me for doing some small-scale research on the influence of pop-culture.

We conducted discussions with fellow students who were die-hard 'Glee' fans. Our goal was to tap into how the show resonated with them on an emotional level, how it shaped their attitudes and how it impacted their perceptions of the world. We wanted to dig deep into their firsthand experiences and viewpoints.

We probed them about everything from how the show influenced their beliefs and actions to how it challenged societal norms and shed light on various cultural issues. It turned out that 'Glee' was a catalyst for many to explore their own musical talents. It provided relatable role models, shattered stereotypes and promoted a greater understanding and acceptance of diverse identities.

Qualitative research is, "the systematic collection, organisation and interpretation of textual material derived from talk or conversation. It is used in the exploration of meanings of social phenomena as experienced by individuals themselves, in their natural context" (Malterud, 2001, p. 483). The study and collection of a variety of empirical materials - case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional

and visual texts - that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives constitute qualitative research. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, cited in Aspers and Corte, 2019)

I can capture detailed narratives and understand how digital skills are incorporated and impact the lives of lower-level ESOL learners, by conducting interviews, focus groups, or observations. This approach can provide rich insights into the challenges, successes and the ways in which digital skills contribute to their daily lives.

According to Sutton and Austin (2015), qualitative research can help researchers to access the thoughts and feelings of research participants, which can enable development of an understanding of the meaning that people ascribe to their experiences. In the context of my research, I can try to gain insights into my learners' motivations, challenges and aspirations related to digital skills by directly engaging with them. This participant-centred approach can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits and limitations of integrating digital skills into the lower-level ESOL curriculum.

Additionally, my research involves a complex phenomenon influenced by several factors such as language proficiency, access to technology and personal circumstances. According to Cleland (2017), qualitative research approaches are used to understand everyday human experience in all its complexity and in all its natural settings. To do this, qualitative research conforms to notions that reality is socially constructed and that inquiry is unavoidably value laden. (Cleland, 2017)

Through Interpretivism, I can prioritise learner voices particularly those that are frequently left out of discussions about academia or policy. However, I am aware of the fact that the small sample size and contextual specificity mean that the findings are not widely generalisable. Secondly, as a teacher-researcher, my positionality may have introduced bias, even though I mitigated this through reflexivity and triangulation.

### Methodology for digital skills acquisition:

The Digital Welcome Methodology, a framework aligned with the European Commission's Dig Comp (Digital Competence Framework for Citizens), informed the methodological approach of this study. This methodology serves as a roadmap for programme organisers and trainers, offering essential principles, practical insights and instructional techniques for effectively implementing digital skills programmes with refugees and newcomers to Europe. Notably, the methodology places great emphasis on the pedagogical approach, advocating peer-to-peer and project-based learning and the involvement of volunteers, refugees and migrants as enriching contributors to the programme (Digital Welcome, n.d.). The relevance of this framework to the current study lies in its focus on developing critical hard and soft skills among refugee and migrant learners, which aligns directly with the research questions explored here.

Leaver and Willis (2005) asserted that the Task Based Learning Approach holds enormous potential for fostering self-directed learning by purposefully engaging students in the learning process. Through the Task Based Approach, students use the target language to conduct communicative tasks linked to real-world contexts (Leaver and Willis, 2005, cited in Lee, 2016).

**Task Based Learning (TBL)** is an approach to language learning that stresses communication and interaction among learners. It involves three main phases: pre-task, during task and post-task. The goal is to provide learners with exposure to real language use and opportunities to negotiate meaning with others. TBL is considered a motivating approach to language learning because it focuses on using the language for real-world tasks related to

learners' personal lives. Additionally, it helps learners develop essential social skills, problem-solving abilities, interpreting, planning and decision-making skills (Teaching English, n.d.). This pedagogical approach focuses on learning through practical tasks that mimic real-world scenarios, making it particularly well-suited for digital skill development. By engaging ESOL learners in tasks that require digital competencies such as online communication, research and content creation, TBL ensures that these skills are acquired in context and with a clear purpose.

However, implementing Task Based Learning in lower-level ESOL classes presents certain challenges. Some students have occasionally found TBL to be too demanding and in mixed-ability classes, accommodating learners with varying levels of prior knowledge simultaneously can be quite challenging.

**Flipped learning** and task-based learning can work hand in hand to overcome these issues. Flipped learning offers students a foundation to grasp concepts at their own pace, while task-based learning then engages students in solidifying their understanding and skills. This combined effect fosters a holistic and effective learning experience.

Abeysekera and Dawson (2014) defined the flipped classroom as an instructional approach that entails relocating information delivery outside of the classroom, utilising in-class time for interactive and collaborative learning activities and mandating students to complete both pre- and post-class assignments to maximise the advantages of in-class participation (Abeysekera and Dawson, 2014).

At my college, a flipped learning model was implemented with ESOL students and proved particularly effective during the transition back to in-person teaching and learning post-COVID. This approach involved conducting two in-person sessions during the week, with the third session taking place online. The in-person sessions served as valuable preparation for the subsequent online session.

During the in-person sessions, the focus was on building a foundation of language skills and digital literacy. This included covering essential language concepts and providing practice with digital tools, equipping learners with the necessary knowledge and skills to confidently engage in the online classroom.

For the online session, learners were provided with comprehensive resources, both in print and digitally, covering everything needed for their online classroom, such as video tutorials, reading materials and wordwall links. This ensured that learners had the necessary materials to independently engage with the content.

The flipped learning model proved highly effective, particularly in comparison to the fully online approach necessitated during the COVID-19 lockdown. It provided a more balanced and engaging learning experience for ESOL students during the transition back to in-person teaching.

In navigating the diverse landscape of language instruction, a comprehensive understanding of learners' needs and the contextual intricacies is essential for effective pedagogy.

Ethnography offers a detailed understanding of social actions, behaviours and beliefs within specific cultural contexts. It is a qualitative research approach in which the researcher immerses themselves in a particular social or cultural group, actively participating to gain an insider's perspective and share similar experiences with group members (Allen, 2017). In the context of this study, an ethnographic approach was adopted because it enables a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of how Entry 1 ESOL learners experience digital

skill development within their language learning environment. By observing classroom interactions and considering the broader socio-economic, political and cultural influences that shape learners' lives outside the classroom, this approach allows for a richer and more situated account of the research questions under investigation.

## “Change through inquiry and action"-Action Research in ESOL

Ethnography and action research share a fundamental connection in their approach to understanding and addressing complex social phenomena, although through different methodologies and focuses**.** Action research in education has its origins in the ideas of John Dewey, particularly his emphasis on reflective practice and the importance of teachers engaging in critical investigation, examination and reflection of their own teaching. This approach to research aims to enhance teaching practices by facilitating a systematic and iterative process of inquiry. It entails reflective practice where teachers actively engage in self-reflection and a critical examination of their teaching methods and classroom experiences. It encourages teachers to identify problems, formulate research questions and collect data to gain insights into these issues. Action research is considered a form of authentic assessment which contextualises teaching, allowing teachers to assess their practices within specific classroom settings, thereby bridging the gap between theory and practice. Beyond personal reflection, it offers a structured framework for rigorous analysis, fostering the application of theoretical principles to real-world problems. Additionally, it fosters a culture of lifelong learning, making teachers more open to experimenting with new teaching methods and adapting their practices based on research findings, leading to improved educational outcomes. (Sowa, 2009)

Whitehead and McNiff emphasise that action research revolves around three fundamental questions: "What am I doing? What do I need to improve? How do I improve it?" By rigorously addressing these questions through empirical testing, action researchers not only enhance their comprehension of their teaching practices but also influence their own personal growth and the learning experiences of others. This approach to research serves as a dynamic and iterative process aimed at continuous improvement in education. (Whitehead and McNiff in 2006, cited in Sowa, 2009)

Baynham and Roberts et al. emphasised that ESOL teachers who possess professional vision demonstrate a reflective approach to their teaching methods and adapt flexibly to various circumstances. They engage in self-critique, are discerning about external demands that may hinder their professional practice and exhibit confidence in experimenting with potentially innovative strategies in their classrooms. These qualities of professional vision contribute significantly to shaping effective ESOL teaching practices. (Baynham and Roberts et al.; 2007)

In my experience, conducting action research with ESOL learners, particularly those at lower proficiency levels, presents a unique set of challenges. Firstly, language proficiency becomes a considerable obstacle. Many ESOL learners at lower levels often struggle to articulate their thoughts and experiences effectively in English, making it challenging to collect rich qualitative data through interviews or written reflections, which are key components of action research. Additionally, the diversity within the ESOL learner population can be deterring. Learners come from various cultural backgrounds, each with their own educational experiences and language challenges. Tailoring action research to address the specific needs of individual learners or groups with different linguistic backgrounds can be complex and time-consuming.

Furthermore, the ESOL curriculum in the UK is often focused on meeting government-mandated proficiency goals. This can leave limited space for teachers to explore innovative teaching methods or engage in reflective practices, both central to action research. I will

elaborate on the scientific rigour of action research later in this discussion. Critics of action research often highlight concerns about its subjectivity, suggesting that the findings may lack generalisability due to the researcher's involvement in the process. However, while action research may be context-specific, its strength lies in its contextual relevance and the potential for immediate application and impact within the specific educational setting.

According to Cooke and Roberts (2007) when embarking on action research in classrooms, some key considerations should guide the process. Firstly, the involvement and support of peers are crucial for meaningful discussions and brainstorming about teaching practices and potential changes. In cases of isolation, joining online groups can facilitate collaborative dialogues. Secondly, it is essential to emphasise that action research should emerge organically from teachers' personal reflections on their practices. Institutions should play a supportive role rather than imposing top-down directives. Thirdly, the existing body of research on ESOL, second language learning and acquisition can serve as a valuable starting point, providing insights and ideas for further investigation.

Moreover, selecting a specific and researchable focus is essential. While it is important not to choose something too complex, it is equally critical to avoid topics that are overly obvious and straightforward. The goal should be to identify areas where meaningful, long-lasting changes can be implemented in the classroom. It is important to consider the institutional constraints within which teachers work, such as administrative policies or resource limitation. Understanding the room for creativity within these constraints can shape the research.

Collecting relevant data is a core component of action research. Depending on the research questions, data collection methods may include audio recordings and transcriptions, peer observations, student feedback, field notes, diaries, video recordings, or a combination of these techniques. It is important to tailor data collection to the specific research goals. Additionally, researchers must exercise caution against over generalising their findings. Each research project should be sensitive to the classroom or institution in which it is conducted, acknowledging the uniqueness of the context.

Sharing results within the institution and if possible, with a broader educational community can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of effective teaching practices. In conclusion, these considerations serve as a roadmap for educators looking to undertake action research in ESOL classrooms, promoting teacher-led, reflective and context-sensitive investigations that can lead to meaningful improvements in teaching and learning. (Cooke and Roberts, 2007)

My MA short course research project served as a foundation for my current research, providing valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions of pre-Entry ESOL students and teachers during the Covid-19 lockdown. Building upon these findings, my current research aims to further explore the challenges and improvements related to digital skills development within the ESOL classroom context**.**

My initial research project during the pandemic provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by disadvantaged pre-Entry ESOL students in remote learning settings. It highlighted issues such as digital poverty, limited access to technology and reduced skills in independent learning due to language barriers (Khan, 2021). However, it also revealed significant improvements in digital pedagogy among teachers and digital literacy among students during the lockdown. These findings served as the impetus for my current research, which aims to further explore and address the challenges identified while promoting positive change within the ESOL classroom.

## Research design: Phases, Participants, Sampling and Data Collection

This study involved 13 Entry 1 ESOL learners at Denton College across one academic year. I structured the research across three distinct phases. First, in March 2022, I conducted a pre-intervention learner consultation to identify learners' existing digital skills, needs and barriers. Second, I designed and delivered a 14-week digital skills intervention from March to June 2022, directly informed by the findings of that consultation. Third, I conducted post-intervention evaluative interviews in May 2023 via Microsoft Teams. I carried out these interviews remotely whilst on maternity leave. At this stage, my participants reduced from 13 to 11 as one learner became homeless and refused to give interview and another Ukrainian learner moved to another city and I couldn't establish any contact with them**.** Throughout the three phases, I collected data using pre and post semi-structured interviews, detailed classroom observation notes and six in-depth case studies. This design allowed me to track learner progress, capture lived experiences and build a rich, contextualised picture of how Entry 1 ESOL learners develop basic digital skills alongside their language learning.

I used purposive sampling to select participants for this study. I deliberately chose learners enrolled in my Entry 1 ESOL programme at Denton College because they matched the specific focus of my research questions. All 13 participants shared the same language proficiency level, which created a coherent and contextually relevant sample. These learners came from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, including Kurdish, Persian, Sudanese and Chinese communities, bringing rich variation to the data while maintaining consistency in terms of language level. I selected this group because Pre-Entry and Entry 1 learners represent the most digitally excluded and linguistically vulnerable cohort within the ESOL sector. Their experiences remain significantly under-researched. By focusing specifically on this cohort, I ensured that my findings spoke directly and meaningfully to the research questions I set out to investigate.

I also recognise that conducting post-intervention interviews remotely via Microsoft Teams while I was on maternity leave introduced a shift in the researcher-participant dynamic. I reflected carefully on how this change in setting and circumstance may have shaped learners' responses and my own interpretations. I documented these reflections transparently in my research journal throughout the analysis process**.**

These reflections not only strengthened the integrity of my analysis but also deepened my understanding of action research as a living, responsive process, one with a rich history of practitioners improving their own practice from within.

According to Corey (2014), the practice of conducting research to improve decision-making and practices in educational activities has a long history. While the term "action research" is relatively new, it was initially introduced by Collier, Lewin and their students. An important psychological element of action research is the active involvement of professionals whose responsibilities necessitate continuous improvement in their practice. They engage in the research process to gain valuable insights into what improvement truly means. (Corey, 2014)

According to Hine (2013), action research involves a methodical investigation aimed at enhancing societal challenges that impact the daily lives of ordinary individuals (Bogdan and Bilken, 1992; Lewin, 1938; 1946; Stringer, 2008, cited in Hine, 2013). Through my research, I aim to bridge the digital divide and empower my ESOL learners to confidently navigate the digital landscape. By integrating digital skills into the ESOL classroom, I seek to create meaningful and sustainable improvements in their digital literacy, language development and overall educational experience.

Cooke and Roberts (2007) further assert that action research is a cyclical process consisting of four key stages:

Explore and Reflect: Researchers begin by reflecting on their practices, observing their actions and collecting relevant data. This stage helps identify problems or questions to investigate.

Plan: After identifying issues in the first stage, researchers create a clear plan of action. This plan outlines the changes or interventions they will implement to address the identified problems.

Act: Researchers put their plans into action by implementing the changes. They observe and document the effects of these interventions, adjusting as needed.

Analyse and Reflect: In this stage, researchers analyse the outcomes of their actions and reflect on the results. They consider any new questions that arise and use data to inform their decisions. This stage leads back to the first stage, initiating a new cycle of action research. (Cooke and Roberts, 2007)

The action research process is iterative and researchers continue to cycle through these stages as they gather more information, adjust and seek further improvements in practice. It is a flexible approach that allows for ongoing learning and adaptation to address real-life challenges in various contexts, such as education and professional development.

As mentioned above, the first step is to identify a specific problem or issue that you wish to address or improve. In my case, I identified the challenge of embedding digital skills within the ESOL classroom for my learners. Once the problem is identified, the next step is to plan and design for the intervention or action. In the context of my research, this includes deciding on the strategies, tools, or interventions that I will use to enhance digital skills development among my ESOL learners.

After planning, the designed intervention is put into action within the classroom. This may involve conducting training sessions, using specific digital tools, or incorporating novel approaches to digital literacy instruction.

As the action is implemented, the researcher observes and collects the data. This data may come from participant observation, interviews, case studies, or other research methods. After collecting data, the researcher engages in reflection and analysis to interpret the findings. This step involves examining the outcomes of the intervention, understanding the challenges faced by the learners and identifying areas for improvement.

Based on the analysis, the researcher adjusts and refine the intervention or action. This iterative process allows the researcher to enhance the effectiveness of their strategies and respond to the needs of their learners.

“In the term action research, it is implicit that teachers will begin a cycle of posing questions, gathering data, reflection and deciding on a course of action.” (Ferrance, 2000: 2). Action research is cyclical in nature and the process repeats as the researcher continues to plan, implement, observe and reflect. Each cycle builds upon the previous one, leading to continuous improvement and refinement of the interventions.

By adopting an action research approach, I am actively responding to the identified challenges and seeking to improve the digital skills development of my ESOL learners. This methodology allows me to engage in a cyclical process of planning, action, observation and reflection. I can collaborate with my learners to design and implement interventions aimed at enhancing their digital skills within the ESOL classroom. Through continuous reflection and adaptation, I aim

to develop effective strategies that respond to the specific challenges my learners face, creating a more inclusive and engaging learning environment.

Moreover, the participatory nature of action research aligns with the ethos of ESOL education. I am involving my ESOL learners as co-researchers in the process by encouraging them to actively contribute their perspectives, insights and experiences. This collaborative approach acknowledges their expertise and enables them to take ownership of their digital skills development. By actively engaging with my learners, I can better understand their needs, challenges and aspirations, which, in turn, informs the design and implementation of interventions tailored to their specific contexts.

### Dual role of teacher and researcher

I occupied a dual role throughout this study. I was simultaneously the classroom teacher and the lead researcher. This position gave me significant advantages. I already had an established relationship of trust with my learners, I understood the classroom dynamics intimately and I could observe digital skill development in real time just as it unfolded naturally. However, I also recognised that this dual role carried serious ethical and methodological risks that I needed to confront directly. Learners might feel pressure to participate simply because I was their teacher. They might give positive responses to please me rather than reflecting their genuine experiences. The power imbalance between teacher and student is real and I refused to ignore it.

To tackle this head on, I made participation explicitly voluntary from the outset. I clearly communicated to all learners that their involvement in the research would have absolutely no bearing on their learning, progress or assessment. I maintained a reflective journal throughout the entire study, consistently interrogating my own assumptions, reactions and interpretations. I also engaged in peer debriefing with ESOL colleagues to challenge my thinking and identify any blind spots.

This ensured that my dual role strengthened rather than compromised the research process. Semi-structured interviews are the key method above all others through which I was able to engage most meaningfully with my learners' voices and experiences.

Semi-structured interviews are an essential tool in action research, enabling researchers to engage with stakeholders, maintain an iterative and participatory approach and gather in-depth data that informs the research process and supports meaningful change within the studied context.

### Unlocking Voices: The Power of Semi-Structured Interviews!"

I chose semi-structured interviews as my primary data collection tool because they gave me the flexibility to follow my learners' train of thought whilst keeping the conversation anchored to my research questions. Entry 1 ESOL learners struggle to express complex ideas in English, a rigid structured interview would have shut them down immediately. Semi-structured interviews gave them that breathing space. I could rephrase questions, use simpler language, pause and allow silence without losing focus. I conducted interviews both before and after the 14-week intervention, which allowed me to capture not just what learners knew but how their confidence, autonomy and sense of belonging had shifted over time. This before-and-after structure was essential to understanding the real impact of the digital skills intervention on their language learning journey.

However, conducting semi-structured interviews with ESOL learners, especially those at lower proficiency levels, can be quite tricky. Learners at this level often have limited English proficiency meaning they may struggle to express themselves fully or answer questions

completely. ESOL students also come from diverse backgrounds and may communicate differently, making cultural sensitivity essential. Sometimes, ESOL learners can get nervous and shy when they have to speak in a new language, making it difficult to open up. Creating a supportive interview environment is therefore essential. To address the challenges of conducting interviews with ESOL learners at lower levels, we can employ various strategies beyond simplifying questions, using visual aids and offering encouragement. One valuable approach is utilising translation support, where a teacher's support assistant can assist in translating questions and responses between the learners' native language and English. This ensures a clearer understanding and more accurate communication. Additionally, involving a teacher's support assistant can help create a supportive and inclusive interview environment. This support assistant can act as a bridge between the learners and the interviewer, making the process more comfortable for the students.

One-on-one interviews are the most common way to collect data in qualitative research. They offer a familiar and flexible method for exploring people's opinions and experiences. Qualitative interviews can be semi-structured or in-depth. Semi-structured interviews use a set of open-ended questions covering various topics the researcher finds relevant. In-depth interviews focus on one or two topics but explore them in much greater detail. The use of individual interviews may be more appropriate when discussing sensitive issues or topics that require self-disclosure. (ISTAT, 2017)

Denscombe (2014) discusses the advantages of one-to-one interviews as a common form of research interviews in his book," The Good Research Guide". He says that there are several reasons for their popularity, including the ease of arrangement, as only two people's schedules need to coincide. Additionally, the opinions and views expressed in the interview come from a lone source, making it easier for the researcher to attribute specific ideas to specific individuals. Another advantage is the ease of control, as the researcher only needs to manage one person's ideas and guide them through the interview agenda. Furthermore, transcribing recorded one-to-one interviews is relatively easier since there is only one voice to recognise, and one person speaks at a time.

He further emphasises the influence of the interviewer's personal identity on interview responses. Research has shown that people respond differently based on their perception of the interviewer's characteristics, such as sex, age and ethnic origins. This applies to both face-to-face and online interviews, where interviewees may not see the interviewer but can still be influenced by their perception of the data collector. Overall, the personal identity of the researcher can impact the amount of information people are willing to divulge and their honesty in revealing that information, regardless of the interview format. (Denscombe, 2014)

The structured interview is a predetermined and organised approach where the questions and procedures are preplanned. The interviewer has limited freedom to modify the sequence or wording of the questions, as they are guided by a predetermined schedule. This type of interview is considered closed and rigid. On the other hand, the unstructured interview is characterised by flexibility and freedom, allowing the interviewer to have more leeway in the content and direction of the interview. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985: 269), structured interviews are suitable when researchers have a clear understanding of what they need to know and can formulate questions accordingly. In contrast, unstructured interviews are valuable when researchers are uncertain about what they do not know and rely on the respondents to provide information**.** (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007)

Denscombe (2010) says that a researcher who opts for semi-structured interviews as the primary method for collecting data may also decide to complement this approach by utilising a closed-answer questionnaire. The decision to employ semi-structured interviews may

indicate the researcher's desire to acquire a comprehensive comprehension of the motivations exhibited by a specific group of individuals. By employing semi-structured interviews, the interviewer is ready to exhibit flexibility in terms of the sequence in which topics are addressed and, potentially more importantly, to enable interviewees to expand on ideas and discuss the issues raised by the researcher in a broader manner (Denscombe, 2010).

### "Exploring Student Experiences": A Case Study approach.

I developed six case studies to tell the individual stories behind the data. Thirteen learners participated in this study, but numbers alone cannot capture the complexity of an Entry 1 ESOL learner navigating digital tools in a new country, in a new language, often while dealing with asylum processes, housing instability and family pressures. I selected six participants whose experiences represented the breadth and diversity of the group, different linguistic backgrounds, different starting points, different trajectories. Each case study drew on interview data, observation notes and my own reflective journal to build a detailed, contextualised account of learner's journey across the 14-week intervention. Case studies allowed me to honour the individuality of my learners whilst generating insights that spoke to the wider research questions. It also helped me to gain a deeper understanding of student experiences, challenges and successes in incorporating digital skills in my ESOL classroom.

Denscombe (2010) asserts that a case study is a research method that involves an in-depth investigation of a single instance or a small number of cases. Unlike other research approaches that aim to study a broad range of cases, a case study focuses on a specific example to gain detailed insights and uncover hidden aspects that may not be apparent through superficial research. When a researcher chooses to concentrate their efforts on studying a single instance, it allows them to delve deeply into the subject matter and explore various aspects in detail. This intensive examination often leads to the discovery of valuable information and insights that may have remained unnoticed in more generalised research. (Denscombe, 2010)

According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007), case studies are valuable in ethnographic research as they provide rich descriptions that capture the essence of being involved in a particular situation. Guidelines for writing case studies include maintaining an informal tone, reporting facts while making interpretations explicit, erring on the side of including more information rather than less and upholding ethical conventions such as anonymity. It is crucial to specify a fixed completion date and clearly indicate the data sources for reliability and validity. The case study approach focuses on individual actors or groups, their perceptions of events and specific relevant events. The researcher is actively involved in the case and aims to portray its richness in the report (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

Case studies aim to present a detailed and descriptive account of a particular situation, offering a close-up reality and "thick description" of participants' experiences, thoughts and feelings. They examine the case within its real-life context and utilise several types of data. Case studies combine subjective and objective information, with a narrow focus. It is important to let events and situations speak for themselves, rather than heavily interpreting, evaluating, or judging them. In this sense, case studies resemble television documentaries. (ibid)

According to Bassey (1999), the case study method is often criticised for its limited reliability as a research tool. However, he emphasises the crucial role of carefully designing case studies. Bassey argues that a good case study should possess certain characteristics. Firstly, its results must be credible and dependable. Secondly, the investigation and reporting process should adhere to ethical principles, particularly in terms of respecting individuals involved.

Thirdly, the case study should provide meaningful insights to someone. Lastly, it should be written in a manner that is both comprehensible and impactful for the reader (Bassey, 1999).

Conducting a case study of my students in an E1 ESOL class to explore their experience of incorporating digital skills would work for my research. Case studies offer a contextualised understanding of my ESOL classroom environment and how digital tools are being integrated. By capturing the individual perspectives and experiences of my students, I can gain valuable insights into their motivations, attitudes and perceived benefits or barriers when using digital skills. Through the case study, I can identify effective instructional strategies, address challenges and barriers and tailor my research to meet the specific needs of my students. The findings from this study will contribute to evidence-based practice in incorporating digital skills in E1 ESOL classrooms and enhance the overall quality of instruction and support in similar contexts.

### “Into the Classroom: Capturing the Learning Journey"

I chose observation notes because interviews alone may not show me what was happening in my classroom. Learners at Entry 1 level often cannot articulate their experiences verbally but I could watch them. I could see the moment a learner successfully navigated a council website for the first time. I could observe the frustration, the persistence, the quiet triumph of a learner sending their first email on Outlook. I recorded these observations in real time during the 14-week intervention, capturing classroom dynamics, learner interactions, digital tool engagement and moments of breakthrough or difficulty. These notes gave my research a living, breathing texture that interview data alone could never have produced. They also allowed me to triangulate what learners told me in interviews against what I actually witnessed in the classroom. I felt that my observation notes can provide important context for my students’ case study as they allow us to describe the physical environment, classroom dynamics and student interactions etc in more detail.

According to Sofaer (1999), the purest form of qualitative research, which has its origins in anthropology and sociology, is commonly referred to as ethnography or naturalistic inquiry. This approach often entails a prolonged engagement with a specific environment or group of individuals (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, cited in Sofaer 1999). The researcher heavily relies on unstructured observations and informal conversations that go beyond conventional interviews. Detailed field notes are typically maintained to document these observations and conversations. In well-executed studies, researchers exercise discipline in distinguishing between what they observe and their own responses and interpretations. Additionally, researchers may gather and analyse a wide range of documents, both official and unofficial, as well as other traces of phenomena and events. This type of inquiry is particularly useful when there is a high level of uncertainty regarding the questions to ask and the individuals to ask them, when there is limited or no existing theoretical guidance and when situations are novel or complex. One specific subset of this inquiry involves participant observation, where the researcher explicitly becomes an integral part of the setting or process under investigation. (Sofaer, 1999)

Observation is a crucial research method in the field of social sciences, encompassing distinct types, techniques and approaches. Due to its diversity, comparing these different forms of observation can be challenging, as they may differ in terms of how they are carried out and the expected outcomes. The selection of the appropriate observation method should be tailored to the specific research problem and the scientific context in which it is being conducted. (Ciesielska et al., 2018).

Observation is particularly useful for understanding how or why something occurs within a natural setting and can be a particularly effective data collection approach when self-reported information (what people say) is likely to be different from actual information (what people really do) (Savin and Howell, 2013, p. 392).

According to Copland (2018) traditionally researchers would engage in observational studies by immersing themselves in unfamiliar settings, often far from their own homes. This involved living among the people being studied for extended periods of time and potentially even learning a new language. However, in recent years, ethnographic studies have increasingly focused on exploring groups and communities that are more familiar or situated within the researcher's own context. This has led to research being conducted in settings such as schools, neighbourhoods and institutions.

In ethnography, fieldnotes play a significant role. The researcher both observes and takes part in local practices while also recording their observations in written form. These fieldnotes serve as the primary data set from which the researcher derives their findings (Copland, 2018).

Observation as a research method has a clear advantage because it lets researchers collect firsthand data from real-life social situations. This direct approach enables researchers to observe and analyse events as they unfold in real-time, rather than relying on second-hand accounts or inferential methods. By using immediate awareness or direct cognition, researchers can obtain more valid and authentic data.

Observational research can focus on specific aspects of a situation, such as the amount of teacher and student talk, off-task conversations, or group collaborative work within a classroom setting. It can also examine behaviours and qualities, such as the friendliness of a teacher or the level of aggression displayed. Observational data are sensitive to contexts and exhibit strong ecological validity, enabling researchers to understand the nuances and intricacies of the observed phenomena. (Moyels, 2002 in Cohen, et al., 2007). One of the advantages of observation is its ability to reveal information that might be unconsciously missed or not freely disclosed in interview situations. It allows researchers to move beyond perception-based data, such as opinions obtained through interviews and access more personal and contextual knowledge.

Observations provide researchers with data on various dimensions, including the physical setting (e.g., the physical environment and its organisation), the human setting (e.g., characteristics and composition of observed groups or individuals, such as gender or class), the interactional setting, such as the nature of interactions taking place whether they are formal or informal, planned or spontaneous, verbal or non-verbal and the programme setting, which includes how resources are organised, the pedagogical approaches adopted and the structure of the curriculum. (Cohen, et al., 2007).

It is important to acknowledge that the method of collecting observation data can raise ethical concerns. One of the fundamental ethical considerations for researchers is obtaining fully informed consent from participants. However, it is worth noting that if participants are made aware of the presence of the observer, their behaviour may change, potentially impacting the validity of the research findings in a negative way. (Dudovskiy, 2019)

Observation is used as a research method in two main ways: structured and unstructured. In positivist research, structured observation is a focused activity designed to record physical and verbal behaviour. Observation schedules are prepared beforehand using categories derived from established theories. By contrast, unstructured observation aims to understand and interpret cultural behaviour. It is rooted in the interpretivist or constructivist paradigm, which recognises the importance of context and the shared creation of knowledge between

the researcher and those being studied. The term ‘unstructured’ can be misleading. Observation conducted within the naturalistic paradigm is not unstructured in the sense of being haphazard or careless. Rather than following a rigid checklist of predetermined behaviours, as seen in structured observation, unstructured observation involves researchers entering ‘the field’ without fixed expectations about which specific behaviours they will witness. (Mulhall, 2003)

Cooper and Schindler (2001) propose three dimensions to consider when examining observation as a research method:

Direct or Indirect Observation: Direct observation requires the physical presence of the observer, while indirect observation involves the use of recording devices like video cameras.
Known or Unknown Presence: This dimension refers to whether the presence of the observer is overt or covert. Overt research means the observer is openly visible, while covert research involves concealing the researcher's presence through methods such as one-way mirrors or hidden cameras. Partial concealment occurs when the researcher is seen but not identified as a researcher, for example, by assuming a visible role in a school.
Role of the Observer: This dimension refers to the observer's role, ranging from participant observation to non-participant observation. In participant observation, the researcher actively engages with the participants, spending a significant amount of time with them to minimise reactivity effects (changes in behaviour due to the presence of the researcher). The researcher records observations while taking on a role within the observed situation. For example, in a school setting, this could involve participating in specific activities, sharing supervisions, immersing oneself in school life and documenting impressions and conversations. (Cooper and Schindler, 2001, cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007)

Participant observation is a qualitative research method that allows researchers to immerse themselves in a particular context to understand human behaviour. It is both natural and challenging, as it involves actively participating and observing people in their everyday lives. The goal is to gain insights into why and how individuals behave in a given setting. For this method to be effective, the researcher needs to establish trust and acceptance among the participants, allowing them to act authentically as they would without the researcher's presence. Being a successful participant observer requires inspiring enough confidence to blend in without necessarily being considered an insider. (Participant Observation.)

Participant observation can be conducted in two separate ways: covert and overt. In covert participant observation, the researcher keeps their identity and research purpose hidden from the group being studied. They assume a false identity and role, often posing as a genuine member of the group. This method allows the researcher to observe participants naturally without their awareness of being studied. (Pressbooks, 2017)

In contrast, overt participant observation involves the researcher openly disclosing their identity and research intentions to the group. They seek permission from the participants to observe their activities. This approach promotes transparency and ethical considerations, as the participants are aware of the researcher's presence and purpose(ibid).

As a practitioner researcher, I am not just an observer but also a participant in the learning process. This allows me to gain an insider's perspective, understanding the nuances, interactions and challenges faced by learners in real time. Observe learners’ sense of achievement, excitement and satisfaction when they successfully complete a task, master a new digital skill, or overcome a challenge. These observations will help me to gauge the impact of my intervention strategies, and the effectiveness of the digital skills training provided.

Practitioner research, conducted by professionals within their field, is directly applicable to their work. Practitioners, also known as insider-researchers, are influenced by personal beliefs, professional perspectives and workplace culture. They must engage in critical self-reflection to recognise their role and biases in the research process. This acknowledgement highlights the challenge of balancing objectivity with subjectivity inherent in practitioner research. (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, pp.1–7)

According to Menter (2011), studies suggest that when teachers participate in research, it positively impacts the academic advancement of their students. Engaging in research helps teachers gain a deeper understanding of their teaching techniques and ways to improve them (Menter, 2011).

Researchers highlight several important factors for successful practitioner research projects: providing practitioners with enough paid time to focus on research, offering mentoring and support to develop research skills, setting clear guidelines and project structures, ensuring local peer support, managing the project effectively and maintaining open communication among everyone involved (Norman, 2001, 2002, 2003). Keeping interest in the research topics over time is also crucial and often involves a significant voluntary commitment of time and effort. Overall evaluations indicate positive outcomes, with research involvement strengthening regional collaborations and partnerships, generating potentially valuable practical results and fostering increased enthusiasm for research among participants. (Hamilton, Davies and James, 2007)

This highlights how certain considerations are necessary for the success of practitioner research projects. It emphasises the importance of institutional support, clear guidelines and effective communication channels. Moreover, it emphasises the need for sustained interest and voluntary commitment from practitioners, indicating the collaborative and dedicated nature of such undertakings.

## "Ensuring Rigour and Credibility in Research: Strategies for Trustworthiness and Transferability"

Validity and reliability are highly critical concepts in quantitative analysis that ensure the accuracy and consistency that are often associated with statistical methods and are concerned with the precision and generalisability of findings.

According to Miller and Dingwall (1997), proponents of qualitative research argue that the quality of qualitative research cannot be ascertained by adhering to predefined formulas. Instead, its excellence is rooted in the expressive capacity of its language to vividly depict the world, enabling us to gain insights about ourselves and our shared human experiences (Miller and Dingwall, 1997). Qualitative research focuses on understanding the complexity and nuances of human experiences and social phenomena. Instead of validity and reliability, qualitative researchers often prioritise concepts such as rigour, trustworthiness, credibility and transferability.

According to Shenton (2004), the concept of credibility in research takes centre stage. Credibility, like the notion of internal validity, emphasises the need for research studies to accurately measure or test their intended objectives. (Shenton, 2004). To bolster this credibility, Lincoln and Guba offer a robust framework for ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research. These criteria encompass four key dimensions critical to evaluating the worth of a research study. Firstly, credibility centres on instilling confidence in the accuracy and truthfulness of research findings. Researchers strive to make their conclusions believable and valid through various techniques such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy and member-

checking. Secondly, transferability focuses on demonstrating that the research findings extend beyond the immediate study context and have relevance in other settings. To achieve this, researchers provide thick descriptions that provide a comprehensive understanding of the research environment. (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, cited in Stahl and King, 2020)

Furthermore, Shenton (2004) outlines six crucial pieces of information that should be included in research reporting to enhance transparency and understanding. Firstly, researchers should specify the number and locations of organisations participating in the study. Secondly, any restrictions on the types of individuals contributing data should be clearly articulated. Thirdly, the number of participants involved in the fieldwork should be provided. Fourthly, the methods employed for data collection must be described in detail. Fifthly, researchers should note the number and duration of data collection sessions. Lastly, the time over which data were collected should be explicitly stated. These details help readers comprehend the research process, contributing to the credibility and replicability of the study's findings (Shenton, 2004).

I built credibility into this research through rigorous methodological choices. I triangulated data across three distinct sources which are semi-structured interviews, classroom observation notes and case studies to cross-check findings and strengthen their trustworthiness. According to Stahl and King (2020), one method of promoting credibility is through the various processes of triangulation. Triangulation means using several sources of information or procedures from the field to repeatedly establish identifiable patterns. (Stahl and King, 2020). This comprehensive approach has reinforced the credibility of the research.

Additionally, I have engaged in member checking by sharing preliminary findings with participants, giving them an opportunity to validate and provide input to refine the interpretations. I have made a deliberate effort to distinguish between objective observations and my own subjective interpretations. Acknowledging my biases and perspectives has been a recurring theme in my research process. I engaged in peer debriefing with ESOL colleagues and Learning Support Assistants who worked alongside me, inviting critical scrutiny of my analysis. I maintained a detailed reflective journal throughout the study, using it to separate my subjective responses from my analytical observations. In their framework for qualitative research trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba introduced the concept of "dependability". They emphasised the importance of actively building trust in the research process and its outcomes. Dependability is achieved through practices such as peer debriefing and scrutiny, where fellow researchers validate interpretations, thereby enhancing trust in the research. Anticipating peer review encourages researchers to be meticulous in separating factual observations from their interpretive comments, a practice known as "bracketing". This discipline safeguards research integrity by minimising personal bias. Moreover, the existence of bracketing reflects the pervasive influence of reflexive analysis, where researchers acknowledge their role in shaping interpretations. (Stahl and King, 2020)

I documented every stage of the data collection and analysis process transparently, creating a clear audit trail. Whilst my eight years of experience teaching ESOL sharpened my contextual understanding of learners' needs, I did not allow professional familiarity to substitute for methodological rigour. I treated credibility as something I had to actively construct and defend at every stage of this research.

In this research, I have diligently followed Shenton's (2004) guidelines to enhance the transparency and understanding of my study. Firstly, I have made it clear that I focus on ESOL learners with specific language proficiency level, which is Entry 1, ensuring transparency about the restrictions on the types of individuals contributing data. Secondly, the demography of the participants involved and their varying proficiency levels provide a comprehensive overview of my study's scope. I have meticulously described the methods I have employed for data

collection, detailing how I have conducted semi-structured interviews, gathered observation notes and developed case studies based on these interviews. I conducted multiple data collection sessions, each lasting around 45 minutes, to provide insight into the depth of my research process. Additionally, I specify that data collection spanned over a year, from March 2022 to June 2023, establishing a clear time frame for the study.

For data collection and analysis, I have described in detail how pre and post semi-structured interviews, observation and case studies will be conducted. The process of narrative analysis involves carefully examining the collected narratives for recurring themes, patterns and unique insights. I have tried to immerse myself in the stories shared by the participants, seeking to understand their experiences holistically. I have paid close attention to the language, emotions and meanings embedded within the narratives, as well as the ways in which digital skills impact learners' language learning journeys.

According to Stacey (2019) ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research does not require adopting a single, standardised perspective or a universally accepted way of knowing. Instead, the focus is on demonstrating a commendable level of integrity throughout the research process and in the results. As pointed out by Bailey (2007, p. 181), trustworthiness does not demand agreement with the researcher's conclusions; rather, it necessitates providing readers with insight into how the researcher reached those conclusions (Stacey, 2019).

Readers of research apply transferability when connecting elements of a study to their own experiences, unlike generalisability, which involves making broad claims. To make the results of a study transferable to other contexts, researchers need to provide a comprehensive account of the research environment and include a detailed description of it in their final report. This approach allows readers to assess how the findings may apply to their own situations and contexts. (Barnes et al., 2019). In the research setting section, I have offered a detailed account of the educational institution where the study takes place, including its location, size, demographics and resources. Describing the institution's unique characteristics have helped readers understand the context in which the research unfolds and the potential implications of these contextual factors on the study's outcomes. To shed light on the participants involved in the research, I have provided comprehensive profiles that encompass their age, linguistic backgrounds, language proficiency levels and previous educational experiences. Additionally, I have strived to portray their cultural diversity and individual perspectives, which may influence their responses and interactions during data collection. In addressing transferability, I recognise the importance of providing a rich description of the research context, participants and data collection procedures. By doing so, I aim to enhance the potential for readers to assess how the findings may be applicable to other ESOL contexts.

In outlining the data collection procedures, I have been thorough in explaining the methodologies employed, such as interviews, observations, surveys, or any other instruments used to collect data. Emphasising the step-by-step process will enable readers to assess the rigour of the study and how it relates to their own research contexts. Moreover, I have highlighted the specific contextual factors that may have affected the research process, such as cultural norms, educational policies, or local practices. This information is critical for readers to comprehend the broader context in which the research findings are situated.

A fourth perspective on trustworthiness is confirmability which represents a distinct perspective on trustworthiness in qualitative research, with a focus on striving to approach objective reality as closely as possible. However, this perspective is not universally applicable to all forms of qualitative research; it finds relevance in approaches like emergent design positivism, as described by Bogdan and Biklen (2003). In research contexts where there is an objective reality to be examined and audited, qualitative researchers who prioritise objectivity

emphasise qualities such as precision and accuracy in their research practices. They also involve other researchers to enhance the credibility of their findings. This approach often entails a deliberate effort to minimise the researcher's involvement to prevent contamination of the natural environment under investigation. Thus, the use of confirmability represents a specific and circumscribed intent within certain qualitative research paradigms, notably emergent design positivism. (Stahl and King, 2020)

In my research, I have taken steps to prioritise confirmability, especially within the context of my chosen qualitative research paradigm. To approach objective reality as closely as possible, I have placed a strong emphasis on precision and accuracy throughout my research practices. This includes meticulous data collection, rigorous analysis and transparent documentation of every step taken.

In qualitative research, achieving rigour is essential and one critical aspect of this is auditability. Auditability involves ensuring a high level of transparency and traceability in the process of collecting, analysing and interpreting data. To facilitate auditability, researchers can employ various tools, such as field notes, memos and pictures, which help provide a systematic and comprehensive account of the research process and findings. These documentation methods contribute to the overall trustworthiness of the study and enable others to assess the research's rigour and credibility (Stacey, 2019). Maintaining an audit trail and comprehensive documentation of all research activities, such as field notes, interview transcripts and analysis memos, will ensure transparency and allow for the verification and replication of the study.

Throughout my research process, I recognise the significance of practising ongoing reflexivity to ensure the integrity and credibility of my study. Reflexivity involves being mindful of my own biases, assumptions and personal values that may influence the research process and findings. As a researcher, I am aware that my background as a teacher of English from the Global South and a Muslim woman may bring inherent biases and perspectives to the study.

In my reflective journal, I have diligently recorded my thoughts, experiences, doubts and moments of self-reflection. This journal serves as a private space for me to explore and critically examine my role in shaping the research. By being transparent with myself, I can identify and address any potential biases that may arise during the study. This commitment to reflexivity is fundamental in promoting transparency in my decision-making and analysis, ensuring that the research remains unbiased and objective.

## "Ethics in action: Putting participants first in the research journey."

Ethical considerations are paramount in my research. I identified five key ethical issues in this research and I tried tackling each one deliberately and transparently.

### Power imbalance between teacher and researcher

I held authority over my participants as their classroom teacher. I confronted this directly by making participation entirely voluntary. I told every learner clearly and explicitly that their decision to participate or withdraw would have no impact whatsoever on their learning or their relationship with me as their teacher. I gave all participants a three-week window to withdraw from the study after data collection, with no questions asked and no consequences attached.

### Informed consent

Standard consent forms do not work for Entry 1 ESOL learners. I redesigned the participant information sheet and consent form entirely. I used visuals, images and carefully graded language pitched at Entry 1 level to ensure every learner genuinely understood what they

were agreeing to. I used Learning Support Assistant where needed to provide additional language support during the consent process, ensuring no learner signed anything they did not fully understand.

### Vulnerability of participants

Many of my participants were asylum seekers and refugees who had experienced significant trauma and displacement. I treated their vulnerability with the utmost care. I created a safe and supportive research environment throughout. I remained alert to any signs of distress or discomfort and made clear that learners could step back from the research at any point.

### Anonymity and confidentiality

I anonymised all data immediately upon collection. I removed all identifying information from transcripts, observation notes and case studies. I stored all data securely in line with GDPR requirements and the University of Sunderland's data protection guidelines. I shared data with no third parties and used it solely for the purposes of this research.

### Dual role bias

I actively managed the risk of bias arising from my dual role as teacher and researcher. I kept a reflective journal throughout the study, used peer debriefing with colleagues to challenge my interpretations and practised member checking with participants to validate my findings. I drew a clear and consistent line between my role as a teacher supporting learners and my role as a researcher analysing their experiences.

I obtained full ethical approval from the University of Sunderland before commencing data collection, confirming that this research met the standards set by BERA (2019) and the university's own ethical framework

In her article ‘A guide to ethical issues and action research’, Zeni (1998) raises several important questions that researchers like me should consider when planning and conducting action research. These questions can be categorised into the following types:

### Project Overview Questions:

These questions focus on the basic details and goals of the research project.

What is the project's current description and purpose?

What is the project's timeline, and does it involve multiple cycles or pilot studies?

What specific problem or issue does the research aim to address?

What initial actions are planned, and what are the expected outcomes or accomplishments? (Zeni, 1998).

Considering these questions, my action research project focuses on incorporating digital skills into the lower-level ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) curriculum. It involves Entry 1 ESOL students from multinational backgrounds. I conducted initial and endpoint semi-structured interviews, from which I derived six case studies and presented classroom observations.

My research addresses the challenge of enhancing the English language proficiency, digital skills, sense of belonging and the integration of ESOL learners. I did a pilot study of this project for my MA short course. The project has a time frame of one academic year. It involves multiple cycles, including data collection at the beginning and end of the year. The initial action I took was to introduce digital tools into the ESOL classroom. I hope to improve students' language

skills, confidence in using English in real-life situations and their overall integration into the community.

### Methods and Setting Questions:

These questions pertain to the research methods used and the context in which the research takes place.

Is the researcher also a participant in the setting, and if so, what is their role?

Will data be collected regarding normal educational practices and potential changes?

What types of data will be collected, and how do they differ from standard documentation methods?

What is the research's primary aim in terms of understanding and change? (Zeni, 1998)

I am the ESOL teacher and the primary researcher in this project. I gathered data on my regular teaching practices and identified potential changes in curriculum and instruction based on the action research process. This allowed me to adapt my teaching methods to better suit the needs of my ESOL learners for the consequent academic year.

I collected data through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and written case studies. These methods differed from my usual practice, which mainly involved traditional teaching assessments. Alternative methods could include surveys, peer observations or learner self-assessments.

My research aims to understand the impact of digital tools on ESOL learners' language skills, social integration and overall comfort with technology. It seeks to change teaching practices to better support these learners in their language acquisition journey.

### Subjects' and Subjectivity Questions:

These questions address the individuals, groups, or communities being studied, as well as the power dynamics and ethical considerations.

Who are the individuals or groups being studied, and what are their demographics?

What are the power relations within the group, and who has authority over whom?

Are there shared understandings or personal/professional relationships with the participants?

Does the research involve studying people from diverse backgrounds, and how is the researcher prepared to understand their perspectives?

Is there potential for cultural bias, and what measures are taken to reduce misinterpretation? (Zeni, 1998)

My study attempts to understand and interpret the experiences of participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, including Kurdish, Sudanese and Chinese. I have prepared myself through coursework and experiences to share their perspectives more effectively.

As mentioned above, I hold the role of a teacher and thus I have some power over the participants regarding their educational experiences. However, outside of the classroom, power dynamics differ. I share professional commitments with my participants, aiming to enhance their language skills and digital literacy. My research seeks to strengthen trust and not abuse it.

I have taken measures to reduce cultural bias in my research tools and have provided opportunities for consultation with adult members of the community to ensure fairness and accurate representation. Recognising that ESOL learners, especially those with limited financial resources or educational backgrounds, may be vulnerable, I have designed my research to demonstrate mutual respect and justice.

### Risks and Benefits:

What are the potential benefits of the research to participants, society, or the profession?

What risks might participants face, and how will these risks be minimised?

How will informed consent be obtained, and what steps are taken to protect participants?

Does the research involve sensitive information, and how will this be handled? (Zeni, 1998).

The research benefits participants by improving their digital skills, English language proficiency and employability. It also contributes to the educational profession by informing best practices in ESOL instruction. Participants may face minimal risks related to the disclosure of sensitive information, but precautions, including informed consent, are in place to protect them.

I have taken several steps to protect participants, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring participants know the nature of the study, allowing them to withdraw within three weeks after the data has been collected and safeguarding anonymity and data confidentiality. Sanjari et al. (2014) highlight that informed consent is a key part of ethical research across different fields. In qualitative research, it's especially important to clearly explain what kind of data will be collected and how it will be used. The principle of informed consent means researchers must fully inform participants about the research in clear and understandable language (Sanjari et al., 2014). The participant consent form and participant information sheet were thoughtfully designed using visuals and simple language pitched at E1 ESOL level to ensure that participants fully understood the study's objectives and what their involvement would entail. It was emphasised that participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw within a three-week period after the data collection had taken place.

According to Kelly (2009), promising anonymity where foreseeably it cannot be maintained is in all cases unethical (Kelly, 2009). To maintain confidentiality, all the data that I collected during the research process were carefully anonymised and stored securely. Measures were taken to ensure that participants' identities remained undisclosed throughout the study. Any identifying information was removed, and data were reported in an aggregated and generalised manner to prevent individual identification.

According to BERA guidelines, researchers are obligated to adhere to legal mandates concerning the storage and utilisation of personal data, as outlined in the UK's Data Protection Act (1998) and any subsequent legislation. Notably, this includes the more stringent General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) implemented in May 2018. Fundamentally, individuals have the right to comprehend the methods and purposes of their personal data storage, its designated applications and the entities with potential access to it (British Educational Research Association, 2019).

As per the guidelines set by BERA for educational research, people have the right to know why and how their personal data is being stored, used and who may access it. Researchers must obtain consent from participants before sharing their personal data with others. They also have to ensure these others have the right to access that information. Plus, researchers

must keep a record of all data disclosures. The GDPR says personal data includes any information that can identify someone and requires extra care to be taken with sensitive personal data (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

Tradmin (2019) emphasises that all data must be stored with the highest standards of safety and security. Researchers are advised to establish clear policies and procedures for data storage and sharing. It is essential to implement measures that safeguard data and limit the amount of information shared to the minimum necessary. Compliance with data protection laws, including GDPR, was a crucial ethical aspect of my research. This required the adoption of suitable practices to collect, store and manage personal data securely and in accordance with regulations. Participants were assured that their data would be used solely for research purposes and would be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Data sharing agreements were not applicable in this study, further ensuring the protection of participants' privacy.

Establishing a professional and respectful relationship with participants was vital to ensure ethical research practices. Transparency and open communication were maintained, allowing participants to ask questions, provide input and express any concerns they may have had. I engaged in self-reflection throughout the research process to identify my own biases, values and assumptions that may influence the research. I documented my reflexive process and made a conscious effort to separate my personal beliefs from the research findings and interpretations.

According to the British Educational Research Association (2019), it is important for researchers to take account of the rights and interests of those indirectly affected by their research and to consider whether action is appropriate. For example, they should consider whether it is necessary to provide information or obtain informed consent. (British Educational Research Association, 2019). Participants of my research provided explicit consent for the use of their data in the research. They were fully informed about how their data would be used, including potential publication or dissemination of findings. Clear explanations were provided and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification before providing their consent.

Researchers should do everything they can to ensure that all potential participants understand what is involved in a study. They should be told why their participation is necessary, what they will be asked to do, what will happen to the information they provide, how that information will be used and how and to whom it will be reported. (British Educational Research Association, 2019). At the conclusion of their participation, participants were provided with a debriefing session. This allowed for a comprehensive discussion of the study's objectives, outcomes and any potential implications. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions, seek further information and express any concerns they may have had.

In research, safeguarding involves taking steps to protect everyone involved, including those who work on the project, take part in it, or are affected by it in any way. The main goal is to prevent anyone from getting hurt because of their participation in the research or because of how the project affects their lives or communities. (Sheffield University, 2023). Throughout the research process, I have offered support and resources to my ESOL students to address any concerns or challenges they faced during the research. This could include providing language assistance, referrals to support services, or offering additional explanations as needed. I also remained vigilant for any signs of discomfort, distress, or other issues among my ESOL students. I was prepared to intervene if necessary and provided opportunities for them to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

I have successfully obtained ethical approval from the University of Sunderland for my research project. Obtaining ethics approval means that my research proposal and methodology have undergone a thorough review by the university's ethics committee. They have assessed the ethical implications of my research, ensuring that it adheres to the highest ethical standards and prioritises the well-being, privacy and rights of my ESOL learners.

With ethics approval in hand, I can now proceed with confidence, knowing that my research is in line with the university's ethical guidelines and principles. This approval signifies that my research project has been deemed ethically sound and that it aligns with the values of responsible and respectful research conduct.

As I move forward with my action research, I will be diligent in upholding the ethical considerations throughout all stages of the study. I will prioritise the welfare and confidentiality of my ESOL learners and seek informed consent from them before involving them in any research activities.

By addressing these ethical considerations, my research aimed to protect the rights, well-being and privacy of the participants while conducting a rigorous and valuable study on the impact of digital literacy on ESOL learners.

*This chapter marks a significant improvement in my research journey as I descend into the exploration of various research paradigms. After thorough consideration, I concluded that interpretivism fits my study the best, especially when it comes to adult ESOL learners.*

*By choosing action research, I hope to become more involved in the complex processes of my students' experiences. This method lets me see what works and what does not in real time. Using this method helps me understand and improve how I teach while keeping my students engaged.*

*As I transition into the next chapter, the spotlight shifts towards narrative inquiry, a research method that I think will help me bring forward the stories of my learners who are part of my study. This chapter will introduce the setting where my study takes place by going over the demographics of my research subjects and giving a summary of their profiles.*

*Furthermore, I will also explain the details of how I did my study and try to capture the experiences of my participants in using digital tools in the ESOL classes. At the end of the chapter, there is a vivid snapshot of my ESOL class, providing a glimpse of their learning journey.*

## Chapter 4: Data collection and Analysis

The chapter begins by placing particular emphasis on the narrative account, thematic analysis and the analytical process, which allows for an in-depth understanding of the data collected. It then introduces the setting in which the study unfolds, namely the St. Xaviers Centre in Hollydale, a vital community hub serving Denton College and the broader community. Following this, the chapter provides an in-depth exploration of the research population and the demography of Hollydale, emphasising the area's diverse and multicultural nature. It sheds light on the high ethnic minority population, the prevalence of British Pakistanis and the notable influx of immigrants from Eastern European countries, painting a vivid picture of the neighbourhood's unique composition.

Subsequently, the chapter offers a detailed insight into the research participants, the ESOL learners. It delves into their characteristics, including their varied nationalities, backgrounds and age ranges. The spotlight is on Kurdish women, representing the largest segment of the research participants, as well as individuals from other countries such as Sudan, Iran, Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of Congo and China. This comprehensive overview sets the stage for a deeper understanding of the diverse tapestry of learners within the ESOL classes at Denton College.

Moving forward, the chapter describes the research methods used, including semi-structured interviews, case studies and participant observation. These methodological details provide a clear roadmap for understanding how the research unfolded and data was acquired.

The chapter then culminates with a snapshot of the ESOL class, offering readers a glimpse into the research journey. This snapshot encapsulates the real-life impact of digital integration on language learning, providing a portrayal of how my ESOL learners navigated the digital landscape. Following this, the chapter then proceeds to present the decisive moment, where the study's objectives are scrutinised and the key questions are addressed.

### Understanding the Data: Narrative Accounts, Thematic Analysis and the Analytical Process

Before delving further into the chapter, I would like to draw a clear and important distinction between two terms that could easily be conflated: narrative inquiry as a methodology and narrative accounts of experience as a data source. This distinction matters and I address it directly here.

Narrative inquiry, as developed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), constitutes a full methodological approach in which narrative is the phenomenon under study. Researchers who adopt narrative inquiry as their methodology design their entire study around the collection, co-construction and interpretation of personal stories. This study did not adopt narrative inquiry as its overarching methodology, that role belongs to action research, as established in Chapter 3.

I used participants' narrative accounts of experience. My 13 Entry 1 ESOL learners shared their personal stories about learning digital skills, navigating everyday services and building confidence in a new social environment. I drew on these accounts as a rich and meaningful qualitative data source. I foregrounded learner voice throughout the analysis, not because I was conducting narrative inquiry but because Entry 1 ESOL learners are a chronically under-researched and marginalised group whose voices deserve prominence and authority in research that directly concerns their lives.

## From Data to Meaning: The Thematic Analysis Process

I analysed the data from this study using thematic analysis, following the systematic six-phase framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006) and further developed by Nowell et al. (2017). Thematic analysis gave me a flexible and rigorous method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns across my dataset, making it particularly well suited to the interpretivist approach underpinning this study.

I conducted my analysis in two distinct rounds, combining both deductive and inductive approaches.

### Round 1 — Deductive Thematic Coding

In my first round of analysis, I manually coded all participant responses with my core research themes firmly in mind. I focused deliberately on six key areas that my research questions directly addressed: language development, autonomy, independence, confidence, integration and sense of belonging.

I read every interview transcript, observation note and case study account carefully and assigned codes to meaningful units of data that spoke directly to these themes. For example, when a learner described successfully navigating a council website independently, I coded this under both confidence and independence. When a learner described feeling more connected to their classroom community after using MS Teams, I coded this under sense of belonging. This first round of coding gave me a clear, structured foundation for my analysis, directly anchored in my research questions.

### Round 2 — Inductive Thematic Coding

I then revisited every transcript, every observation note and every case study account with fresh eyes, actively searching for themes I had not anticipated and had not yet touched upon. This recursive revisiting is a fundamental hallmark of rigorous thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

This second round revealed two significant emerging themes that the data itself generated:

The relationship between learners' prior educational background and their development of basic digital skills

How basic digital skills filled critical gaps in guided learning hours beyond the formal classroom

These themes were not themes I went looking for but the data brought them to me. Their emergence strengthened the findings considerably, adding layers of meaning that went beyond my original research questions and pointed towards wider implications for ESOL policy and practice in England**.**

Throughout both rounds of analysis, I worked at two levels of coding simultaneously. I used semantic coding to capture what participants explicitly said. Semantic coding focuses on what is directly expressed in the data, without looking for meaning beyond what has been stated (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For example, when a learner stated she felt proud after sending her first email on Outlook, I coded this semantically as digital confidence in everyday tasks. When a learner described using Wordwall to practise vocabulary at home independently, I coded this semantically as self-directed digital language learning.

I then used latent coding to go beneath the surface, to identify the underlying assumptions, beliefs and deeper meanings embedded in participants' accounts. Latent coding interprets the ideas and assumptions that underlie the semantic content of the data (Nowell et al., 2017).

For example, when learners repeatedly described feeling less dependent on others after the intervention, the latent meaning pointed not just to digital skill development but to a profound shift in their sense of autonomy and self-determination within their new social environment. When learners described using apps like Class Dojo and Parent Apps Connect to help their children with homework or access information about their children's school and their activities, the latent meaning spoke to a shift in family dynamics and a growing sense of confidence and integration beyond the classroom.

This two-level coding process allowed me to move beyond simple description and towards genuine interpretation, generating findings that spoke to both the explicit and the deeper experiential dimensions of my research questions (Nowell et al., 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2006). The following diagram illustrates the cyclical and layered nature of this analysis process:

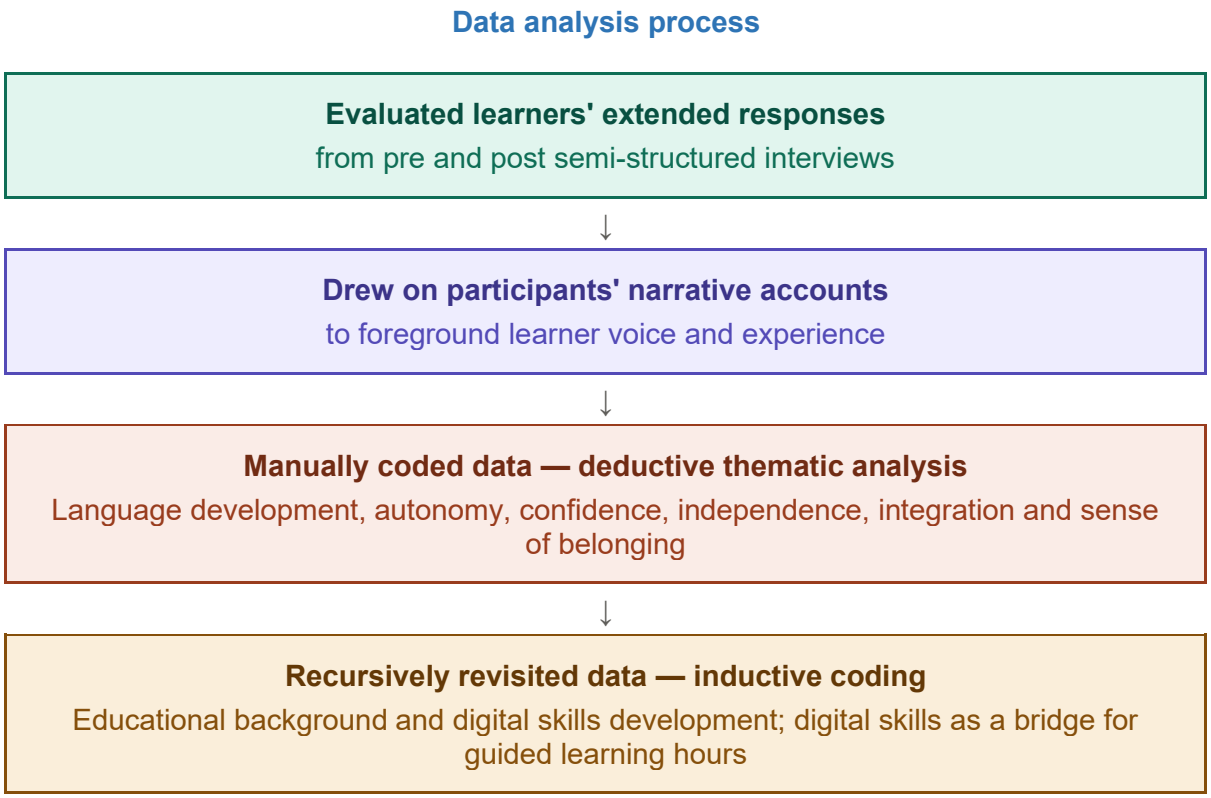



*Figure 1: Data analysis process — combining deductive and inductive thematic coding (adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017)*

## How the Analysis Was Done

I took the following steps to ensure full transparency throughout my analysis.

I transcribed all pre and post semi-structured interviews verbatim immediately after each session. I read every transcript multiple times before applying any codes, ensuring I fully understood each participant's account before interpreting it. I colour coded transcripts manually, assigning different colours to different codes to make patterns visible across the entire dataset. I kept an analytical memo throughout the process, recording my thinking, decisions and emerging interpretations at every stage. I revisited this memo regularly, using it to track how my thinking evolved and to maintain a clear audit trail of my analytical decisions.

I shared emerging themes with ESOL colleagues for peer debriefing, actively inviting challenge and alternative readings of the data. I conducted member checking with selected

participants, sharing key findings with them directly, both face to face and via Microsoft Teams to confirm that my interpretations accurately reflected their lived experiences. Where participants challenged or refined my interpretations, I revised my analysis accordingly.

I also maintained my reflective journal throughout the analysis phase, consistently interrogating my own assumptions and the ways in which my dual role as teacher and researcher may have shaped my reading of the data. This commitment to reflexivity ran through every stage of the analytical process and sits at the heart of the trustworthiness of these findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

Having established the analytical framework and process that underpins this study, I now turn to the narrative accounts of my participants' voices which is at the centre of this research.

### Stories that bind us….

When I was little, I was obsessed with making up stories. I loved weaving stories of all kinds, from horror tales to adventures in distant places. But writing was only one aspect of my love for narrative. I was a persistent daydreamer, constantly creating stories and scenarios in the infinite spaces of my imagination.

Whilst narrative inquiry as a full methodology was not adopted in this study, its ability to capture intricate first-hand experiences resonated deeply with my ESOL learners and informed how I drew on their narrative accounts of experience throughout the analysis.

According to Polkinghorne (1995), narrative inquiry is a well-established approach within qualitative research, characterised as a subset of qualitative research methods that employs storytelling to depict human actions. Creswell et al. (2007) define narrative research as an investigation into the life experiences of individuals across time, involving the collection and reflective examination of people's real-life experiences. (Creswell et al., 2007, cited in Huber, 2010)

Narrative inquiry gained prominence in the realm of social science literature (Polkinghorne, 1988), teacher education (Carter, 1993) and educational research (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Its origins can be traced back to the ideas of Confucius, a prominent figure in Eastern philosophy, who believed that teaching and learning are closely interconnected and learning occurs when individuals reflect on their past experiences and derive meaning from them (Waley, 1938; cited in Huber, 2010).

Built upon interpretive hermeneutics and phenomenology. The primary focus lies in uncovering the meanings individuals attribute to their experiences, with the ultimate goal of providing "insight that respects the complexity of human lives" (JOSSELSON, 2006, cited in Trahar, 2009). However, it is essential to understand that narrative inquiry extends beyond merely collecting stories. Practitioners of narrative inquiry are dedicated to examining how a narrative is crafted, the intended audience and purpose and the cultural narratives and influences that shape it. (Trahar, 2009).

According to Connelly and Clandinin (2000), the main argument supporting the use of narrative in educational research stems from the idea that humans are inherently storytelling organisms, which shapes their personal and social experiences. Consequently, studying narratives becomes a way to understand how humans engage with the world. This overarching concept extends to the belief that education involves the creation and re-creation of individual and collective narratives, where both educators and learners assume the roles of storytellers and characters in various stories. When both practitioners and researchers share narratives about their research relationships, it offers the potential for empowerment. Instead of mere investigative processes, this approach emphasises collaborative efforts characterised by

mutual storytelling and the continuous refinement of the narrative as the research unfolds. In the initial stages of embracing narrative inquiry, researchers must be mindful of fostering a relationship where both voices are acknowledged. This does not imply silencing the researcher's voice but rather granting the participant, who may have been traditionally silent in the research context, the opportunity to express their own story, thereby lending it authority and credibility that the research story has long had. (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000).

Narrative inquiry relies on field records obtained through participant observation within a shared practical environment as a primary data collection method. Additionally, unstructured interviews conducted between the researcher and participants facilitate the creation of narrative data. (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). Chase (2005) explains that narrative interviews, a key method for collecting verbal stories, can be similar to semi-structured or unstructured interviews. They can also be seen as a collaborative process, where the researcher engages with and responds to the stories shared. This interactive approach can lead to new, co-created stories emerging (Chase, 2005).

According to Creswell (2013), as data is gathered and analysed gradually, researchers construct a narrative that develops over time. The study is presented using the traditional structure of scientific research, which includes the problem, research question, methodology and findings. Researchers also reflect on their experiences during the study and how these shape their interpretation of the results. The voices of the participants are given prominence throughout, allowing their perspectives to guide the narrative through dialogue. When conducting a narrative study, the methodology, as guided by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), is characterised by its flexibility and adaptability rather than a strict, linear process. The initial step involves evaluating whether narrative research aligns with the research problem or question, making it best suited for capturing in-depth life stories or experiences from individuals. Subsequently, researchers select one or more participants with compelling stories to share, investing substantial time in collecting these "field texts. A crucial aspect of narrative research is contextualisation, where researchers gather information about the broader context surrounding these stories. This entails understanding the participants' personal experiences, their cultural backgrounds and the historical settings in which these experiences are situated. The next step involves analysing the collected stories and then "restorying" them, reorganising them into a meaningful framework. An important feature of this process is collaboration with the participants, engaging them in the research as active partners. (Creswell, 2013)

Narrative inquiry has the potential to reveal distinct viewpoints and foster a deeper comprehension of a situation, frequently amplifying the voices of marginalised communities whose insights are typically overlooked. Narratives hold the capacity to establish an approach that is both empowering and inclusive and fosters collaboration (Indira, 2020). Narrative inquiry can reveal unique perspectives and deeper understanding of a situation, giving voice to marginalised populations whose perspective is not often sought (Deakin University, 2022).

Previously, researchers often referred to an individual's "voice" in research studies, but an increasing number of scholars, such as Connelly & Clandinin (1991), Elbaz-Luwisch (2002), Gudmundsdottir (2001), Hoel (1997) and Moen et al. (2003), now favour the term "voices." They make this shift because they understand that the stories people share are shaped not only by their own experiences and feelings but also by the listeners and the society they belong to (Moen, 2006).

Claiming one's voice means finding a balance between personal thoughts and external influences from the past, present and future. This concept, based on Vygotsky's (1978) ideas, involves both social interactions (intermental processes) and inner thoughts (intramental processes). So, when people tell stories, they are not just speaking for themselves; they are

representing the many influences in their lives (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002, 2005, cited in Moen, 2006).

I feel drawn to narrative inquiry's capacity to showcase diverse perspectives, which aligns powerfully with the demographics of my research participants. My goal of capturing the personal stories and individual journeys of my Entry 1 ESOL learners makes narrative accounts of experience a resonant and enriching analytical lens within this study, one that sits alongside and enriches my thematic analysis rather than replacing it as a methodology.

Trahar (2009) mentions that narrative inquiry is multifaceted and one of the criticisms levelled against narrative inquiry is the potential shift from being a story analyst to a storyteller, where the goal shifts from analytic to therapeutic. (ELLIS and BOCHNER, 2000, cited in Trahar, 2009). So, instead of just studying and understanding the stories, it might sometimes shift towards using those stories to help people feel better emotionally. This shift from analysis to therapy is what some critics are concerned about when using narrative inquiry.

As I delve further into the world of narrative inquiry with my ESOL learners, I find myself confronted with certain challenges. My ESOL learners, who come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, bring with them a wide array of stories that are as complex as they are rich. One of the first challenges I encounter is the management of these collected stories. Each narrative has some or other impact on the way these learners learn and their language learning journey, and my role is to carefully gather and organise these stories to gain meaningful insights into their experiences.

Creswell (2013) states that one of the fundamental challenges of narrative inquiry lies in the management of the stories collected and the subsequent decision on how to represent the voices of the participants within the data. Researchers must tread a fine line to maintain the authenticity of these narratives while ensuring their clarity and relevance in the research findings. Furthermore, the researcher's role within these narratives is a critical consideration; they can choose to be visible, absent, or operate behind the scenes and each role carries implications for the research process and the portrayal of participants' stories. (Creswell, 2013)

Another challenge that I navigate with these learners is the representation of their voices within the data. Entry 1 ESOL learners have limited English language proficiency, which requires a careful balance between preserving the authenticity of their narratives and ensuring that their stories remain comprehensible and relevant. In a classroom where English is still a developing skill for many, this challenge becomes even more significant. My role as a researcher takes on particular importance in this context. With Entry 1 ESOL learners, some may require my visible presence and active engagement to facilitate communication and gather narratives effectively. Others may feel more comfortable with my role operating behind the scenes.

Creswell (2013) says that in the process of conducting a narrative study, the researcher is tasked with gathering comprehensive information about the participant and gaining a deep understanding of their life context. This demands a discerning eye to identify the specific stories within the collected source material that best encapsulate the participant's experiences, akin to uncovering the "figure under the carpet" as described by Edel (1984). Active collaboration with the participant is essential, involving discussions about their stories and necessitating reflection on the researcher's personal and political background, which invariably influences how the narratives are reshaped or "restoried" (Creswell, 2013)

Furthermore, issues surrounding the ownership of these stories, who can narrate them and how alterations can be made while maintaining their credibility are especially pertinent when working with Entry 1 ESOL learners. They mostly have limited agency in terms of language skills, and this necessitates careful consideration. Pinnegar and Daynes raised crucial

enquiries regarding the rightful ownership of the story, the authorised narrators, the capacity for alterations and the credibility of various versions. Moreover, the interactions between multiple narratives and their intersections pose intriguing challenges. (Pinnegar and Daynes in 2006, cited in Creswell 2013). Although stories are very important in ESOL research because they help us understand how learners experience language learning, it is also important to recognise how these stories can add value to research more broadly. At the same time, we need to be aware of the challenges involved in collecting and sharing these stories, so we can do research that truly reflects the learners' experiences and the difficulties they face in their lives.

It is imperative to provide a backdrop against which their stories unfold before delving into the narratives of my ESOL participants. The Hollydale area in Denton stands as a testament to diversity and community spirit, shaping the experiences of the individuals who call it home.

## Discovering Hollydale: Home to Our ESOL Learners[1]

St Xavier's Centre in Denton serves as the community hub for Denton, offering a range of courses, including ESOL. This community organisation is in the heart of Hollydale, which is particularly significant because a majority of my ESOL learners and the research participants for this study reside in and around the Hollydale area in Denton.



*Figure 2 St Xavier's Centre (Hollydale), where ESOL classes take place*

Hollydale is an inner-city suburb and ward of the city of Denton, England. The area is characterised by high-density late 19th century terraced housing and is renowned for its status as the most ethnically diverse locality within the city of Denton. (Wikipedia, 2019).In 2018, the estimated population of the Hollydale area was 19,530. The male residents accounted for 50% of the population, while the female residents constituted the remaining 50%. The geographical

[1] *To protect the identity of the participants in this study, all place names have been replaced with fictitious or fictional names.*

area of the ward is 2.27 square kilometres. With this population and area, the population density of Hollydale was calculated to be 8,600 people per square kilometre. (Visual Property Insights, 2019)

The area has a high ethnic minority population, with the largest concentration of Denton's British Asian community. Around 43% of the ward population is from an Asian background, with the largest minority community being British Pakistanis at 27% of the total population. Since the expansion of the European Union in 2004, there has been a noticeable influx of new immigrants to the area from various Eastern European countries. In Hollydale, Denton, a significant proportion of the population, approximately 53.12%, was born outside of the United Kingdom, highlighting the area's diverse and multicultural composition.

Hollydale also has a significantly lower level of home ownership than the national average which can serve as an indicator of it being an economically deprived area in Denton. When it comes to formal qualification, 32.25% of the population lacks any formal qualifications, indicating a portion of the community with limited educational attainment. In comparison, for England as a whole, the percentage of individuals without qualifications is lower, standing at 18.08%. (iLiveHere, 2010)




*Figure 3:Hollydale area (Denton) where the majority of ESOL learners come from*

The statistics also suggest that the Hollydale area experiences higher rates of unemployment and individuals who have never entered the workforce compared to the regional average. (themovemarket.com, 2020)

However, Hollydale, a vibrant and culturally rich community, stands out for its multitude of places of worship, catering to diverse religious beliefs. The area embraces a harmonious coexistence, evident in the presence of various Sikh Gurdwaras that play a pivotal role in nurturing the Sikh community's spiritual and social life.

Equally significant are the numerous mosques that grace Hollydale's landscape, including Masjid As salaam, Masjid Ahl-e-Hadith, Masjid-e-Khulafa-e-Rashedeen, Denton Jamia Mosque and Masjid Al-Farooq. Furthermore, Hollydale hosts an array of Christian churches, representing different denominations, from Anglican and Roman Catholic to free and house churches. The coexistence of these diverse places of worship in Hollydale highlights the community's spirit of inclusivity, where people of all faiths and beliefs are welcomed and

embraced. These religious establishments not only provide spaces for worship but also act as hubs for cultural exchange, social cohesion and community building, fostering a strong sense of unity and mutual understanding among its residents (Wikipedia, 2019).

### Meet my research participants![2]

The study involved 13 participants, all of whom were assessed prior to the start of their courses. Their competency levels ranged from consolidating to emerging at the Entry level, meaning they could perform tasks like exchanging personal information, giving unprepared talks, describing people, places and things, listening to short texts and engaging in discussions (City and Guilds, 2023).

The target audience for these classes are the ethnic minority population of Hollydale and Cavendish area who were mostly born outside the UK. To ensure accessibility for as many residents as possible, the courses were designed to accommodate their schedules and responsibilities. Typically, most classes take place during the school hours, from 9am to 3 pm. The schedule for the ESOL classes was established with a framework of 6 guided learning hours per week throughout the academic year. The academic year comprises three terms: Term 1 from September to December, Term 2 from January to April and Term 3 from April to July with a few new students joining every term. My ESOL Entry 1 class ran from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. This timing allowed parents with school-aged children to drop them off at school in the morning and attend the class before picking them up back from school.

Additionally, a crèche was established at the site to support parents with younger children who needed childcare support to attend their classes. This provided a crucial opportunity for parents who, in different circumstances, might have been excluded from English language courses, thus emphasising the course's inclusivity and community-orientated approach**.**

For the research, I chose participants from my own students who willingly agreed to participate. Out of the 16 students in my ESOL Entry 1 class, I had 13 research participants who fell within the age range of 20 to 45 years. The sampling method I used is a combination of convenience sampling and purposive sampling.

I decided to collect data from my own students, which was the most accessible and convenient option for me as a researcher. I purposefully selected participants based on specific criteria, such as their nationality and background. Given my role as an ESOL teacher, I placed particular emphasis on catering to students from diverse backgrounds, with a specific focus on those of Kurdish origin. This emphasis was prompted by the fact that students of Kurdish origin comprised the majority of the ESOL group not only in my own class but also in various other Entry Level ESOL classes at Denton College.

[2] To protect the identity of the participants, all personal names have been changed to fictitious ones.

Here is the breakdown of my research participants:

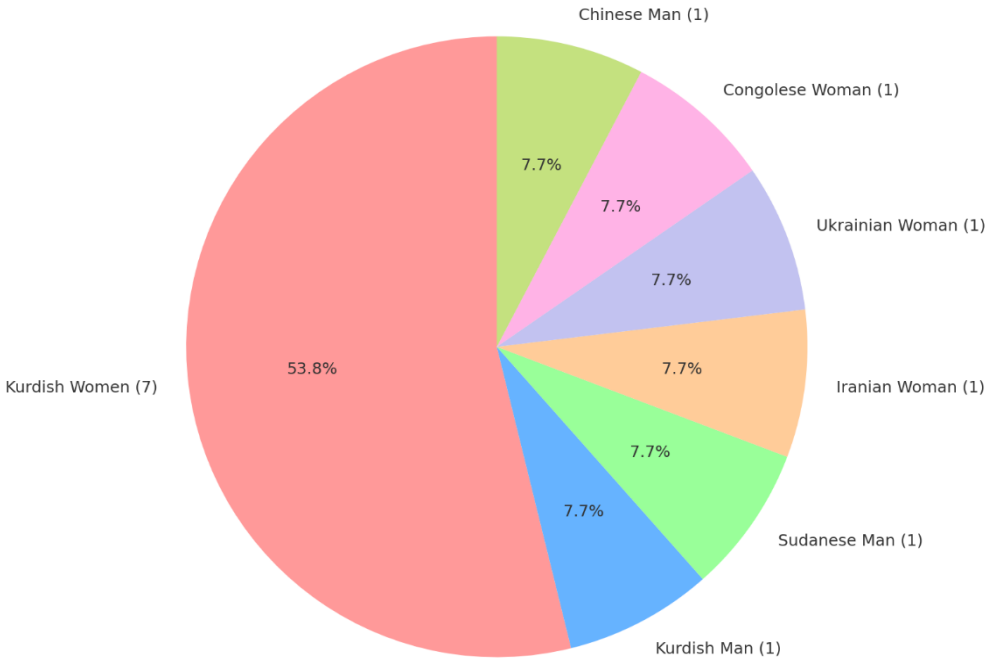



*Figure 4: Visual representation of the participant demographics*

Kurdish Women (7 participants): The largest segment among my research participants, within the age range of 20-32.

One male participant aged 40 who identified as Kurdish.

A male participant aged 41 from Sudan.

A female participant aged 32 from Iran.

A female participant aged 45 from Ukraine.

A female participant aged 34 from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

A male participant aged 33 from China.

It is important to note that the gender distribution of my research participants is identical to that of the majority of ESOL students at Denton College, who are female. Additionally, the substantial number of Kurdish students in my research and the ESOL programme at the college is evidence of how common this background is among the college's student body. Three male students in our largely female group have undoubtedly given my research a different viewpoint. Examining how gender may affect relationships and group dynamics in our ESOL class is made possible by this dynamic. I found that the male students preferred to be together during activities. One of the male learners from Kurdistan expressed a reluctance to send emails or Microsoft chat messages to female learners, fearing trouble with their husbands and partners. It is interesting to note that despite the unique gender dynamics in our class, the female participants, the majority of whom were Kurdish and within the age range of 20-32, appeared to be at ease collaborating with their male counterparts. Their comfort and ease in engaging with male learners during discussions is a significant observation. This finding emphasises the importance of considering individual and group dynamics within the research context. While one male student expressed concerns about communication, the

female participants' behaviour suggests a more inclusive and relaxed atmosphere for intergender interactions.

## "The Pursuit of Investigation"

This study aims to explore the experiences of integrating digital skills with the Entry ESOL class. I'd like to remind the reader of my three research questions:

How do Entry 1 ESOL learners develop basic digital skills to support their language learning?

In what ways do basic digital skills enable Entry 1 ESOL learners to access and navigate everyday services more independently, and how does this relate to their autonomy?

How does the development of basic digital skills shape Entry 1 ESOL learners' confidence, integration and sense of belonging within their new social environment?

To gather insights into these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews on two separate occasions, engaged in observations and conducted case studies involving ESOL learners. These research methods aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and outcomes of integrating digital skills into the Entry ESOL class.

Initially, I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with my ESOL learners. This took place throughout March 2022. These interviews aimed to gather qualitative data about learners' existing digital and language skills. The interviews were designed to be flexible, allowing learners to express their thoughts, experiences and challenges related to technology and language proficiency.

During the intervention period spanning from March to June 2022, I implemented the 14-week intervention plan outlined below to introduce and reinforce digital skills within my ESOL Entry 1 class.

| Week | ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE AND/OR SKILLS | Digital Skills Topic | LEARNING OBJECTIVES | Resources Used | FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT | Curriculum Link |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Essential Wi-Fi connection skills | Connecting to College's Wi-Fi | To enable students to connect to college Wi-Fi and use their login credentials effectively | College Wi-Fi, Username, Password | Assess students' ability to connect to college Wi-Fi and troubleshoot common issues | N/A |
| 2 | Essential Microsoft Teams proficiency | Microsoft Teams Basics | To familiarise students with MS Teams features and communication functions | MS Teams App, Microphone, Camera, Desktop Computers | Observe students' proficiency in Teams: Mute/Unmute, Making Calls, Joining/Leaving Classes, Attaching Files, Sending Voice Notes | Use basic technology for communication purposes |

| Week | ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE AND/OR SKILLS | Digital Skills Topic | LEARNING OBJECTIVES | Resources Used | FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT | Curriculum Link |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | Effective email composition skills | Practical Email Writing | To develop students' email writing and communication skills | Desktop Computers, Microsoft Outlook, Email Vocabulary | Assess students' email composition and communication skills | Write simple emails and messages |
| 4 | PowerPoint presentation skills | PowerPoint Presentation Creation | To teach students how to create engaging and informative presentations using PowerPoint | Desktop Computers, Microsoft PowerPoint | Evaluate students' ability to create effective PowerPoint presentations | Use ppt to write about their country, culture and create invitation cards. |

| Week | ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE AND/OR SKILLS | Digital Skills Topic | LEARNING OBJECTIVES | Resources Used | FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT | Curriculum Link |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | Reviewing subject pronouns, the verb "to be," and SVO | Accessing Live Worksheets | Evaluate students' ability to access, use and complete Live Worksheets for reviewing subject pronouns, the verb "to be," and SVO. | Desktop Computers, Live Worksheets Platform | Evaluate completed Live Worksheets and quizzes | Utilisation of online resources for language practice |
| 6 | Video sharing skills using Flipgrid | Microsoft Flipgrid Engagement | To guide students in creating and sharing videos on Flipgrid | Desktop Computers, Microsoft Flipgrid | Evaluate students' engagement with video-sharing platform | Use technology for sharing information and opinions |
| 7 | Poster design skills on health topics | Poster Creation on Healthy Living | To teach students how to create informative posters on health-related topics | Desktop Computers, Microsoft PowerPoint | Assess students' ability to design informative posters on health topics | Use technology for creating simple visual materials |

| Week | ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE AND/OR SKILLS | Digital Skills Topic | LEARNING OBJECTIVES | Resources Used | FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT | Curriculum Link |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8 | Vocabulary retention and tense understanding using Word Wall and Quizlet | Word Wall and Quizlet to Recap Simple Present Tense | To reinforce students' understanding of the Simple Present Tense and vocabulary | Online access, Word Wall, Quizlet | Assess vocabulary retention and understanding of the Simple Present Tense | Revise basic language structures and vocabulary |
| 9 | Answering WH questions effectively using Jeopardy Labs | Use of Jeopardy Labs for WH Questions | To help students practise answering WH questions effectively in a fun way | Online access, Jeopardy Labs | Assess students' ability to answer WH questions accurately | Ask and answer simple questions |
| 10 | Spelling rules in Simple Present Tense<br>Write about your holiday using Padlet | Simple Present Tense Spelling Rules using Spell city<br>Use of Padlet | To improve students' spelling and writing in Simple Present Tense | Padlet, online access, Spelling rules resources, Spell city | Assess students' spelling of words in Simple Present Tense<br>Assess students' writing on Padlet | Spell familiar words<br>Write simple sentences at E1 level. |
| 11 | Navigating government websites, local services, HMRC website | Exploring Denton City Council Website, check/apply for benefits on HMRC. | To teach students how to find information and access services on government websites | Desktop Computers, Denton City Council Website | Assess students' ability to find information and access services | Use technology for finding information |
| 12 | Creating CVs and applying for jobs using Microsoft Word | Microsoft Word and Job Applications | To prepare students for creating CVs and applying for jobs | Desktop Computers, Microsoft Word, Indeed.co.uk | Evaluate students' CV creation skills and job application proficiency | Use technology for finding and applying for jobs |

| Week | ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE AND/OR SKILLS | Digital Skills Topic | LEARNING OBJECTIVES | Resources Used | FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT | Curriculum Link |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 13 | Online shopping proficiency | Online Shopping Skills | To equip students with the ability to navigate and use online shopping platforms | Desktop Computers, Asda, Amazon, eBay websites | Assess students' capability to navigate online shopping platforms | Use basic technology for shopping |
| 14 | Filling a form for online registration, navigating school apps | Using Apps like Swift queue, ClassDojo and Parent apps Connect | Observe ESOL students' proficiency in using day to day apps | Smartphone, Wi-Fi access | ESOL Curriculum: Engage in basic conversations and guided writing practice. Filling up a form | Feedback and communication through ClassDojo and Parents apps connect. |

*Figure 5: SOW for incorporating digital skills into E1 ESOL*

Following the intervention period, I conducted another round of one-on-one semi-structured interviews with my ESOL learners between April-June 2023, but this time remotely through MS Teams.

During the post-intervention phase of the study, I encountered some unexpected challenges when trying to conduct semi-structured interviews with two of the students. The first student, originally from Ukraine, had to leave the college and relocate to another city and I couldn't get in touch with her. As a result, it became impossible to proceed with the planned interview. The second student, who came from Kurdistan, was facing an incredibly difficult time. He and his two children had recently become homeless. Given the overwhelming stress and immediate concerns, he was dealing with, he explained that he simply did not have the time or emotional capacity to participate in the interview at that moment. "Sara sorry I don't think so I can help you… I am homeless at the moment with my two young children.. I let you know if my situation changes", he said over the phone. These experiences serve as a poignant reminder of the diverse and often complex situations that learners may find themselves in. It highlights the importance of understanding and accommodating the individual challenges and priorities that students may be grappling with, especially when conducting research in an ESOL context.

During the planning phase of my research, I initially intended to conduct semi-structured interviews in November-December 2022 through face-to-face interactions; however, my plans had to change when I found myself on maternity leave. As a result, I had to adapt and conduct the interviews using Microsoft Teams. Despite this shift, I realised that this change in approach could offer valuable insights into how learners effectively interact using digital platforms like MS Teams. The decision to use MS Teams for my interviews brought about some unexpected advantages. First, the practicality of conducting remote interviews became evident. This approach ensured that all learners had an equal opportunity to participate, regardless of their location or circumstances Second, using MS Teams provided an opportunity to directly observe how participants interact with digital tools. This aspect resonated perfectly with the central theme of my research. By observing their interactions on a digital platform, I could gain a more accurate understanding of their digital literacy and how effectively they integrate these skills into their language learning process.

Admittedly, there were some challenges and limitations that arose. One major concern was that I had to consider the absence of certain nonverbal communication cues that are easier to detect during face-to-face interviews. This could impact the holistic understanding of participants' reactions and emotions. Technical glitches and connectivity issues posed a risk, potentially disrupting the flow of interviews. Additionally, conducting interviews remotely brought about new considerations in terms of potential researcher bias and influence. The online medium could introduce unintentional biases in how questions are asked, or follow-up probes are handled.

To address the challenges associated with conducting interviews online, I made sure to provide participants with clear instructions on using MS Teams effectively and conducted technology readiness assessments prior to the interviews. To capture missing nonverbal cues, I considered supplementing the interviews with other data collection methods such as observation and case -study. The interview aimed to gather feedback from the learners regarding their perceived improvement in digital skills and the effectiveness of these skills in real-life situations beyond the classroom. To make the process more accessible and ensure that language barriers did not hinder communication, I enlisted the help of the LSA (Language Support Assistant) who spoke Kurdish and Persian to translate the interview questions. I also used Google Translate to translate interview questions into Arabic, Chinese and French. However, as the learners pointed out, translation was not 100% accurate, but they also

mentioned that since they were also written in English, they could grasp the intended meaning of the questions. While these interviews were challenging, they were also a valuable learning experience for both me and my students.

I used case studies based on semi-structured interviews to gain a deeper understanding of student experiences, challenges and successes in incorporating digital skills in my ESOL classroom. Conducting a case study was a valuable opportunity for me as it is something that I have not explored in the past. Focusing on a few students in my class allowed me to explore their interactions, progress and challenges with digital tools, providing me with detailed insights into their learning processes and outcomes. Through these case studies, I hope to identify effective instructional strategies, techniques, or interventions that enhance language learning outcomes, as well as uncover and address the challenges and barriers encountered in incorporating digital skills within the lower-level ESOL classes.

Throughout my intervention phase, I employed participant observation as a key method to gain deep insights into my students' experiences. As a teacher, I had the unique opportunity to observe my learners' interactions and behaviours first hand while they were engaged in various digital activities. I began taking note of observations as I initiated the intervention, covering the period from February/March 2022 through July 2022.

I positioned myself within the classroom, closely observing my ESOL students as they worked on computers, collaborated in pairs, utilised tools like Padlet and created PowerPoint presentations and CVs. Being present in the classroom allowed me to capture the intricacies of their digital skills development process.

Through participant observation, I was able to witness the challenges they faced while navigating digital tools and technologies. This provided me with valuable insights into their learning process and the specific areas where they encountered difficulties. Additionally, participant observation allowed me to observe the sense of achievement that my students experienced. I witnessed their excitement and satisfaction when they successfully completed a task, mastered a new digital skill, or overcame a challenge. These observations helped me gauge the impact of my intervention strategies and the effectiveness of the digital skills training provided.



*Figure 6:ESOL classroom during the first session: learners using desktops to access Outlook*

**Class Observation - Field Note 2- set up MS Teams and MS Outlook**

On March 19th, 2022, I observed my ESOL Entry 1 class in Room Molineux starting at 9:30 am. The class consisted of 14 students. The primary focus of the session was to connect to the college's Wi-Fi and set up MS Teams and MS Outlook for effective communication and learning.

Ms Teams and MS Outlook are highly important applications for learners to communicate with each other, be part of the classroom, interact with each other, access online resources and resources from the classroom.

During the initial phase of the session, I, along with a learning support assistant, provided one-on-one assistance to students who were facing challenges connecting to the college's Wi-Fi network. It was evident that both the students and the teachers were experiencing nervousness as they delved into this technological setup.

Several students displayed a willingness to follow instructions but awaited guidance on how to go to the next step. On the contrary, a few others encountered difficulties in connecting to the Wi-Fi. Two specific students, Nehwal and Aziz, faced issues due to their Apple phones and an unfamiliarity with their Apple ID passwords. Nehwal remarked, "Teacher, it is asking password, I don't know" which prompted her to contact her husband for assistance. In Aziz's case, he decided to postpone resolving the issue until the following day.

Students were asked to use the chat option in Microsoft Teams for communication and collaboration. Most students actively engaged in the chat feature, using desktop computers to exchange messages. A few students found it challenging to navigate the chat interface, occasionally sending messages to the wrong recipients or experiencing difficulties in attaching files.

Despite the initial challenges, most students successfully connected to the college's Wi-Fi, installed MS Teams on their devices and joined the ESOL Team. This collective accomplishment was a positive outcome of the session. Furthermore, students were able to learn how to navigate the Teams interface, including clicking on links and accessing resources that were shared within the platform.

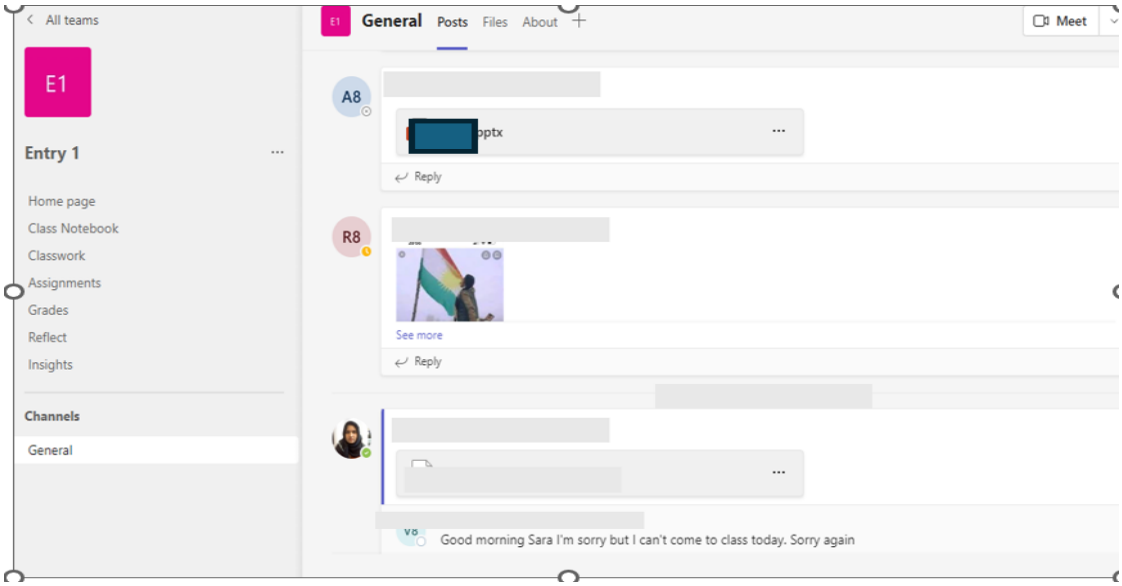



*Figure 7: Screenshot of the Entry 1 (E1) Microsoft Teams ESOL class site*

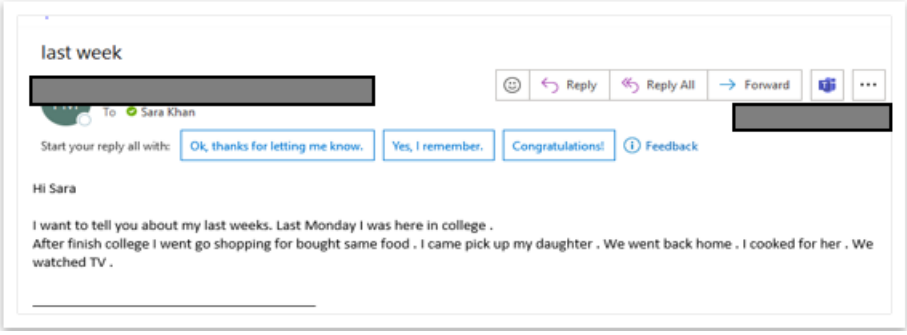
## Class Observation - Field Note 4 – March26th, 2022- Writing emails and accessing live worksheets

On a crisp morning, specifically on the March 26th, 2022, I observed my Entry 1 ESOL class in the IT room commencing at 9:30 am. The classroom contained 13 students. The session's main objectives were centred around the practical aspects of writing emails and accessing live worksheets. This observation directly aligns with my research questions concerning the development of low-level ESOL learners' digital literacy and its impact on language learning, independence, autonomy, confidence, sense of belonging and integration. Through tasks like email writing, students not only enhanced their language skills but also gained essential digital competencies, preparing them to independently access digitalised services.

Students were introduced to desktop computers in the ESOL classroom. Some students approached the task with confidence, easily navigating the desktop interface. However, a few students found it more challenging, requiring additional support to power on/off the computers and access basic functions. The Learning Support Assistant and I gave one to one support to learners who were struggling.

As the session began, the students engaged with the Outlook application on their desktop computers, honing their skills in composing emails. The exercise involved writing a sick note to your teacher or describing what you did last week, thereby introducing them to email communication. Interestingly, a common thread emerged among the learners — all except for Rebwar confessed that this was their first attempt at sending emails. A student named Omar even shared his sentiment, exclaiming, "It is good …. email is very good for jobs."

Transitioning from email composition to digital engagement, the class had previously established a class file named "ESOL E1 ON LIVEWORKSHEETS." This repository was dedicated to customised worksheets focusing on topics such as the simple present tense and WH questions. The students were tasked with accessing these worksheets and working on them independently. While most students worked within the anticipated time frame, there were a few who required additional support. Several students frequently called out for help with shouts of "Teacher! Teacher!" during the class, posing a challenge to address each one individually. The presence of a learning support assistant proved highly valuable.



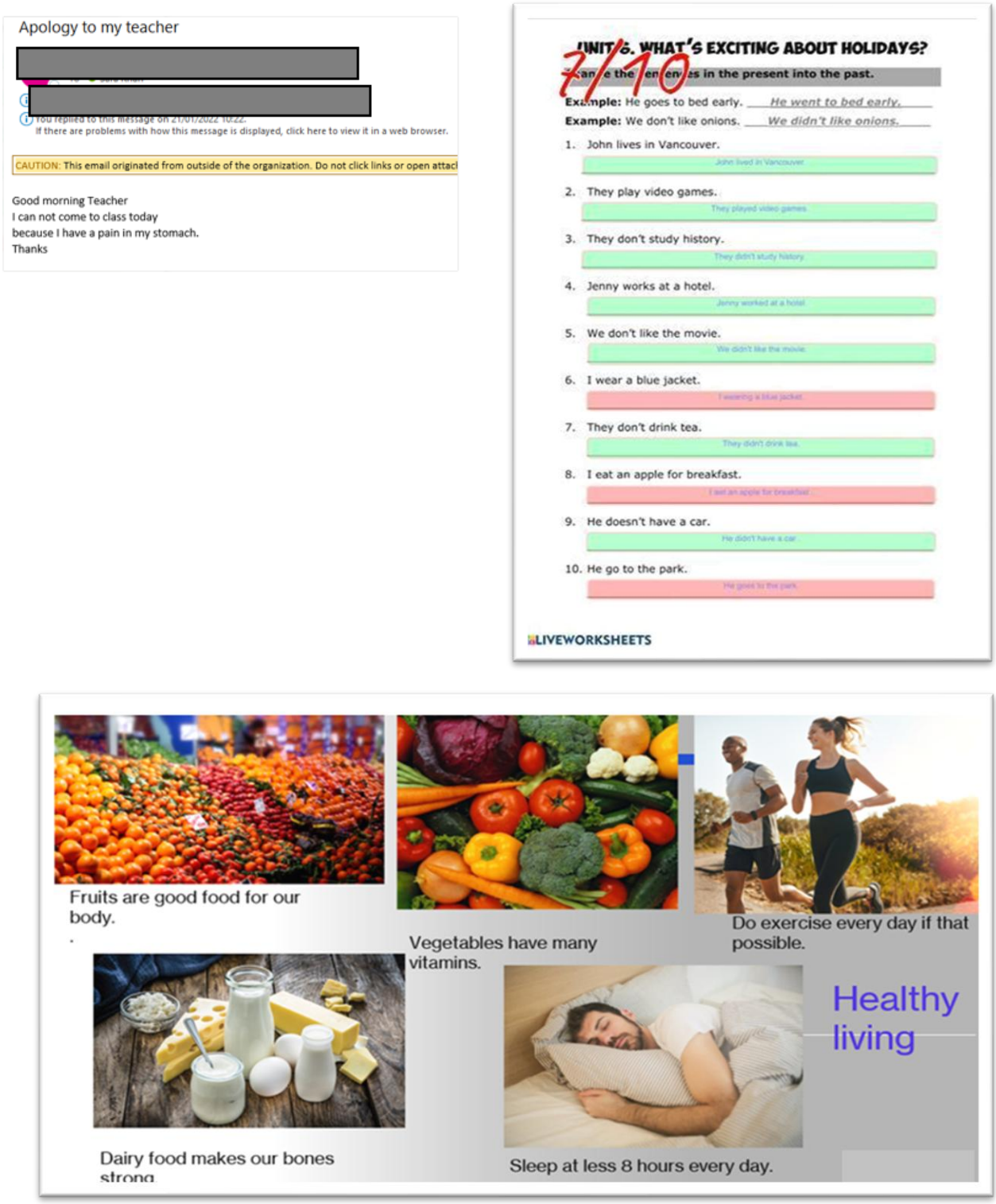



*Figure 8: Sample of learners' work on various digital platforms*

## Class Observation - Field Note 7 – May 6th, 2022-Creating power-point presentation -IT room

On May 6th, from 9:00 to 11:00 am, I observed a class in the IT Room comprising 14 students. The lesson was dedicated to creating PowerPoint presentations centred around the theme of "my country." By focusing on creating PowerPoint presentations, students got the opportunity

to enhance both their language skills and their proficiency in using digital tools. Through this task, they practised organising information, selecting relevant visuals and presenting their ideas effectively, all of which are valuable skills for both language learning and digital literacy.

Throughout the session, each student worked independently on crafting their PowerPoint presentations. Remarkably, all the students revealed that this was their first experience with using PowerPoint software. Some students, such as Seza and Omar, exhibited a commendable grasp of desktop computing, crafting presentations that were both visually engaging and informative.

However, a few students encountered challenges in aspects like slide formatting, image insertion and content organisation. Particularly noteworthy were the cases of Avin and Belan, who worked together and struggled with copying images from Google and pasting them into their presentations, said “Teacher don’t know it’s not coming”. Through collaborative efforts, the learning support assistant and I demonstrated the process twice, helping in the students' understanding and subsequent success.




*Figure 9: Learners giving a PowerPoint presentation on their country and culture*

### Class Observation - Field Note 9 - Microsoft Flipgrid- Molineux Room

During our session from 9 to 11 am in the Molineux Room, we explored the use of Microsoft Flipgrid to delve into the topic of pastime activities with 13 students. This activity will provide valuable practice in using digital platforms for communication and collaboration. Additionally, collaborative engagement with Flipgrid is expected to foster a sense of belonging within the classroom as students share their interests and learn from one another's experiences.

I initiated the session by creating a model video in which I shared some of my favourite pastime activities. This video served as a reference point for the students, providing them with an example of how to use Microsoft Flipgrid to express their interests.

The students eagerly embraced the task, and several of them recorded videos while engaged in the very activities they enjoy during their free time. We saw students strolling in the park,

jogging along scenic trails, immersed in the pages of books and passionately playing football, among other engaging pastimes.

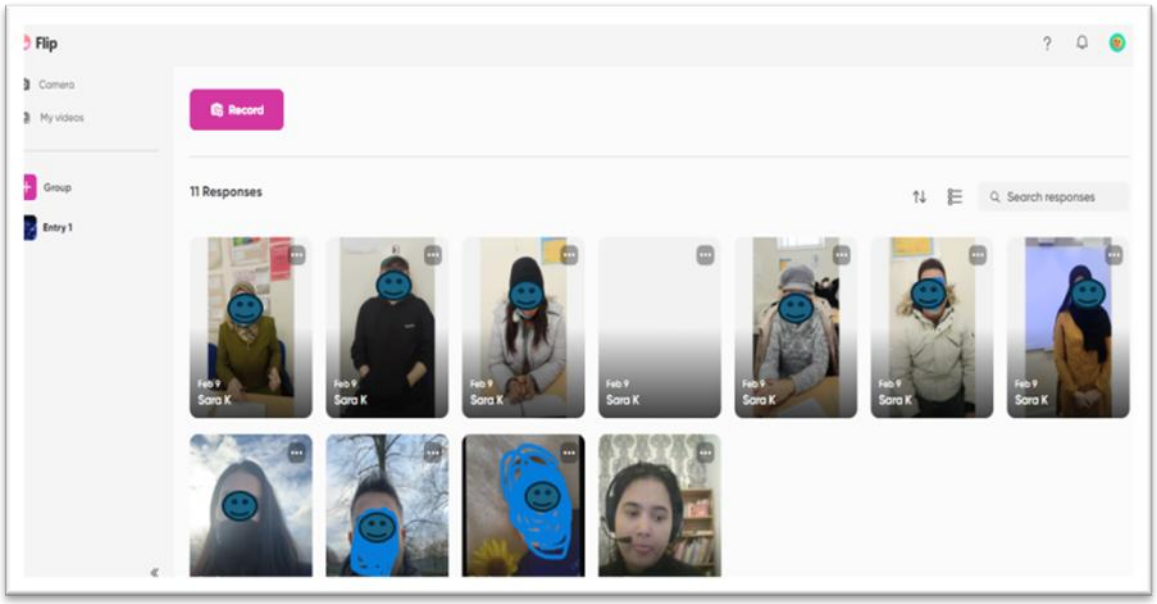



*Figure 10: Screenshot of students MS Flipgrid videos discussing their likes and dislikes*

## Class Observation - Field Note 10 -Introducing Padlet

On May 24th, from 9 to 11 am, I observed a class at Molineux room where students engaged with the online platform Padlet. The task was for students to write about their activities during the holidays.

By using Padlet, I aimed to provide my learners with practical opportunities to practise language skills while simultaneously acquiring essential digital competencies. Through tasks such as writing about their holiday activities on Padlet, learners were encouraged to apply their language skills in a digital context, preparing them for independent access to digitalised services.

During the session, one student named Felicia, encountered difficulties accessing the Padlet link. However, after receiving one-on-one assistance, she successfully joined the Padlet platform. Challenges also arose when students attempted to publish their notes on Padlet. To address this, a demonstration on the smart board was given. This approach of group demonstration was found to be more efficient than providing individual support to each student.

Padlet proved to be a valuable tool, enabling students to share their work with one another and draw inspiration from their classmates. One of the downsides was that the platform's feature of auto-correcting spelling contributed to well-structured submissions, with minimal spelling errors noted. Nonetheless, some students encountered structural errors in their work.

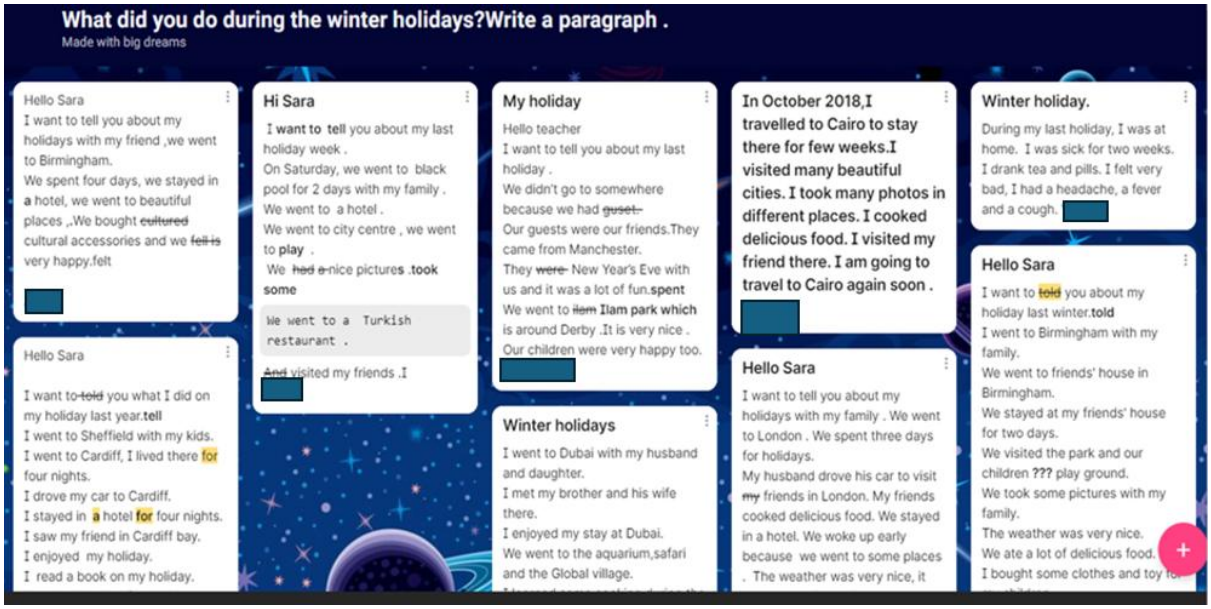



*Figure 11: Screenshot of learners' writing task on Padlet*

## Class Observation-Field Note 11- 12 Accessing Denton city council Website-IT room

My ESOL class was held on the 7th and 9th of June 2022, from 9 to 11 am in the IT room, 14 and 13 students were present in the session respectively. The primary focus of this session was to explore the Denton City Council's website, uncovering its array of services and resources. By exploring the Denton City Council's website, students can find many helpful information about city services, events in the community and what the local government is doing. This activity helps students practise their language skills and learn how to use websites to find valuable information they might need.

Throughout the session, we ventured into various sections of the website, discovering valuable information and assistance for a range of needs. Vilaria, a recent resident in Denton, initiated our exploration as she sought to apply for refugee status for herself and her family under the Ukrainian scheme. We also explored events happening across Denton, promoting community involvement and social interaction.

The website provided online resources for housing benefit and council tax support claims, simplifying financial matters for residents. One of the student's Felicia's quest to find childcare options in her area was facilitated by the website's comprehensive listings. We sat together and went through it step by step.

Through the website, I briefly introduced managing recycling and waste by registering blue and brown bins, contributing to environmental sustainability.

The website also served as a gateway to explore Denton's library services, including information on library membership. Avin found it useful as she said there's a community library across the road from her house and she would like to join it along with her four-year-old.

## Class Observation - Field Note 13 -Online shopping - IT Room - E1 ESOL Class

In the IT room, during a class from 9 to 11 am, the E1 ESOL students (totalling 12) engaged in a session centred around online grocery shopping, with a primary focus on online shopping

at Asda's website and an exploration of websites like Amazon and eBay. This session aimed at enhancing their digital literacy skills by preparing them to independently access digitalised services such as online shopping in the future. Additionally, collaborative exploration of e-commerce websites is anticipated to foster a sense of belonging within the classroom, contributing to students' future integration into both digital and social aspects of society.

During the session, a significant portion of students demonstrated a high level of confidence when it came to using desktop computers for various tasks related to online shopping. They were adept at browsing products, comparing prices and efficiently adding items to their virtual shopping carts. Their comfort with technology was evident in their ability to navigate these online marketplaces with ease.

However, it is worth noting that a couple of students, Rebwar and Belan, faced challenges in navigating the online shopping platforms. They encountered difficulties with search functions and the process of adding items to their cart. Rebwar's plea, "Teacher, help me, I do not know, I don't know" captured the frustration they experienced. In addition to the practical aspects of online shopping, the lesson also incorporated essential online vocabulary, including terms like "add to cart," "basket," "checkout," "payment method," and "voucher codes". These terms aimed to provide students with a foundation for understanding and engaging in online shopping with confidence.

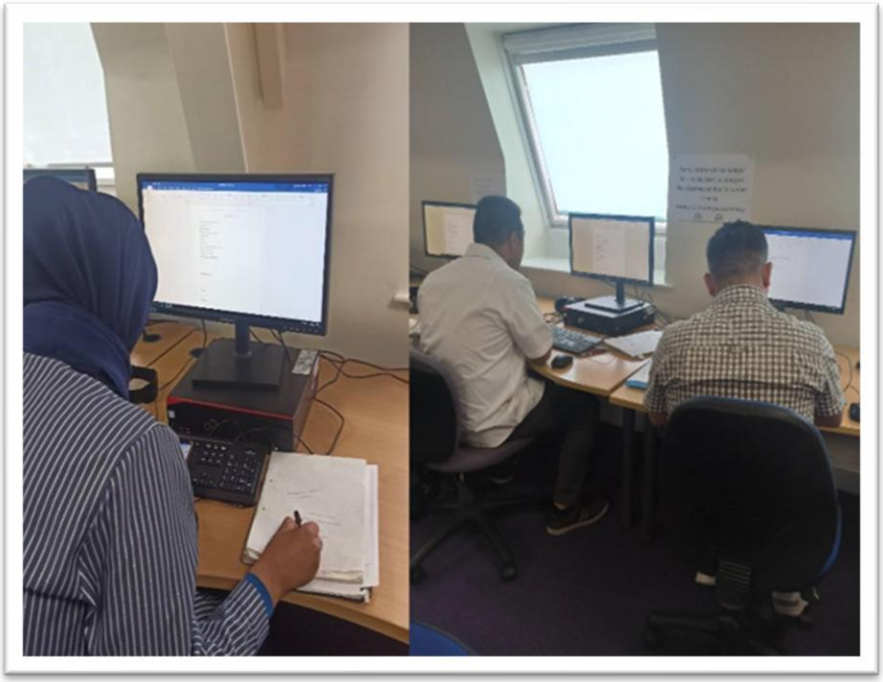


*Figure 12: Learners creating a shopping list for buying groceries online*

## Class Observation – Field notes 15-16- Microsoft Word and Job Applications-IT Room

In a class held in the IT room, 13 students gathered for a session from 9 to 11 am. The primary focus of this session was to use Microsoft Word to create their CVs and explore job opportunities on indeed.co.uk. Job listings included positions like warehouse operative, voluntary roles at charity shops, dinner lady jobs and teaching assistant roles, among others.

This session aimed to empower students with the digital and language skills needed to pursue job opportunities independently and integrate into the English workforce.

This session was particularly significant as it addressed an essential skill for students such as crafting their CVs and applying for jobs. Many of the students were new to this process, and it was their first time creating a CV. Consequently, they began with no prior experience, but with enthusiasm and motivation to learn.

The Learning Support Assistant (LSA) and I played an active role, moving from one student to another to provide the necessary guidance and assistance. We worked together to help each student create their CV, highlighting their skills and experiences, even if they were limited.

By the end of the session, all the students had successfully created CVs both in digital format and printed on paper. Some students, particularly Omar, Rebar and Aziz, were especially keen on applying for jobs. Aziz, a single parent, expressed the urgency of finding work. He shared his situation, mentioning that he had not worked last year because his children were not in school, but with them now in school, he was determined to secure employment. Exploring job opportunities on jobsites like indeed.co.uk exposes students to real-world job listings and helps them understand how to navigate online platforms for employment.

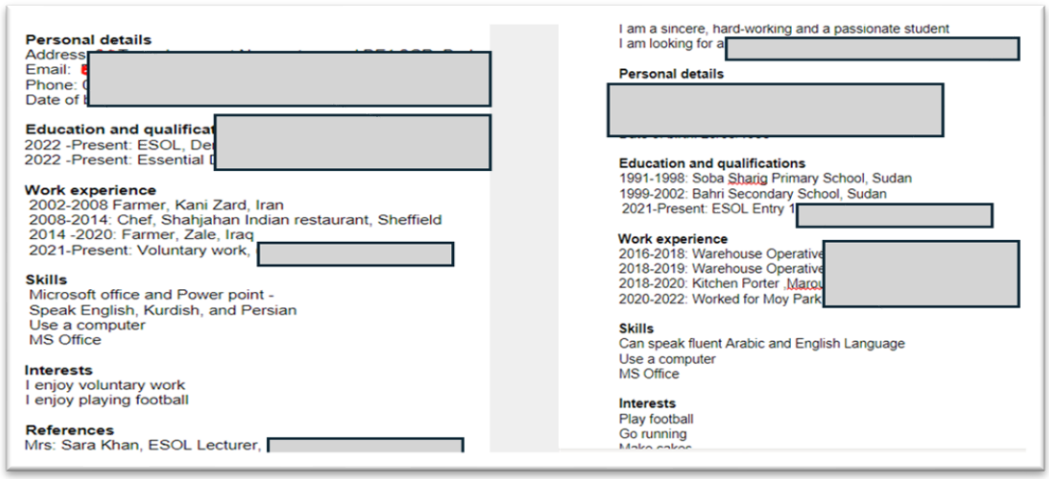



*Figure 13: Sample of CVs created by students using MS Word*

## Research Unveiled:

As mentioned earlier, in February/March 2022, a series of interviews were conducted, including face-to-face sessions and two telephonic interviews. To ensure comprehensive understanding, Google translation and a Language Support Assistant (LSA) proficient in Kurdish and Persian facilitated translations for those requiring assistance. I sought help from the Language Support assistant to check the translation of the questions as many learners told me that Google translation is not very accurate, although they get the context of the questions. This semi structured interview consisting of 14 questions aimed to gauge the starting points of the learners in terms of both their language and digital skills.

This study is guided by three separate but related research questions. The first is:
How do Entry 1 ESOL learners develop basic digital skills to support their language learning?

Research Question Two: In what ways do basic digital skills enable Entry 1 ESOL learners to access and navigate everyday services more independently, and how does this relate to their autonomy?

Research Question Three: How does the development of basic digital skills shape Entry 1 ESOL learners' confidence, integration and sense of belonging within their new social environment?

## Digital Skills:

During the pre-intervention phase, I asked the students about their familiarity with devices. These questions were translated in multiple languages, including Kurdish Sorani, Persian and Arabic to ensure better understanding. The questions asked were:

**Have you ever used a computer or smartphone?**

**How comfortable do you feel using a computer or smartphone?**

The vast majority (11 out of 13 of learners) had used smartphones, demonstrating a basic level of familiarity with digital devices.

**What did you do on a computer or a smartphone? Have you searched for information in English on the internet?** A substantial portion (4 out of 13) can perform basic searches on Google in English, indicating some online search skills. The majority (10 out of 13) can use smartphones and use their native languages to send texts and WhatsApp etc.

**Familiarity with educational platforms**: To understand learners' familiarity with various educational platforms, I asked them the following questions:

Have you ever used Ms Teams, Live worksheets, Wordwall, Quizzes?

Can you search online for things like jobs? What do you search for?

Have you ever booked a blood test online or used your GP surgery's online system? If yes, how did you do it?

Have you sent an email before? Who did you send it to and what was it about?

Educational Platforms: None were familiar with Live worksheets, Wordwall, Quizizz, Padlet and Flipgrid etc. Only 2 participants (15%) had used MS Teams previously. None have ever accessed the online system at the GP surgery or booked a blood test online.

Prior IT Education: One learner had past IT education in using email, PowerPoint and Word during their time in Kurdistan. However, they expressed the need to relearn these skills due to the extended time gap.

**Language Proficiency:**

All students, based on initial and diagnostic assessments, are working towards Entry 1 in ESOL, indicating a foundational level of English language proficiency.

**Digital Skill Improvement Aspirations:** To understand learners' digital skills aspirations, I asked them the following questions.

**Do you want to improve your digital skills? If yes, what skills do you want to improve?**

Students expressed a desire to improve specific digital skills related to job searching, creating CVs and using online resources (like council websites), applying/checking for benefits, navigating apps like class Dojo used in their children's school and swift queue to book and cancel blood tests online. Some learners also expressed a practical integration of language and digital skills, such as doing homework online and using digital tools for communication with teachers.

Following the intervention phase spanning from March to June 2022, post-intervention interviews were conducted with 11 ESOL learners through MS Teams. The aim was to assess the influence of digital tools on their English language learning experience. The survey, translated into Kurdish, Persian and Arabic using LSA and Google Translator, comprised 15 questions. As mentioned before, I could not reach two students for the semi-structured interviews during the post-intervention phase of the study. The first student, originally from Ukraine, had to relocate to another city, making it challenging to establish contact for the interview. Consequently, proceeding with the planned interview became unfeasible. The second student, hailing from Kurdistan, was experiencing significant hardships as he and his two children had recently become homeless. The post-intervention phase was conducted with only 11 students online on Microsoft Teams

Here are some key analyses of the interviews which could be divided into subsets based on the following research questions:

How do Entry 1 ESOL learners develop basic digital skills to support their language learning?

In what ways do basic digital skills enable Entry 1 ESOL learners to access and navigate everyday services more independently, and how does this relate to their autonomy?

How does the development of basic digital skills shape Entry 1 ESOL learners' confidence, integration and sense of belonging within their new social environment?

The interviews demonstrated that all the 11 ESOL learners have experienced the integration of digital tools into their language learning process. Digital tools like Microsoft Teams, Padlet, PowerPoint, online platforms and email have helped them in enhancing their language skills up to some extent. For instance, Fatima* used tools like Google Translate to facilitate comprehension and communication in English.

### Impact on Everyday Life:

The interview highlighted the impact of digital skills on daily life activities including communication, learners' independence and autonomy, accessing online services, scheduling appointments and job searching. Some of the questions that were asked in relation to the above were.

**Were you able to use digital services without any help after using digital tools in class?**

**Did digital tools help you talk better with classmates and teachers?**

**Do you feel more connected to your classmates and community because of using digital tools in class?**

8 out of 11 ESOL learners expressed positive experiences with using digital tools for practical purposes, such as booking appointments, engaging with their children's education and seeking employment opportunities.(as observed in the case of Fatima, Raiham, Seza, Sayin, Rebwar, Omar, Nehal, Felicia and Wang). 3 learners initially expressed challenges, but they learnt to overcome obstacles, especially with the help of Language Support Assistants (LSAs) who could communicate in their native language.

**Confidence and Empowerment:** How did using digital tools affect your confidence in using English outside of class?

10 learners admitted having a positive correlation between the development of digital skills and increased confidence. Seza talked about her ability to schedule appointments

independently and Rebwar said that they are quite self-reliant now in accessing online platforms. However, 1 student wasn't sure if digital skills increased their confidence.

**Independence in Digital Services:** 9 out of 11 students admitted to being able to use services and digital tools independently. This suggests that basic digital skills acquired during ESOL classes empower learners to navigate day-to-day digitalised services on their own.

To understand how digital skills impacted learners' sense of belonging, I asked them the following questions.

**How did using digital tools affect your confidence in using English outside of class?**

**Did digital tools help you talk better with classmates and teachers?**

**Do you feel more connected to your classmates and community because of using digital tools in class?**

**Did digital tools help you better understand the culture of England?** While not explicitly mentioned by the learners, the ability of the learners to engage with digital tools, such as Microsoft Teams and Outlook for communication (as mentioned by Fatima, Omar, Seza and Raiham) contributes to sense of belonging by facilitating communication with peers and teachers.

The motivation for learning English and digital skills was often linked to practical goals, such as finding employment and overall integration into the host society. Learners recognised the importance of digital skills in accessing job opportunities and interacting with various aspects of daily life.

## Challenges and Growth:

**Have you faced any challenges with using a computer or a smartphone? What were they?**

7 out of 11 learners acknowledged the challenges faced including initial difficulties, language barriers and the need for adaptation especially in terms of registering online, creating emails and creating presentations.

**Recommendation and Progression:** Would you suggest using digital tools in class to other ESOL learners? Why or why not?

10 out of 11 students recommended the use of digital tools to other ESOL learners, indicating the perceived benefits. Furthermore, all 11 students progressed to Entry 2 after passing their Entry 1 exams.

## Additional Observations:

All the 11 students admitted to using some form of digital tools they learnt about in the ESOL class, indicating the sustained impact and relevance of these skills beyond the initial learning period.5 students have enrolled themselves in a Basic IT course run at St. Xaviers Centre to further enhance their digital skills.

To summarise these findings, the study revealed that integrating digital tools into ESOL classes significantly benefited learners' language development, confidence and sense of belonging. While many learners demonstrated basic familiarity with smartphones, their proficiency varied, particularly regarding educational platforms and online searches in English. However, after the intervention phase, interviews with participants highlighted notable improvements in their ability to independently access digital services and engage with their

peers and teachers. Despite encountering initial challenges, such as language barriers, learners expressed a strong desire to enhance their digital skills, especially for practical tasks like job searching and accessing essential services online. Moreover, their recommendations for integrating digital tools into ESOL classes were overwhelmingly positive, indicating a recognition of the benefits for their language learning journey. The continuation of digital skill development beyond the classroom, as evidenced by enrolment in additional digital skills courses, further emphasises the enduring significance of digital literacy in empowering ESOL learners to navigate and participate in an increasingly digitalised society.

*Writing my chapter 4 served as a poignant reminder of the connection between research and the complex realities of our ESOL learners. As I reflect on the completion of this chapter, I find myself deeply intertwined with the lives, challenge and resilience of our learners.*

*The journey through this chapter unveils a striking revelation that goes beyond research findings. It reveals the profound challenges faced by ESOL learners, challenges that extend far beyond the digital classroom. As we dive deeper into the humanitarian aspect of ESOL education, we encounter stories that are marked by a unique blend of perseverance, resilience and adversity.*

*Chapter 4 uncovers yet another layer of complexity. Some of my current ESOL learners have found themselves homeless after being granted refugee status, unable to secure employment or a place to live within the tight 7-day window. This is a striking example of the challenges that many of our learners confront, as they navigate not only the intricacies of language learning but also the broader complexities of their lives as refugees.*

*The Palestinian ESOL learner who could no longer continue their English classes due to the loss of their entire family during the ongoing Israel -Palestine conflict. This is a stark illustration of the human realities that the ESOL learners confront. Their narrative stands as a testament to the fact that the pursuit of language learning often becomes a secondary concern in the face of extreme personal tragedies.*

*This chapter is not just a scholarly endeavour but a call to action. It highlights the need for a holistic approach to ESOL education that acknowledges the multifaceted nature of ESOL learners' experiences. It requires us to reassess and adapt our approaches to provide support and understanding beyond the traditional classroom setting.*

## Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

### Introduction

In this chapter, I will continue the research that began in Chapter 4 by examining how basic digital abilities improve language learning opportunities for ESOL students. The findings reported in the previous chapter offered compelling evidence that introducing digital tools into ESOL sessions can significantly improve ESOL learners' language growth, confidence and social cohesiveness.

Although many ESOL research participants were familiar with smartphones, their ability to access online educational platforms and conduct online searches in English varied. However, following the intervention phase, interviews with participants revealed that many students can freely access digital resources and connect with their peers and teachers online.

In this chapter, I also draw on learners' extended responses and data from semi-structured interviews to build a fuller picture of their experiences with digital skills in the ESOL classroom. To ensure the voices of ESOL learners were central to this study, I employed a narrative inquiry approach alongside thematic analysis. After conducting semi-structured interviews, I manually coded the transcripts, focusing on recurring themes related to language development, autonomy, confidence and social integration and sense of belonging. These themes were informed by both the literature and learner narratives. As part of my reflexive practice, I revisited the data iteratively to identify any overlooked or emerging sub-themes.

### Three Threads: The Findings That Run Through This Chapter

Three findings emerge strongly from this study and recur throughout this chapter. First, learners developed digital skills most effectively through experiential learning which is learning by doing, in the context of real tasks that mattered to them, such as booking appointments, writing CVs and communicating with schools. Second, a participatory pedagogy, fostered autonomy, motivation and a stronger sense of ownership over their learning. Third, learners' progress became visible through multimodal forms of evidence such as spoken narratives, digital artefacts such as Padlet posts and PowerPoint presentations and demonstrations of practical tasks rather than through traditional assessment alone. These three findings are illustrated through the case studies and themes that follow.

### Research Question One: Digital Practices and Language Learning

To remind the readers, my first research question considered the development of low-level ESOL learners' digital practices to support their language learning.

My findings resonated with the fact that in today's interconnected world, both digital literacy and English language proficiency are critical, particularly in multicultural societies like the UK. Majority of my ESOL learners shared positive experiences of using digital tools for learning English online, booking appointments, supporting their children's education and seeking employment opportunities. However, a few learners faced initial setbacks while using digital skills but gradually they were able to overcome them with the support of Language Support Assistants (LSAs) who spoke their native language.

One of my learners, Fatima originally comes from Iran. During the semi-structured interview, she offered an insight into her journey of acquiring basic digital skills and English language skills. Fatima arrived in England in 2018 along with her husband due to government-related challenges in Iran, she said, "Too much problem with government in my country."

"I have a problem with speaking, yes and spelling... new word." "I cannot speak...but slowly, slowly… yeah." "I can practise English speaking, listening on BBC and YouTube."

In her journey of learning English, Fatima has encountered challenges that included difficulties in spelling, speaking and using new vocabulary. She spoke about how tools like Google Translate, helped her with comprehension and communication. She celebrated her successes, by mentioning how she was able to connect with others in English and practise her speaking and listening skills.

"Google Translate is very good. Just take a picture and see in Farsi."

"Listening on BBC and YouTube help me with English….and teacher we do spelling games…. very very good…. spellings big problem for me yeah"

Fatima's initial digital skills went untapped due to a lack of practice, leading to a decline in proficiency.

"Yeah, can use internet in my country but I forgot... I could not work... just learn and I forgot."

However, when she participated in her ESOL classes where digital tools were integrated. She learnt to navigate platforms like Microsoft Teams, Padlet and even PowerPoint presentation.

"I can look job on internet.... talk to other people. More people." "Yes, I think I can (use digital tools) without help."

Fatima also mentioned using digital skills acquired in class to engage in tasks such as accessing her daughter's school app, booking appointments and exploring job opportunities.

"I use email, Google and Google Maps... I book appointment in my daughter school ...online." "Yeah, I can search for jobs, like ... nail artist."

Fatima wants to learn English and gain digital skills so she could find better jobs. She liked working in a beauty salon as a nail artist, a job she did before in Iran.

"Yeah, I want job because in Iran I was a nail artist".

"I came to the UK to find work and mix with people. In my country... problem with the government."

Fatima mentions about her challenges with speaking and spelling but also mentions the positive experiences that she had. For example: going to college which helped her interact with others. Her desire to learn English in England is to find work and connect with more people highlights the relationship between digital literacy and language learning.

Another learner, Wang's* journey to language proficiency and digital literacy began at Denton College* in 2019, where he enrolled as a beginner ESOL learner. Wang's determination to learn English and adapt to the English environment was quite evident from the beginning as he had no formal qualifications from his home country, China.

His initial exposure to digital tools was rooted in basic tasks in his native language, Chinese. Wang revealed, "I know somethings… like search online in Chinese…. Google Translator … (some) apps. "I know phone (shows his phone) I can use it, but computer… no. Now I try to learn slowly slowly."

Despite starting as a beginner, he embraced digital tools and their utility through one to one, LSA and peer support.

In the context of his Entry 1 ESOL class, Wang expressed enthusiasm about his digital learning experiences. He noted, "I learn CV online, PowerPoint presentation and email. "It was good, good for my job." Wang's openness to adopting new digital skills underscores their

significance in his personal and professional growth. “Yeah, this is good (showing Padlet) writing …everyone can read everything…I read Omar and take help writing. (giggles)”

Recognising the importance of digital skills, especially for ESOL learners, Wang highlighted, "Yeah, it is good, good for you, good for your future, jobs, everything is online… my children homework."

“Me and Omar write invitation for party …that is good …it is good writing… think…write together.”

This shows that the learner has an awareness of the digital skills’ impact on various aspects of his life including language skills and communication.

### Experiential learning: digital skills developed through real-world tasks

The integration of digital tools into ESOL education aligns with the broader literature on the positive impact of technology on language learning. In my study, learners used tools like Microsoft Teams, Padlet and PowerPoint, which allowed them to practise language skills in various contexts within the classroom as well as outside. The digital platforms provide immediate feedback and access to a vast number of resources which are crucial for language development. Additionally, technology can offer independent online learning opportunities that complement face-to-face classroom activities and enhance classroom experience. (Harris n.d.)

Digital and English language skills play a crucial role when it comes to social inclusion in the UK. Acquiring these skills along with the confidence and motivation to apply them, can significantly improve ESOL learners' quality of life. They are not only crucial for participating in social, economic and civic activities across the UK but are also considered one of the vital skills for navigating British society (Paget and Stevenson 2014, cited in Reder et al., 2012).

Limited proficiency in English and literacy skills makes it particularly difficult for English language learners to develop digital literacy. Nonetheless, both English language proficiency and digital literacy are crucial for securing and maintaining well-paying jobs, helping children succeed in school, engaging in community activities, accessing community services and pursuing further education. (Harris n.d, cited in Reder et al., 2012)

Reder et al. (2011) argue that basic digital skills are so "central to academic success" (p. 22) for the Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA) population that the definition of second language literacy must be expanded to include digital literacy (Reder et al., 2012).

Stapleford says that independent access to internet can promote inclusion in learners with limited English proficiency. For instance, the internet can be used to translate essential information needed for day-to-day tasks. This in turn, will reduce dependency on others (Stapleford, 2014, cited in Stone and Maye, 2020).

Using digital tools both inside and outside the ESOL classroom can offer engaging and interactive opportunities for learners to practise various language components such as grammar, spelling and productive skills like speaking and writing. This, in turn, supports the development of their overall language proficiency.

### Navigating Everyday Services: Findings from Research Question Two

I’ll take this occasion to remind the readers about my second research question which looked at how digital practices support ESOL learners in accessing online services independently and how this relates to their autonomy. Learners in the study showed a strong desire to improve

their digital skills for practical reasons, especially for job searching, creating CVs and accessing online resources. Many learners understand that knowing how to search for jobs online is crucial because most job listings are now on digital platforms. One learner, Omar mentioned “"Apply for job using CV from the class. It is for M and S Warehouse. Now, waiting…”

Another learner Sayin said “Book appointment myself…before always husband or children”

Fatima's experience with Google Translate, BBC and YouTube for English practice and comprehension demonstrate how digital tools support language learning for her. "Listening on BBC and YouTube help me in English…. I use email, Google and Google Maps... I book appointment at daughter school online." "Yeah, I can search for jobs, like ... nail artist."

This newfound independence not only boosts their confidence but also fosters a sense of self-reliance and competence in navigating the digital world. Moreover, the ability to access educational tools online supports continuous learning and personal growth. The desire to improve digital skills, as highlighted by the learners in my study, highlights their intrinsic motivation to achieve practical goals and become more self-sufficient.

Ultimately, mastering basic digital skills allows ESOL learners to take control of their learning journey, participate actively in digital society and confidently handle day-to-day digitalised services, reflecting a significant increase in their autonomy.

### Autonomy through experiential and self-directed digital practice

As mentioned in chapter 2, learner autonomy is the “ability to take charge of one’s own learning”, noting that this ability “is not inborn but must be acquired either by ‘natural’ means or by formal learning, i.e.in a systematic, deliberate way”. (Holec, 1981)

The literature on autonomy offers many definitions, from simple to very complex. A straightforward one comes from Chan (2001), who says that when students cannot learn the way we teach them, we need to help them find their own ways to learn (Chan, 2001, p.1, cited in Ade-Ojo, 2005). Learner autonomy is mostly defined as a learner’s ability to take charge of their own learning. This means students take responsibility for different parts of the learning process, such as setting their own goals, choosing what to learn, deciding which resources and methods to use and evaluating how well they are doing (Cotterall, 2000).Within this context, the autonomous learner is seen as a decision-maker (Chan 2003) who exerts varying degrees of control over learning management, learning content and cognitive processes (Benson, 2001, cited in Illes, 2012).

There is an underlying assumption that autonomous learning naturally leads to successful language use in the future, with the belief that learners who have been properly trained in autonomy will be able to transfer their ability to manage the learning process to successfully performing in real-life communication outside the classroom. As Little articulates: "They become more autonomous in language learning in proportion as they become more autonomous in language use and vice versa." (Little, 2001, cited in Illes, 2012, p.223).

Nevertheless, several concerns can be raised about the appropriateness and effectiveness of learner autonomy, particularly considering the recent changes in the use of English. One such concern is how the concept of autonomy, defined in terms of control over the learning process, enables learners to become efficient and successful language users. Specifically, how does taking responsibility for their learning equip learners to negotiate meaning and solve problems arising from the international use of English? (Benson, 2001, cited in Illes, 2012, p.24)

Coffield et al. (2004) identify another issue relating to autonomy: the constructive friction that occurs in scenarios where the teacher expects students to demonstrate greater self-regulation, whereas destructive friction is experienced when students are either capable of more autonomy than their teachers allow or incapable of taking responsibility for their own learning in a loosely structured learning environment. These ideas suggest that teachers need to understand their students better than they currently do and to become more adaptable in the roles they play. While these notions may seem logical, particularly in extreme case scenarios, their practical effectiveness across higher education and for lifelong learning has yet to be extensively tested. (Coffield et al., 2004)

In my approach to teaching ESOL learners, I focused on several aspects of autonomy, guided by Ade Ojo's research (2005) on what autonomy means for these learners. A key focus was involving students in decision-making processes regarding their education. This included allowing them to participate in decisions about what should be taught and learnt, ensuring that the content was relevant and meaningful to their needs. I also involved them in making choices about what should be assessed, giving them a sense of ownership over their learning outcomes. Additionally, learners had input on how they preferred to be taught, particularly when it came to the types of teaching methods, they found effective, especially when working independently.

The learners suggested specific digital tools and platforms they wanted to learn about such as creating CVs, using online job platforms like Indeed and Total Jobs and uploading their CVs to these sites. They also expressed interest in navigating various online services such as council websites for benefits information, apps like Class Dojo used by schools for parent - teacher communication and systems like Swift queue for booking blood tests appointments. In terms of their learning preferences, they preferred starting with pair work to help them build confidence, before moving on to independent work while receiving support from the teacher when needed.

If we look at the connection between autonomy and digital skills, digital autonomy would be the capacity to maintain knowledge and control over one's own affairs in the digital domain. If adult ESOL learners lack the requisite knowledge and abilities, this is a concern especially at this time when more and more public and private services are transitioning to an entirely digital delivery paradigm. Because of this, they can end up needing help from others to manage their relationships in the digital space. This reduction in their authority may put their autonomy, financial security and physical health in jeopardy. It is important that these learners are equipped with the necessary digital skills. This can help them learn more independently because they do not need to rely on their teachers for practising their language skills. It offers students the chance to learn outside of the classroom and develop greater independence.

The key to unlocking classroom pedagogy and development of learner autonomy can be found in gaining a better understanding of how participation in digital activities leads to learner autonomy. In navigating this terrain with lower-level ESOL learners, I employed a trial-and-error approach to identify the most suitable digital tools. Through research and personal observations, I discovered several highly beneficial resources that resonated with student preferences. Padlet emerged as a valuable tool for facilitating writing tasks and enabling peer review among learners, fostering collaborative work even in remote learning settings. Additionally, I customised Live Worksheets to mirror traditional paper-based exercises, allowing students to engage in familiar activities online, particularly useful during the remote learning phase of the lockdown.

Live quiz sessions conducted through platforms like Kahoot and Quizizz served as interactive tools for reviewing topics, enhancing student engagement and encouraging active

participation in class. Microsoft Flipgrid proved instrumental in conducting speaking activities, enabling students to express preferences, discuss hobbies and engage in free-time activities as part of class activities.

Moreover, leveraging Microsoft PowerPoint, Word and Publisher, among other tools, further enriched the learning experience by incorporating multimedia presentations, document creation and data handling. These varied digital resources, chosen based on student preferences and research insights, played pivotal roles in fostering learner autonomy by engaging students, encouraging active participation and providing diverse avenues for skill development within the ESOL classroom. (Khan, 2024).

### Participatory pedagogy: learners as co-creators of the curriculum

Learners who are able to use technology on their own, develop a sense of identity, gain independence in their pursuits and ultimately become more well-rounded individuals with greater access and understanding of the world around them. Furthermore, my research shows that students gain self-assurance and mastery of their learning when they are actively involved in deciding what, how and what classroom activities they wish to participate in. In addition to making lessons more interesting and relevant, it encourages students to actively participate.

Chapter 2 discussed the participatory approach to education, which aims to increase students' comprehension and retention by active student participation in class using strategies such as group work, discussion and shared decision-making. The goal of this approach is to encourage students to take an active role in their own education by developing their capacity for critical analysis and creative problem solving. Teachers and educators may foster learning settings that are dynamic, inclusive and responsive to varied needs and viewpoints by using participatory strategies. It facilitates the shift from learners being passive recipients to learners becoming active participants in their language learning journey by including them as co-creators of their learning. (Anderson, 2024).

I first became aware of Participatory ESOL through the Community of Action online event by EFA, London, during the Covid-19 lockdown. The event showcased how Participatory ESOL can be used in remote classroom spaces. Although it was somewhat overwhelming to learn how to implement Participatory ESOL online while grappling with learners' digital poverty, as well as their low digital and language skills. It was clear that many teachers had attempted it in online spaces, but appropriate support and training are necessary. The webinar was attended by around 15 teachers who met once a month to discuss ideas on how to teach participatory techniques online, replacing sticky notes and flip charts with Jam board, Padlet, virtual slides, pictures and other digital tools. Though ESOL teachers are often constrained by awarding body exams, Participatory ESOL methods can still be effectively used to develop learners' language skills.

I also used participatory approaches such as problem posing and coding to enable learners to reflect challenges often faced by adult immigrant learners such as speaking in English in public areas such as public transport, housing troubles etc. Learners worked together in groups and displayed images or code of circumstances that concern them the most such as chatting to a bus driver in English, asking for help in a supermarket, loss of heritage language in their children, managing finances etc. Students in the class were asked questions such as "what do you see in the picture?" Where is everyone? Who are these individuals? What is the issue? What can be done? by the group that presents the pictures or codes with the help of the instructor. Through this strategy, learners are able to freely express themselves and offer answers through interactive ways. Translanguaging, in which students use their native tongue

when necessary to gain self-assurance before moving on to English, was used by learners with low speaking skills.

Learning became more relevant and meaningful with this method. Students were more engaged because they felt their opinions mattered. Seza pointed out, "Before, I think it is only me… but now, I know …. same problem everyone." By reflecting on and making decisions based on their own experiences, these sessions also assisted in the development of autonomy.

During the intervention phase, when questioned about their desired learning outcomes:

*Omar said,"Can we write about job? Like CV or apply for job? I need this for better job."*

*Seza asked,"We can practise calling reception? Sometimes I don't know right words… Like call GP or council."*

*Fatimah requested "I want to write to children school teacher….booking and paying in school online…I need this every day."*

*Wang also mentioned "I want to…...(access) Council app"*

Participatory approaches also foster a sense of community, helping learners to work together and promotes mutual support. In my study, group activities where learners worked together to solve problems or complete tasks were quite effective in promoting mutual support.

During the interview, Rebwar commented *"I like working together with Omar or Wang*

*"When we do computer work together ...he (Omar) give good ideas. Omar always help..."*

This approach encouraged motivation as learners saw the relevance of their learning to real-life challenges, encouraging them to actively participate and build confidence. It also allowed learners to critically engage with their realities while developing both language(speaking) and digital skills.

Throughout the data analysis process, motivation to advance digital and language abilities has also emerged as a recurring trend among my ESOL learners.

## Motivation and Digital skills

Motivation has been defined as the "drive" within human beings to achieve an objective (Harmer 2007, Rogers 2002, cited in Hudson, 2017). According to (Rogers, 2002, cited in Hudson, 2017), 'motivation' is among the most important "attributes learners bring to language learning" (Richards and Rogers 2014:28, cited in Hudson, 2017). Similarly, Hedge (2000, p.23, cited in Hudson, 2017) opines that motivation is of crucial importance in the classroom, whether learners arrive with it or whether they acquire it through classroom experiences". Ellis (1997:75) notes that motivation in L2 involves "attitudes and affective states that influence the degree of effort that learners make to learn an L2. According to Harmer (2013), a variety of elements contribute to such views; they include the degree to which a language is incorporated into the curriculum, the significance of the L2 outside of the classroom and any associations, positive or negative. (Hudson, 2017)

To understand the persistence of adult learners, it is crucial to identify the elements that help maintain their motivation and effort over time. Self-determination theory, closely related to both goal theory and expectancy-value theory, emphasises the impact of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation on learning. It suggests that extrinsic motivation can be a powerful positive force when the external goal is self-endorsed and pursued with a sense of volition (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p.55, cited in O'Neill and Thomson, 2013).

As learners progress towards their goals, their initial motivation helps foster a sense of confidence, which not only reinforces their effort but also builds a belief in their ability to achieve their objectives. When extrinsic motivators become internalised, they engage a sense of volition, further driving effort towards the goal and fostering autonomy. (O'Neill and Thomson, 2013)

Helping individuals identify specific long-term goals and the strategies to achieve them can play a significant role in sustaining motivation and enabling adults to persist through challenges. Setting realistic, attainable goals is also crucial for developing self-efficacy and self-confidence. Both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation can be harnessed positively to enhance and sustain motivation. While career goals are often a primary focus for adult learners, they are not the only motivation driving their pursuit of achievement.

This underscores the importance of a holistic approach to motivation, where both personal aspirations and external incentives are aligned to support adult learners. By recognising and nurturing these diverse motivational factors, educators can help learners not only achieve their immediate goals but also foster a lifelong commitment to personal growth and learning. (O'Neill and Thomson, 2013). Lewandowski (2021) asserts that empowering ESOL students to organise their own learning tasks by establishing goals enhances their motivation and problem-solving abilities. His study demonstrated that when learners establish their own goals, regardless of their personal circumstances, it enhances their language skills; setting a goal increases their likelihood of success in language learning even when other factors remain unchanged. (Lewandowski, 2021)

When exploring the motivation required to learn a foreign language, a variety of theories come into play. Gardner and Lambert (1972) describe it as "the combination of effort, desire to achieve the goal of learning the language and favourable attitudes towards learning the language" (cited in Noels, 2001, p. 43). It suggests that a learner is more likely to reach their desired level of proficiency, when all the three elements are present. However, understanding language learners as more than just students and acknowledging them as individuals with complex lives can help us grasp the evolving nature of their motivation. This perspective is particularly crucial in the context of adult learners in the ESOL programmes, where many are adapting to a new culture which they have not chosen for themselves. Their past experiences, or "life capital" (Consoli, 2021), play a significant role in their learning journey and serve as valuable resources in the classroom (Sidaway, 2021).

It is quite risky to categorise all ESOL students as having similar motivations as it overlooks their unique experiences and needs. Mercer (2011, p.4, cited in Sidaway, 2021) advocates for a person-in-context approach (Ushioda, 2009; in Sidaway, 2021), which offers deeper insights into the diverse realities within any given classroom. Ushioda (2016, p. 567) further argues for a "small lens" approach to language learning motivation research, promoting an in-depth investigation of a small group of learners. While this approach may limit generalisability, it aligns with the goal of understanding the nuanced and individualised nature of language learning motivation. Traditional, positivist approaches to research which often dominate the literature, may fall short of capturing the complex realities of these learners, which a small-scale, qualitative case study could reveal.

Sidaway further says that her research participants arrived in the United Kingdom seeking asylum, fleeing war or persecution, or to reunite with family members. Unlike learners in other contexts, they had not learnt English with the intention of moving to England or interacting with British people. Much of the existing research on motivation has focused on EFL learners, primarily teenagers or university students engaged in what Ushioda (2020) refers to as "elite multilingualism." This contrasts sharply with the experiences of adult ESOL learners in

English-dominant countries, who face unique challenges such as social exclusion, poverty and discrimination (Ushioda, 2020, p. 62, cited in Sidaway, 2021)

This scenario resonates with my ESOL learners, many of whom were refugees or asylum seekers from regions like Kurdistan, Sudan and Ukraine. They arrived either independently or to join family members. Their motivation to learn English and enhance their digital skills is distinct from that of EFL learners in private institutes or those pursuing higher education.

Understanding the motivation of ESOL learners requires moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and considering the broader social and cultural contexts that shape their experiences. By adopting a more personalised and context-sensitive approach to research, we can gain a richer understanding of the factors that drive these learners and the unique obstacles they face. This, in turn, can inform more effective teaching strategies that support not just language acquisition, but also the overall well-being and integration of ESOL learners into their new communities.

One of the learners, Wang mentioned in the pre intervention interview “I want to book blood test online…use English online apps for homework”.

Another learner Omar mentioned “Now everyone asks online cv apply …. job apply also online …. I have only paper CV..it is good if we make online cv learn apply job online because everything is online now”.

During the post intervention interview Raiham, Fatima and Sayin mentioned that they have enrolled themselves in basic digital skills class on top of their ESOL class to further their digital skills.

Sayin mentioned “I am very busy five days classes 3 days ESOL and 2 days computer class…I am learning more … …you said teacher try teaching assistant job…. I am trying…

Let us take an example of another learner, Raiham, a 20-year-old female who recently arrived in the UK (2021) from Kurdistan following her marriage. She promptly made the choice to join an ESOL class at Denton College. This decision, she said was influenced by her husband, an ex-ESOL student at the college who had come to England as a refugee.

Raiham's background in English was rooted in her education in Kurdistan. She mentioned, "I study English at college and school as well, but a lot at college." However, her transition to England revealed challenges in spoken English and comprehension. Raiham admitted, "My problems in English...is speaking or understanding." She faced difficulties in certain conversations and struggled to explain words to others.

Amid the challenges, Raiham identified positive aspects of language learning. She stated, "When you learn English…you learn more about other countries, I think." This broader perspective became a rewarding aspect of her English language endeavour.

Raiham expressed the idea that learning digital skills, including computer usage, is important because they can be valuable in various job settings. Specifically, Raiham suggested that as ESOL students like her enter the workforce in the future, it is likely they will encounter situations where computer skills are necessary.

"Maybe when in the future you work, and you need computer work.”

Raiham's digital skills journey was equally significant. While she possessed a basic understanding of computers and the Internet, she confessed unfamiliarity with certain tasks. Reflecting on creating PowerPoint presentations during her ESOL classes, she noted, "Some things… new for me, but some things I know before in Kurdistan." One of the new things that

she learnt was sending emails, "Yeah, I can use it now...I send emails to my friends or you, teacher. Every time not coming, I send email to you, I email when I go Kurdistan….in Kurdistan Teams not working…I email you ...you send me work …. very very helpful."

Raiham aimed to navigate websites for practical purposes. She understood the significance of improving these skills, while not entirely self-reliant. She believed that technology proficiency was vital for ESOL learners, stressing that "You need it...it is important for future."

Her insight that "You need it...it is important for your future" reflects an awareness of the practical applications of these skills beyond the classroom. By acknowledging that computer skills would be necessary in various job settings, Raiham highlighted a forward-looking perspective that many learners share. A few decades ago, digitisation only affected a few professions, but now most workers in OECD countries use the internet for their jobs. It is widely believed that digital literacy will soon be essential for most workers (Berger and Frey, 2016). The specific digital skills needed vary by industry, market position and business strategy (Curtarelli et al., 2017, cited in Kispeter, 2018). The UK Government's Digital Strategy emphasises the importance of digital skills for the UK to become a leading digital economy, suggesting that everyone needs these skills to fully participate in society (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2017, cited in Kispeter, 2018). There is a government consultation on improving adult basic digital skills and establishing new national standards for digital skills qualifications and training (Department for Education, 2018, cited in Kispeter, 2018). According to a survey, 79% of UK adults have a full set of basic digital skills, while 8% have none. Among employed individuals,10% lack basic digital skills. However, the survey also found that work motivates people to improve their digital skills, with a third of those who had improved their skills in the past year doing so to enhance their job performance (Lloyds Bank, 2018, cited in Kispeter, 2018).

Raiham's exposure to digital tools like PowerPoint and email during her ESOL classes allowed her to complement language learning with practical digital tasks.

## Digital skills through the lens of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Raiham's digital skills journey can be studied through the lens of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which was introduced by psychologist Lev Vygotsky as mentioned in the preceding chapter. ZPD distinguishes between what a student can do on their own and what they can accomplish with the instruction and help of a professional partner. The ZPD refers to the learner's ability to successfully complete tasks with the help of more skilled others and it is frequently mentioned in conjunction with supported or scaffolded learning. ZPDs are created by assisting with the cognitive structuring of learning activities and being aware of the learner's present capabilities. Sociocultural (e.g., Sivan, 1986) and mainstream motivational theorists (e.g., Brophy, 1999) have observed that these aspects of the ZPD make it an inherently motivating zone; the ZPD is optimally challenging (Sivan, 1986) because tasks are calibrated to the learner's level, while appropriate support and scaffolding ensure that tasks are completed successfully. Receiving aid from others also facilitates the learner's ability to tackle challenging assignments, control or manage stress and anxiety. Working within the ZPD is also intrinsically rewarding since it entails the learner taking charge of their own education, shifting it from the teacher or another more experienced person. The student is motivated by this transfer of authority since it recognises their mastery of the material and consequently, their growing efficacy. (Walker, 2015)

Raiham initially had a minimal comprehension of computers and the Internet, which reflected her current developmental level. This fundamental skill was gained in Kurdistan, where she learnt to use computer. This grounding provided the foundation upon which further abilities

might be built. However, when she began her ESOL classes, she discovered gaps in her digital skills.

With the support that she received in the class and the structured environment of her ESOL classes, Raiham began to bridge these gaps. She reflected on her learning process, noting that some aspects were entirely new to her while others built on what she already knew. For instance, learning to send emails became a significant milestone. She described how she started using email to communicate with friends and her teacher, especially during times when she could not attend classes or when she was in Kurdistan and needed to receive classwork. This progression from unfamiliarity to competence highlights the critical role of guidance in ZPD.Raiham's recognition of the importance of digital skills further illustrates the concept of ZPD. She understood that improving her technological proficiency was essential not only for her integration into her new environment but also for her future career prospects.

## Confidence, Belonging and Integration: Findings from Research Question Three

My third research question asked how the development of basic digital skills shapes Entry 1 ESOL learners' confidence, autonomy, integration and sense of belonging within their new social environment. Seza and Raiham's journeys illustrate this clearly.

Let us take the example of Seza, a 34-year-old Iraqi woman, who arrived in England in 2016.Seza relocated to England to join her husband who came here as a refugee a few years before her. The transition to a new country brought its own set of challenges and opportunities for her.

Seza's initial linguistic challenges were quite pronounced. She spoke Kurdish and faced difficulties in communicating effectively in English. However, over time, she worked towards improving her English proficiency. Reflecting on her early days, Seza mentioned, "I did not understand. I could not speak. Yeah, I had to use an interpreter."

Her determination to learn English led her to enrol in Denton college in 2017. However, due to family commitments, such as the birth of her child, she had to pause her studies temporarily. Despite these challenges, she restarted her English classes in 2021 in my ESOL Entry 1 class. Recounting her journey, Seza noted, "I went to college in 2017, but I had the baby, so I stopped it. Last year, I started again."

One of the notable aspects of Seza's journey is her transition to using digital technology. Seza initially had minimal exposure to the internet and digital tools in her home country. Upon her arrival in England, she gradually began to learn how to use a computer and navigate the online realm. "When I came here…. Only then learn computer and internet," she stated. She emphasised how her confidence grew over time, even using mobile applications to translate words and phrases between English and her native language, Kurdish.

Seza's progress with digital skills extended to various aspects of her daily life. For instance, she shared how she now independently schedules appointments using her mobile phone. "Now … can book blood appointment. Before, I don't… I need my husband," she said.

She had her first experience of digital skill development in my ESOL class. Seza recalled, "Last year, this class, that was first time." With guidance, she learnt to use email, search online for information and even create basic PowerPoint presentations. She also explored translation apps to understand unfamiliar English words. "Sometimes I use translator my phone because some words very difficult. ...I do not know in English," she explained.

She expressed her willingness to encourage fellow ESOL students to embrace digital tools and language learning, saying, "Yeah, I tell my friends to use …. It is important. Seza continues to be able to interact confidently in her new environment with increasing language proficiency and digital skills.

The four questions below were designed to explore these themes directly with learners.

As mentioned in chapter 4, to understand how digital skills impacted learners' sense of belonging and integration, I asked them the following questions:

**1.How did using digital tools affect your confidence in using English outside of class?**

**2.Did digital tools help you talk better with classmates and teachers?**

**3.Do you feel more connected to your classmates and community because of using digital tools in class?**

**4.Did digital tools help you better understand the culture of England?**

While not explicitly mentioned by all the learners, the ability of the learners to engage with digital tools, such as Microsoft Teams and Outlook for communication likely contributed to connection and sense of belonging by facilitating communication with peers and teachers.

The motivation for learning English and digital skills was often linked to practical goals, such as finding employment and overall integration into the host society. Learners recognised the importance of digital skills in accessing job opportunities and interacting with various aspects of daily life.

Raiham's growing familiarity with digital tools instilled confidence in her ability to use technology. Her acknowledgement of the importance of digital skills for future prospects implies a potential positive impact on her confidence and integration into society.

*"Now using Class Dojo for my kids' schoolteacher …She message me …. Teams to speak with friends in class …. if no coming class …. call my friends on Teams."*

Omar's journey highlighted the positive impact of digital tools on his language learning and integration within the community.

*Apply for job ...using CV from class for M and S Warehouse. Now, waiting. Using Teams talking and practise English with Wang and Rebwar"*

## ESOL Learners and the Road to Integration

As established in the literature review, integration is a dynamic and multifaceted process that extends well beyond language acquisition. English language proficiency is widely acknowledged as a critical factor in helping newly arrived migrants integrate with long-term residents, yet it is not the sole determinant of successful integration (Gidley and Jayaweera, 2010, cited in Court, 2017). The findings of this study reflect this complexity, demonstrating that digital skill development within ESOL education contributes meaningfully to learners' confidence, independence and sense of belonging, but that these gains take place against a backdrop of significant social and structural challenges.

Policy makers have long viewed ESOL classes as a tool to facilitate integration for migrants and refugees (Cooke and Simpson, 2008, cited in Court, 2017). However, political rhetoric has often associated English language proficiency with national security, framing language barriers as a risk rather than a social challenge requiring investment and support. Such rhetoric promotes a monolingual ideology that downplays the benefits of multilingualism and

marginalises other languages and cultures (Simpson, 2012, cited in Court, 2017) and frequently overshadows other critical factors in integration such as access to employment and experiences of discrimination. Contrary to this portrayal, many migrants are eager to learn English but face real barriers including long waiting lists for ESOL classes and limited digital access (McIntyre, 2017; NATECLA, 2014, cited in Court, 2017).

Research by Hodge, Pit and Barton (NRDC, 2004, cited in Pattar, 2010) found that asylum seekers and refugee ESOL learners expressed a strong need for opportunities to interact with native English speakers, as such interactions are crucial for building friendships and practising language skills. However, opportunities for part-time ESOL learners to engage with native speakers are often limited (Pattar, 2010). This lack of interaction can be a significant barrier to improving language proficiency and fully integrating into the community, a finding that is strongly reflected in the data gathered for this study.

The integration of ESOL learners into British society is not a straightforward process. It is messy, layered and deeply human. Too often, policy reduces it to language acquisition, as if mastering grammar and vocabulary alone were sufficient for belonging. Many ESOL learners, especially asylum seekers and refugees, are simultaneously trying to make sense of a new culture, navigate unfamiliar systems and rebuild their lives after trauma or displacement. When society frames newcomers as problems to be solved rather than people with potential, integration becomes a burden that they sometimes carry alone.

## Digital Skills and Integration: Evidence from this Study

The findings of this study demonstrate that digital skills development within ESOL education has a tangible impact on learners' integration journeys. As outlined in the refugee integration framework discussed in Chapter 2 (Potocky, 2022), digital skills affect multiple domains of refugee life simultaneously, from language learning and cultural preservation to employment, housing and social connection. The data gathered in this study reflects all four levels of this framework, with participants demonstrating growing digital competence that supported their independence, confidence and engagement with the host community.

However, the risks associated with digital engagement also emerged from the data. As Benton (2019) notes, false information spreads easily through digital tools and social media, making it harder for refugees and migrants to make informed decisions and potentially putting them at risk. Many online platforms that once helped refugees find education and services have become unreliable, with broken links and outdated information creating what Benton (2019) describes as digital litter. For vulnerable learners with limited digital literacy, these risks are particularly acute, and they underline the importance of developing not only basic digital skills but also critical digital literacy within ESOL education.

## Omar’s story of integration

Let us look at Omar, one of my ESOL learners who has been mentioned before. He is from Sudan and came to England as an asylum seeker in 2016. His narrative fits well within the refugee integration framework. His digital skills helped him learn a language, make friends and even secure employment. He continues to face significant challenges, but his growing digital literacy helps him integrate into the host culture. Omar came to England due to severe economic difficulties in Sudan. He sought asylum to escape the challenging circumstances in his home country. He initially arrived alone but his family joined him after his asylum claim was approved by the Home Office. As an Arabic speaker, Omar initially faced significant challenges in learning English and fully participating in his new community. “I come here alone, but I want to learn English good,” he shared.

Omar exhibited significant dedication to improving his language skills despite his limitation in formal English education. In Sudan, he studied English for only a year. “Only one year I study English before,” he recalled. “In my country, I studied a little bit, private English lessons for 3-4 months. “Yes, your class is first time I learn English in UK “But I work hard…. learn more.”

Omar mentioned about the challenges he faces while learning English, including difficulties with spelling, pronunciation and understanding rapid speech. These obstacles were also evident in his day-to-day interactions. He reflected on the practical difficulties of his language barrier by mentioning “Sometimes when I speak to GP or go council house ...I don’t get …all the words to tell my problem. I become nervous.".

Omar's integration extended beyond learning English in the classroom. He participated in local events and tried to connect with his classmates. “Sometimes Wang call me, Rebwar call me, I also call on Teams and we together practice… hmmm speaking, sometimes write each other, Rebwar always make spelling mistake (chuckles)but can understand he speak very very good” he said.” His improved language skills also enabled him to engage in social activities that he previously found challenging. He emphasised his growth in communication by saying “I write texts to my friends now. Before, I make many mistakes,”

Omar also mentioned that he sometimes practices speaking in English with his young British neighbour. Omar mentioned that he tried to engage in conversation with him despite the fast pace of his speech. “I speak with British man…boy I think 21 -22 ah he is …neighbour…always ask for change or cigarette (chuckles) he speak very fast,” Omar explained. “But slowly, slowly, I can understand and speak with him.” Omar’s motivation for learning English was driven by his need to improve his job prospects and quality of life in England. He emphasised “English is important for job, talking with GP... and many things in life,”.

It is quite evident that digital tools played a transformative role in his learning journey. Initially, his digital literacy was low, but he became more proficient and confident over time. “Before, I have no knowledge of computer". “Now I use YouTube for learn grammar and punctuation. It help me.” He emphasised his progress in writing and accessing digital resources by saying, “Before, not sure how to use email”. “I can send email to you teacher,”

Omar often acknowledged the significant impact that digital tools had on his language learning. He often said, “This ...cv writing, email writing, apps ...all are very good for me... I need it in my job. He recognised that digital skills combined with his own efforts, played a vital role in overcoming language barriers. “Rebwar work in M and S, he told me… Apply for job using CV from class... It is for M and S Warehouse. Now, waiting”. He currently works in chicken factory while attending ESOL classes. “I work in chicken factory…M and S better …because more salary”, he said. Omar also joined a Sudanese Facebook group, which helped him find information on community events, jobs and houses for rent in Denton. “I am on FB group ..it is a Sudanese group…..any information like job, cheap rent place …any gathering…everything is there in the group.”

Omar’s story shows that technology can facilitate language development, enhance sense of belonging and integration of migrants into their new societies. Omar’s journey of integration in England closely reflects the four levels of the refugee integration framework. In the foundation level of rights and responsibilities, it is quite likely that his growing digital literacy helped him access information about his legal rights and responsibilities as a refugee in England. At the facilitators level, Omar interacted with platforms like YouTube to improve his grammar and communication skills. It demonstrated the importance of technology in language acquisition and cultural adaptation. At the social connections level, Omar built social bonds with his classmates and maintained connections through digital tools like MS Teams. He also formed

social bridges with members of the host society, such as his British neighbour, with whom he practised English. Finally, at the markers and means level, digital skills were crucial for Omar's job search and education. It enabled him to apply for jobs online and improve his chances of securing employment which is a key indicator of integration success as per the refugee integration framework.

Digital skills have been instrumental in helping Omar navigate language, social and practical aspects of life in England, emphasising its importance in the resettlement process. However, according to the refugee integration framework, it has several drawbacks as well. Digital tools can take the place of face-to-face interactions which may hinder refugees' ability to form genuine connections and completely assimilate into their new communities.

According to the article by Migration policy (Benton, 2019) false information may spread through digital or online tools, apps and social media, making it harder for refugees and migrants to make decisions and can even put them in danger. Many websites, online maps and platforms that once helped refugees find education and other services are now full of broken links or outdated ads for things that no longer exist. You can think of these "ghost" websites and lost links as internet "litter." When content is moved, renamed, or deleted, clicking the link shows a "page not found" or "404 error" message. This problem, called "link rot," is growing bigger. It affects everyone, but it can be especially hard for archivists and historians trying to do their work. But this broken link rot and websites or apps that look like they are still being updated when they are not, are clearly bad for vulnerable people and refugees. People who are migrants or refugees often value information they find on social media more than information they find on official websites like those run by the government. A 2016 study by Open University and France Médias Monde, led by Marie Gillespie and Claire Marous Guivarch, found that refugees attempting to reach Europe were exposed to a great deal of false information on social media, including rumours and conspiracy theories, which increased their vulnerability to exploitation during their journey. (Benton, 2019)

## Rethinking Integration

Some critics argue that the concept of integration reinforces a normative ideal that places the burden of change disproportionately on migrants rather than on host societies (Spencer and Charlsey, 2016, cited in Court, 2017). Integration is more productively understood as a two-way process involving both migrants and host communities (Phillimore and Goodson, 2008, cited in Court, 2017). The disadvantages faced by many migrants and refugees, compounded by negative media and political positioning, often lead to marginalisation rather than integration (Cooke and Simpson, 2009, cited in Court, 2017).

While integration is undoubtedly important, it is more complex and challenging than it may seem. As an educator and researcher, but also as an adult Muslim migrant woman, I have encountered first-hand the stereotypes and perceptions that can hinder the integration of migrant communities. One of the most persistent issues is the way people of certain religions, particularly Muslims are perceived. There is a tendency to view us as a monolithic group. Religion is vast, and within any one religion, people can hold a wide range of beliefs and practices. Even when people identify with the same faith, they are not mirror images of one another. There are individual differences shaped by personal experience, upbringing, cultural background, education and even by what someone chooses or chooses not to believe. Each person may also be at a completely different point in their journey of faith, whether they are questioning, exploring, deepening or simply living their beliefs quietly in their own way. It is important to remember that religious identity is deeply personal and shaped by numerous factors. Assuming uniformity within a religious group not only overlooks this complexity but also erases the uniqueness of everyone's journey. Another common stereotype is the

assumption that a hijab-clad Muslim woman is oppressed or coerced into wearing the hijab by her family. This reflects a deeply reductive view that strips Muslim women of their agency and ignores the complex, deeply personal reasons why women choose to wear the hijab. For many, it is an expression of faith, identity and empowerment rather than submission. Such assumptions not only misrepresent the lived experiences of Muslim women but also create barriers to integration by fostering misunderstanding, othering and exclusion, making it harder for women like me to be seen as individuals rather than symbols of a faith that is so often misunderstood.

Given my own experiences, I can identify with ESOL learners, who face even greater challenges due to their limited English proficiency. Addressing the challenges of integration, particularly for migrant communities, requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond language acquisition. Encouraging people to engage with individuals from diverse backgrounds on a personal level can help dismantle prejudices and foster a more inclusive environment. Moreover, creating platforms for diverse voices and experiences to be shared can promote greater understanding and respect.

### Multimodal Evidence of Learning

A further finding from this study concerns how learners' progress became visible — not through conventional written tests, but through multiple, overlapping modes of evidence. Fatima's growing confidence emerged through her spoken account of using Google Translate and BBC content. Wang's progress was captured in a Padlet post co-written with a peer. Omar's CV, created and submitted through the ESOL programme, became tangible proof of his ability to apply digital skills to a real-world goal. Raiham's emails to her teacher, sent from Kurdistan when Teams was unavailable, demonstrated written competence in an authentic communicative context.

This multimodal evidence which are spoken, written, digital and practical offered a richer and more accurate picture of learner progress than any single assessment method could provide. For Entry 1 ESOL learners, whose written English often lags behind their spoken comprehension and practical capability, multimodal assessment captures competencies that traditional testing overlooks entirely. This pattern aligns with broader scholarship on multimodality, which recognises that meaning-making and communication occur across multiple modes — spoken, written, visual and digital (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001) rather than through a single channel such as writing alone.

### Beyond the Research Questions: Emergent Findings

In addition to the findings addressing each research question directly, two further themes emerged through the recursive, inductive phase of analysis described in Chapter 4. These themes, the relationship between learners' educational backgrounds and their digital skills development and the role of digital skills in bridging gaps in guided learning hours extend the scope of this study's findings beyond its original research questions.

### How Learners' Backgrounds Shape Digital and Language Skills

In my research, I have also found out that the personal and educational backgrounds of learners significantly shape their experiences and outcomes in language learning. Factors such as prior education, cultural context, socioeconomic status and personal motivations play a critical role in how learners' approach and engage with novel resources.

If we look at my learner Fatima's case study who didn't study English in school in Iran but said she had some exposure to English outside the classroom. She mentioned "No…English in class but outside sometimes friends speak English." Her previous exposure to English

influenced her strategy for language learning in the ESOL classroom. She mentioned, “I have a problem with speaking, yes and spelling... new word.” Her exposure to English in Iran provided her with a starting point but she still faced challenges in fluency and vocabulary. She also mentioned being able to use smart phones and the internet prior to intervention. After intervention, she started to actively seek resources like BBC and YouTube for practising English, stating, “I can practise English speaking, listening on the BBC and YouTube.”

Raiham, the 20-year-old learner from Kurdistan, had studied English in both college and school. Since she learnt some English in her country, she was able to progress well in her reading and writing but she struggled in speaking and understanding the British accent. She expressed, “My problems in English... it is about speaking…and sometimes white people speak very fast. ..no understand”. Her decision to join an ESOL class was also influenced by her husband’s experience as a former ESOL student at the college. Her personal networks, cultural contexts and her background impacted her learning decision and affected her perspective on learning. She mentions, “When you learn a new language…you learn more about other countries…other languages… other cultures, I think.” When I recently met Raiham, she informed me that she had been enrolled in the college's Essential Digital Skills course and was set to complete Entry 3 level ESOL course. Her next goal is to become a teaching assistant. Her background in English from both school and college in Kurdistan, laid a foundation that has helped her make strides in English.

Another learner, Seza, comes from a background with limited digital and English skills but she went to college in Kurdistan and worked as a primary school teacher for a few years before she had her first child. She mentioned “In Kurdistan I work in school…schoolteacher ... small kids. “During the post -intervention semi-structured interview, she mentioned “And GP or any place anywhere ...I can make appointment now… today I called GP. I made the appointment for myself. Before…. husband or interpreter all the time ...I couldn’t.” In her case, her personal circumstances, which was her job in Kurdistan and relying on her husband or interpreters influenced her initial engagement with technology and language. Seza’s progress in digital skills, her ability to make appointments independently goes on to show how her background drives her to become more independent.

Again, if we consider Omar’s background and experience, it is clear that both played a big role in shaping his approach to learning English. Coming from Sudan in 2016, he explained,” I am from Sudan, I came to the UK in 2016…I came to the UK because there is money problems in my country …I came here as an asylum seeker to seek protection…. came alone now I live with my family after home office accepted my application to call my wife… who joined in 2020. He had some exposure to English before he came to the UK. He mentioned “In my country, I studied a little bit, private English lessons for 3-4 months. “Yes, your class is first time I learn English in the UK and after that I worked hard myself to work on English. I now buy some books and tried to understand if I find new word I use Google to find the meaning of that word.”

Digital tools became a turning point in his language learning journey. Although he began with little digital knowledge, he gradually became more comfortable and confident. “Before, I have no knowledge of computer,” he shared, but now he actively uses YouTube to learn grammar and punctuation. “I can send email to you, teacher,” he said proudly. “Before, I not sure how to use email. “I still try to go to YouTube to improve my English”.

Another learner, Wang came to the UK from China as an asylum seeker. He mentioned that he had no background in English. His only experience with digital tools was using a smartphone and that was where he started. He mentioned “China never study ..English… when I hear English…. very hard.”

“I know phone (shows his phone) I can use it, but computer… no. Now I try to learn slowly slowly. “In the classroom, he often needed more support than his classmates—Omar, Raiham and Fatimah, who had some previous experience with English. The LSA (Learning Support Assistant) and I worked closely with Wang to support his digital and language skills.

Some ESOL students can benefit if they already possess some knowledge of the English language and some basic digital skills. It simplifies the first steps of learning a new language and doing simple digital tasks. Their educational or academic background provides them with some sense of familiarity in recognising certain English words or navigating a smartphone or computer. Students with some background understanding of digital tools and English were able to make quicker progress in reading, writing and using online resources than those who had no exposure to either before. This was true for Omar and Raiham.

According to Schellekens et al., migrants and refugees who are enrolled in ESOL programmes come from widely varying educational backgrounds. The level of English proficiency varies greatly, ranging from none at all to mastery in professional fields. From having little to no prior schooling in their own country to having a great deal of competence, education and experience. In 2021, 50% of migrants in the UK had post-secondary education as compared to 39% of UK-born citizens. There is a significant economic benefit from the high degree of expertise and experience that immigrants and refugees bring with them. However, they are unable to reach their full potential if they lack adequate English language proficiency. It negatively impacts them in the job market and often limits them to jobs that are below their skill and education level (Schellekens et al., 2005).

Higton et al. highlighted the challenge ESOL providers face in addressing learners with no literacy while also serving those with advanced education and expertise. Many learners with limited formal schooling prefer community-based providers over larger Further Education (FE) institutions. These learners often report feeling intimidated by formal settings and find comfort and support in smaller community settings (Higton et al., 2019). It is quite apparent that digital skills are closely linked to language proficiency. Learners with higher educational backgrounds often have good independent study skills to make progress in language classrooms and gain employment. However, learners with limited educational experiences often struggle with both English and digital literacy skills. To bridge these gaps, they may need more targeted and explicit interventions.

## From Gaps to Gains

As per my findings highlighted in chapter 4, five out of 13 of my ESOL research participants went on to join the basic digital skills course provided by the college on top of the ESOL course. The enrolment of these students in the essential digital skills course beyond the intervention phase highlights their long-term engagement and interest in digital literacy. Rebwar mentioned during the semi-structured interview “I am very very busy, Monday, Wednesday and Friday ESOL classes, Tuesday …computer class but it is good I am learning more ..it’s good for us”, she said.

The progression of all my learners to Entry 2 after passing their Entry 1 exams supports the effectiveness of integrating digital tools into the ESOL curriculum. It often takes Entry level ESOL students two years at a level to pass all their skills exam and move up to the next level. The sustained engagement suggests that learners recognise the long-term significance of digital skills. It also indicates that once learners become comfortable with digital tools, they are more likely to continue using them for further education and employment opportunities. It also calls for ongoing opportunities for learners to further enhance their digital literacy.

Fatimah, the learner who has been mentioned before, mentioned that she didn’t find class time enough. She said, "I want to learn fast but in class only little time. I use app at home and practise." She liked to use Spell city to help her learn words. She said, "this is good for spelling at home, teacher."

Another student, Rebwar, who finished Entry 1 and passed their exam, said "The class time not enough for me…. I need more practice. I use Google after class," he explains. He said that it helped him study for his exam. "I practise in internet every day after class".

Like the students stated above, many ESOL students complain about insufficient classroom teaching and learning hours. Years ago, I had a young asylum seeker who would often say how much he wanted to attend these ESOL sessions every day. "Teacher, why only three days? Why not every day? I no job, no family, no friends I feel depressed (at home). Digital technology may allow learners to bridge this gap between their formal education and the hours needed to achieve significant progress in English language proficiency. My ESOL learners' use of digital resources such as online apps and language learning platforms like YouTube demonstrates their desire to expand learning outside the classroom. It can compensate for the limited guided learning hours (GLH) offered in conventional ESOL courses. Online educational tools and apps allow students to practise English independently outside of the classroom, reinforcing the skills they learnt in class. They also let learners to practise at their own speed. Many students report using their phones or laptops outside of the classroom to seek for new vocabulary, listen to English videos, or practise pronunciation, so self-guided study might help bridge the hours gap.

According to Hullford-Wood (2024), the use of digital tools provides an excellent chance to extend learning outside the classroom. By utilising technology, students can extend their study time while also filling gaps in their guided learning hours (GLH). This is especially important in ESOL education, because learners' prior education and literacy levels vary, making it impossible to standardise the number of hours required for development. Research conducted by the Association of Colleges (NRDC and UCL, 2015, cited in Hullford-Wood, 2024) found that a single 12-week course with 60 GLH is frequently insufficient for learners with no English language or limited literacy abilities to make significant progress and pass their skills exam. (Hullford-Wood, 2024)

For far too many ESOL students, significant classroom time is required to make meaningful and sustained development. There was a lot of talk about not having enough time in the interviews, and some people could not spend a lot of time studying or participating as much as they would have liked. Despite these limitations, many students have made active, autonomous attempts to improve their English skills outside of the classroom. These include conducting regular online searches, reviewing vocabulary, taking notes, photographing learning materials and interacting with people outside of class. (Hullford-Wood, 2024)

However, compensating for a lack of sufficient Guided Learning Hours (GLH) with digital skills only addresses one side of the coin. When it comes to learning English in and out of the classroom, adult learners, particularly ESOL learners, confront a variety of psychological, social, economic and emotional barriers. Motivation is pivotal for engaging with English outside of the classroom. According to Hullford-Wood (2024), maintaining adult learners' motivation over time may be more difficult than recruiting them into ESOL courses. It is especially relevant in the field of adult education. Fear of failure, lack of confidence and previous poor educational experiences all play a significant role in restricting the ability to fully bridge the GLH gap.

Furthermore, social barriers make it difficult to expand learning outside of the classroom. Women ESOL learners, particularly those with several children, frequently have to balance caregiving and household duties at the same time, leaving little time for individual study. Last year, my students Maryam and Gulafshan* expressed similar concerns when I advised the class to spend some time learning English outside of the classroom if they wanted to progress quickly. "Teacher…no time... home cooking, cleaning, children going to classes…. no time to study". On the other hand, some ESOL learners work shifts and work long hours at night, which limits their ability to engage in learning outside of the classroom. During a session, one

of my learners, Rebwar* mentioned ““I don’t sleep last night ..all night I am working 8-9 hours and come straight to class …sorry about it”.

Over the years, I have also noticed that many ESOL learners, particularly asylum seekers who are not eligible to work, as well as those who are unemployed or earn low wages, face financial barriers to owning a proper smart phone, data plans, or Wi-Fi set up at home to engage with digital skills outside of the classroom. According to the article by (Parliament.uk, 2023) there is a lot of worry about digital poverty in the UK and the rising cost of living is making more and more people cut back on or cancel their internet plans. (Parliament.uk, 2023)

Almost all of the people who responded to my study (Khan, 2021), which focussed on the perceptions of students and teachers towards remote learning during the lockdown, agreed that most pre-entry ESOL students do not have access to the right ICT resources or the skills to use these technologies. One of the teachers said “The biggest barrier is that most of my students do not have laptops/computers or access to the internet. They depend on getting their homework packs in the mail. Another respondent said, “learners are not accessing classes because of lack of digital resource and domestic reasons, poor connection and technology at either end making it hard to always effectively assess….”. (Khan, 2021)

Also, adult English as a Second Language (ESOL) learners often have mental and psychological issues. Many ESOL learners assert that they have anxiety, or PTSD, which makes it difficult for them to fully engage in their learning outside of college. I have also seen way too many students drop out of ESOL classes over the years, saying that they had to because of their mental health.

According to the research by Agbaso and Roberts (2023), prolonged and complex migrant traumas are hard to understand and often affect the lives of migrant adult language learners. They are one of the many things that prevent learners from learning English. In addition to having good teaching skills and specialised knowledge, ESOL teachers may have to deal with issues that are outside the usual responsibilities of language teachers because of the mental health needs of students who have been through trauma ( Agbaso and Roberts, 2023). Teachers might think that "the average adult learner" would have a longer attention span, be more mature cognitively and understand concepts more deeply (Dörnyei, 2009, cited in Agbaso and Roberts, 2023). They might also think that "the average adult learner" would be more dedicated to their education, more focused and work harder (Day et al., 2011, cited in Agbaso and Roberts, 2023). However, these assumptions might be far from reality in an adult ESOL classroom.

## Conclusion

There is another, less positive aspect of digital skills worth briefly acknowledging here. Oxford’s word of the year for 2024, ‘brain rot’, is defined as the perceived decline in a person's mental or intellectual state linked to excessive consumption of trivial or low-quality online content, with usage of the term rising 230% between 2023 and 2024 (Heaton, 2024). I see a version of this at my own college, where under-19 ESOL students are regularly asked to hand in their phones because of the distraction they cause, and research such as the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development Study has linked heavy screen use in young people to poorer mental health outcomes (Gardner, 2023). I recognise something of this in my own relationship with my phone too, and a balance clearly needs to be struck between the screen time that supports learning and the screen time that erodes wellbeing.

Who is responsible for striking that balance, and what happens when it is not struck, matter more than a passing observation about phone use. Left unaddressed, this is not a neutral gap. The same learners this study identifies as gaining the most from digital engagement, namely those with the least prior digital confidence, the fewest resources and the most to gain from

autonomous online practice, are also the least likely to have had support in developing critical, self-regulating digital habits. They are therefore arguably the most exposed to its risks, in much the same way that digital exclusion itself falls unevenly (British Academy, 2022; Parliament.uk, 2023). This has practical implications for Curriculum Design, Development and CPD in ESOL. Digital skills provision should not stop at teaching learners to use tools; it should also build in an explicit, critical strand on how, and how much, to engage with them. CPD for ESOL practitioners should equip staff to model and teach that judgement, rather than leaving phone use to be managed only as a matter of classroom discipline.

The volume of recent media and academic attention to phone dependency and 'brain rot' suggests this is a substantial topic in its own right, with other dimensions that fall beyond the scope of this study; it stands, though, as a valuable direction for future research into ESOL learners' digital wellbeing specifically.

This conclusion naturally makes me reflect on the limitations of my study. Although digital skills are highly promising in supporting the language skills of adult ESOL learners and helping them to socially to integrate and independently access resources, certain limitations which may have influenced the scope and depth of the findings. A few students were unable to take part in the semi-structured interviews due to reasons such as relocation or mental health difficulties. I couldn't get in touch with these learners through follow-up emails and calls, one of them outrightly refused to give an interview. The perspectives of these students who may have faced the greatest difficulty with technology and language are under-represented in this study. If they had been included, we may have obtained a fuller picture of the difficulties they encountered and a better insight on the overall students' motivation, barriers and success with technology.

In the following chapter, which will be the final chapter of my thesis, I will examine the context of my study, summarise my research findings and provide practical advice to educators and policymakers.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations:

### Introduction

A few months ago, as I was heading down the busy corridor with students leaving for home after their morning ESOL classes, I heard someone call out to me, "Teacher, how are you doing?" I got distracted by the hubbub of students laughing and talking to each other. "Hello, Teacher," said Seza, Rebwar and Reza almost simultaneously. The sight of my old students after two years made me smile: "Oh hello, you all must be in Entry 3 at this point, is not it?". They all grinned and nodded, while Reza responded, "Of course," she seemed confident and proud while saying that. Seza reacted by adding that all she had to do was pass her writing exam and she would move on to level one. Oh, wonderful! What about digital resources? Do you still use them to study English? I asked. Rebwar gave an answer: "Yes, I do use them all the time …. BBC English, Word wall, YouTube English video... "I am also doing computer classes with ESOL ...now very busy...3 days ESOL ...2 days computer," Rezan stated. That's fantastic, you know. I am proud of how far you've come and you should be too, I remarked. Thank you, teacher, they all said simultaneously. After we said our goodbyes, they all went their own ways, and I walked to the staffroom to get ready for the next lesson I was about to teach. Installing Microsoft Teams, utilising it for texting and accessing resources and links to practise tasks on the class teams' site were all on the agenda. I could not help but assume that this would improve students' confidence in the same way that it had for the students that I just met.

I tried to recollect these learners' stories of seeking refuge in the UK, they either came as asylum seekers or to join their spouse after they were granted refugee status in the UK. My thoughts also hovered over the riots that erupted in the summer of this year, which may reflect the current state of migrant attitudes in the United Kingdom. On July 29, 2024, three young girls were killed and numerous others injured in Southport, sparking racial violence and anti-immigrant riots in several cities and towns across the UK, including attacks on mosques and hotels that host asylum seekers. The tragic event was swiftly hijacked by false information on social media about the perpetrator being an asylum seeker who entered the UK via a boat. The far-right anti-immigrant riots in the UK highlighted how years of anti-immigrant debate and normalisation can exacerbate and fuel disinformation on social media. The summer's anti-immigrant protests and riots have had a long-term negative impact on individuals seeking refuge. According to a study done by the Action Foundation (Holt, 2024), two months after the August civil unrest, refugees and asylum seekers were asked how the riots affected them and how they felt afterwards. The poll, completed by 38 service users and 20 staff members, aimed to better understand how the riots affected the daily lives, mental health and sense of security of asylum seekers and refugees. Of the refugees and asylum seekers polled, 58% claimed to have been personally affected by the riots, protests and attacks, while 32% reported being afraid. One woman admitted, "I did not go out for two weeks. I went out one day with my infant and a youngster yelled at me, 'Go back to your country!'" A male asylum seeker expressed their current feelings as "scared, lonely, sad and angry." The worst feeling was that there were individuals who disliked me and wanted to hurt me. Another commented, "My wife was crying and wanted to return to Iran. I am scared of being attacked." (Holt, 2024)

It is a bit disheartening as the individuals whose voices I am attempting to highlight are despised, unwanted and unwished for. However, I reflected on how, following the anti-racism demonstrations in cities such as Belfast, Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow and London, the demonstrations dissipated, providing a welcome development for many refugees and asylum seekers, who may have felt unsettled by the heightened public tensions.

However, returning to my research, which only occurred after the students who I met earlier today agreed to take part and devote their time for the interviews. We concluded in the last chapter that adult ESOL students who acquire basic digital skills are more likely to succeed in their language skills, have more confidence, be more independent in accessing various online services and with more support can even become more socially integrated and cohesive members of the host society. Yet, misinformation can spread through social media, apps and other digital platforms, making it more difficult for migrants and refugees to make informed decisions and potentially harming their lives. To make the most of the abundance of digital resources available to them, especially outside of class, students still want guidance on which resources to use and guidelines for using the internet to improve their language skills. They also need to be provided with the information on the dangers of mobile device use to our mental health, the importance of limiting screen time to avoid eye strain and the necessity of protecting ourselves from the radio frequency radiation that these gadgets generate.

## Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis makes three distinct contributions to knowledge: empirical, methodological and practical.

## Empirical Contribution

My research focuses on Entry 1 and lower-level ESOL learners, the group that receives the least attention in research, since most ESOL studies focus on higher levels. The report by the Learning and Work Institute (2019) highlights the limited resources, training and guidance available to practitioners who deliver 'pre-Entry' and Entry 1 ESOL instruction to students with significant personal and learning needs. Teaching ESOL at the lower levels is a specialised area within ESOL and demands highly skilled educators to meet students' needs (Learning and Work Institute, 2019).

This research looked at how digital skills impact language learning, independence and social integration and cohesion of ESOL learners, particularly asylum seekers and refugees, who represented most of my research participants. It indicated that digital skills are more than just technical skills; they are a means of accessing online resources, communicating with the local community, participating in day-to-day life and becoming more autonomous.

Digital engagement is increasingly necessary to fully participate in society and the economy as digital technology becomes more incorporated into daily life. Public and private systems and services are rapidly moving online, which creates new opportunities for social impact and benefit but also risks exacerbating inequalities for those without the access, skills, resources or motivation to digitally engage (British Academy, 2022). My research demonstrates that the autonomy gained through digital skills minimises learners' need for external support services such as an English-speaking spouse, children, an interpreter, volunteers or charity workers. It also indicated that digital capabilities allow students to practise English outside of the classroom, improving both their language skills and their social networks.

My work shows that digital skills are now as essential as language skills for navigating life in the UK, whether booking a GP appointment, applying for jobs or communicating with children's schools. There have been numerous instances of this throughout the study: Rebwar talking to classmates about MS Teams and Omar using it to connect with other refugees and asylum seekers. Omar joining a Sudanese Facebook group, which helped him find information on community events, jobs and houses for rent in Denton, increasing his sense of belonging. Seza using digital tools to communicate with GP services rather than relying on an interpreter or her spouse. Fatima learning to use apps like Class Dojo to contact her child's teacher and send emails, giving her a greater sense of control over her life in the UK. Rebwar, who was eager to work and had experience as a welder in Iraq but lacked formal qualifications and struggled with job applications, learnt through ESOL-integrated digital skills lessons to create

a CV, apply for jobs online and attend job interviews and went on to enrol in a welding and Maths course, later finding part-time work as a welder.

My research also found that digital skills can help individuals develop a sense of identity and even renegotiate the identities that have been allocated to them initially through social and political discourse. Taken together, this evidence demonstrates that ESOL provision needs to include digital skills not as an afterthought, but as an integral part of language learning.

## Methodological Contribution

Beyond what this research found, it also demonstrates how meaningful research can be conducted with this group, something not widely discussed in the existing literature. My research demonstrates that, through participatory methods such as problem-posing activities and translanguaging practices, low-level ESOL learners can engage, reflect and contribute valuable insights. This is about giving learners agency in their education and showing that even those with the least linguistic capital can still shape their own learning journey.

Incorporating participatory approaches through digital skills, such as using Padlet to discuss issues learners face, increased a sense of solidarity. Problem-solving techniques, such as discussing rising bills or the challenges of expressing themselves in public settings with limited English, helped to build a sense of solidarity and belonging among classmates.

For teachers and researchers, my study offers a practical roadmap for designing research for lower-level ESOL learners: what challenges to expect and what works in achieving meaningful engagement. It also shows that lower-level ESOL learners are not passive recipients of education. They have perspectives, ideas and experiences that should inform how we teach and support them.

## Practical Contribution

This research translates directly into implications for ESOL provision and curriculum design. Three pedagogical principles emerged consistently across the case studies in this study: experiential learning, where learners developed digital skills most effectively by completing real tasks that mattered to them. Participatory pedagogy, where learners shaped what was taught and how it fostered autonomy and motivation. Multimodal assessment, where learners' progress became visible through spoken, written, digital and practical evidence rather than traditional assessments alone.

Together, these principles offer a practical framework that ESOL teachers, curriculum managers and policymakers can apply directly; I set this framework out in full as a table later in this chapter (see ‘A Proposed Model for ESOL Curriculum Design’, pp. 134–135), showing what each principle replaces and what it looks like in practice. Rather than treating digital skills as a separate "IT lesson" bolted onto the ESOL curriculum, this research demonstrates that digital tasks can be embedded into existing classroom activities, using tools such as Padlet, Microsoft Teams and email, without requiring additional funding, specialist software or significant changes to timetabling. Looking ahead, the same framework could be piloted across other pre-entry and Entry-level provision beyond my own classes and used to open a conversation with awarding bodies about recognising multimodal digital evidence within formal ESOL assessment, a possibility I return to below.

This research also has practical implications beyond the individual classroom. It speaks to wider conversations about ESOL curriculum reform, digital inclusion policy and the integration of digital skills frameworks into ESOL provision nationally. This research demonstrates what works for lower-level ESOL learners like my Entry 1 learners, many of whom are asylum seekers and refugees and offers a model that could inform provision for similarly under-resourced cohorts elsewhere.

Ultimately, this thesis pushes the issue that ESOL provision needs to include digital skills, not as an afterthought, but as an integral part of language learning.

## Lessons from my research

Some of the important lessons that I have learnt through the course of my research include:

**The Connection: Digital Skills and Language Development:** Digital skills are an essential component of education even for lower-level ESOL learners. They play a vital role in ESOL learners' ability to navigate the world in and outside the classroom. Digital literacy overlaps with life skills and workplace readiness. Tasks like managing an outlook account or understanding how to log into Teams reflect broader societal and workplace requirements in today's highly digitalised world. If we are preparing our learners for job readiness through ESOL we can't leave basic digital skills out of it as most of the jobs require digital literacy.

According to Houlson and Hauge (2024), digital literacy is no longer optional for adult ESOL learners. It is a fundamental necessity for everyday tasks such as navigating public transport systems, online shopping, checking bank balances, accessing learning resources or checking email and passwords. The integration of digital skills into ESOL instruction addresses the challenges learners face in managing technology-related issues and helps them gain independence in a digitally driven world. Many ESOL learners rely on family members or community helpers for digital tasks. By gaining digital skills, learners can independently manage tasks, boosting their confidence and integration into society. Digital skills are also closely linked with soft skills and real-world applications, enabling learners to transition into the workplace or manage bureaucratic tasks.

However, there is a plethora of online resources available, and it is crucial to know which ones to utilise with ESOL students as lower level ESOL students may find it extremely overwhelming and intimidating if several resources are introduced simultaneously. Houlson and Hauge further advocate for introducing digital routines which can be particularly effective in supporting lower-level learners. These routines are repeated regularly within lessons and help learners build confidence through familiarity and predictability. They not only enhance digital skills but also reinforce language learning by allowing students to practise vocabulary and instructions in a structured way. Repetition of digital tasks reduces stress and anxiety that learners may experience if they feel overwhelmed by technology. Starting small with manageable and authentic tasks, allows students to make progress without feeling daunted. (MN Adult Education Professional Development, 2024)

ESOL educators can help equip learners with the tools they need for everyday life and bridge the gap between language acquisition and technological proficiency by integrating basic digital skills into ESOL instruction. It sets the foundation for greater independence and success in their personal and professional lives. (MN Adult Education Professional Development, 2024)

In chapter 5, Omar's and Seza's ability to independently use MS Teams and search for employment opportunities show how digital competencies can directly complement linguistic proficiency. However, the research also highlights disparities in learners' access to digital resources which can widen gaps in outcomes if unaddressed.

**Digital skills for sense of belonging and integration**: Jill Court (Court, n.d.) in her research article emphasises that to settle and do well in Britain, ESOL learners need to be able to speak and understand English, but they also need to have positive integration experiences that help them learn the language. These experiences should include well-being, safe and secure living standards, good jobs and interactions with other people in the society. The way people talk and think about immigrants and refugees in society affects the experiences of ESOL learners.

The current discourse about migration and refugees in politics and the public sphere is not helping their integration and cohesion in Britain. (Court, n.d.)

In chapter 5, we have concluded that digital skills when used cautiously, can promote social integration and cohesion. Based on the case studies, some students like Omar and Rebwar have been able to connect with other people through digital skills. Digital skills helped the learners connect with people from similar backgrounds or who are going through similar situations as them. It created a sense of belonging, provided access to information on social platforms and even allowed them to join groups online.

Artamonova and Androutsopoulos state that "only learning the language of a country is not necessary for successful social integration but also being digitally literate and able to use digital tools for everyday tasks" (Artamonova and Androutsopoulos, 2019, p. 83, in Bradley, Guichon and Kukulska-Hulme, 2025). Migrants often need to learn digital skills in places where most services are online and where technology is used more to fit in socially, culturally and linguistically. (Diminescu, cited in Bradley, Guichon and Kukulska-Hulme, 2025) However, most language programmes for immigrants do not help them learn how to use technology (Malessa, 2018, cited in Bradley, Guichon and Kukulska-Hulme, 2025). Language skills and digital literacy go hand in hand. People with higher levels of digital literacy may have better chances to learn languages and improve their language skills, and people with higher levels of language skills may find it easier to learn or improve their digital literacy (Bradley, Guichon and Kukulska-Hulme, 2025).

Digital inclusion has expanded opportunities because of the recent and rapid digital transformation that has occurred after the COVID-19 pandemic. Financial inclusion has been made easier by digital instruments like e-money, money wallets and crowdfunding. Opportunities for digital inclusion have grown as a result of the pandemic's acceleration of the rapid digital change that was already underway before COVID-19. New employment and income-generating options made possible by the dramatic rise of online commerce, have the ability to boost family income, help people escape poverty and fortify rural communities. (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2021)

A significant revision in the updated integration framework for asylum seekers and refugees was the addition of “digital skills” as a domain of refugee integration. Digital skills were added to the refugee integration framework in recognition that access to people, services and rights often depends on, or is facilitated by, technology (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019, cited in Potocky, 2022). Although many resettled refugees are tech-savvy, many others have low levels of digital literacy and socio-economic, linguistic and cultural barriers that can hinder their use of technology (Alencar, 2020). Additionally, while many refugees use smartphones, these devices are insufficient to fully develop digital skills (Cherewka, 2020, cited in Potocky, 2022). People whose sole digital connection is a smartphone are likely to have fragmented digital knowledge. For instance, someone might use a mobile app to stay in touch with family overseas but not know how to fill out and submit a job application on a desktop computer. This kind of patchy digital knowledge can help with basic daily tasks but can also limit the development of wider, more advanced digital problem-solving skills (Cherewka, 2020, cited in Potocky, 2022).

Being able to use digital tools effectively opens doors to a wealth of educational materials such as online learning which can greatly aid in language acquisition. Asylum seekers, refugees and students with poor language abilities can greatly benefit from basic digital literacy since it facilitates enhanced communication by facilitating sharing information. Important details regarding services, legal rights and community resources, resources for learning languages and other skills can be found on the internet. The rights and responsibilities can be better understood with this knowledge. Social media and group websites make it easier to learn

about local culture, stay connected with people that they have met in person, receive information and support to launch a business, look for a job and even to look for a place to live. Resources for supporting mental health, including apps that provide support and digital stories and connections that enhance well-being. It also allows them to access resources for finding jobs online, uploading resumes and cover letters on job sites.

However, there are other downsides to adopting digital technologies, as I have already covered in the previous chapter. People with limited English language skills and computer skills may find the rapid speed of digital engagement overwhelming. Over -reliance on online translation apps can stall language development. Google Translate is a wonderful tool. It is an excellent way to survive, especially for lower-level language learners. It can help students explain their needs more swiftly. However, utilising it exclusively will not help students improve their English. Using a translation tool does not eliminate the necessity to learn a language.

On the other hand, there might also be issues with cybersecurity, websites with broken links and false information being circulated on social media that can cause people to worry about their own safety, thus it is crucial to use digital tools with caution. (Potocky, 2022)

## Autonomy may be achievable through digital skills

My research shows that developing autonomy is possible even for lower-level ESOL learners with limited prior education. Learners in my research expressed a significant desire to develop their digital abilities for practical reasons, particularly for job searches, CV creation and using online resources. Fatimah's journey from initial hesitation to confident use of digital tools demonstrated that autonomy grows when learners are provided structured guidance and defined progression pathways. Seza's growth in digital abilities affected many aspects of her daily life. For example, she described how she now makes appointments alone using her mobile phone, whereas she previously struggled with this and relied on her husband for assistance. She learnt how to use email, browse the internet for information and even create simple PowerPoint presentations with assistance.

However, as I previously stated, autonomy through digital skills must be applied in a highly systematic manner. From my own experience, I have discovered that creating autonomous situations, such as learners selecting the topic and resources that they want to study and use, or to engage in independent learning outside of the classroom, is far more difficult for beginner level ESOL learners than for intermediate and advanced level students. It is critical that instructors make appropriate decisions based on the requirements and desires of their learners. A lack of knowledge about accessible online resources, as well as an inadequate comprehension of how to access digital resources, may act as a barrier for learners. Educators may help students decide when and how often to utilise various digital tools, as well as raise awareness of how to use them. If students understand how a tool can best assist them, they can use it more intelligently. This will make it easier for them to meet their goals. Giving students choices can boost their motivation while also allowing them to take some responsibility for their own education.

In my approach to teaching ESOL learners, I concentrated on numerous characteristics of autonomy, inspired by Ade Ojo's (2005) research on what autonomy means to these students. A significant focus was on involving students in educational decision-making processes. This included empowering people to make judgements about what they should learn and teach, as well as ensuring that the curriculum was relevant and meaningful to their needs. I also allowed them to make decisions about what should be assessed, providing them a sense of control over their learning outcomes. Furthermore, learners provided feedback on how they preferred to be taught, specifically on the types of teaching approaches they found helpful, particularly when working independently.

## Participatory approaches for ESOL Learners:

In participatory ESOL, students and teachers collaborate to create and trade knowledge and skills. Students' existing linguistic resources are utilised. The teacher learns about how language works, how individuals learn and how to teach as a result of the exchange of language skills (Cooke et al., 2015). Participatory initiatives for ESOL learners may promote autonomy and motivation. As discussed in chapters 2 and 5, participatory strategies, such as incorporating students in lesson design and task creation, increased engagement and generated a sense of ownership. Rebwar, for example, was enthusiastic about group projects, which demonstrates how active participation in the learning process inspires students and makes their experiences more relevant to their daily life. During the interview, Rebwar stated, "I enjoy working with Omar or Wang when we do computer work together...he (Omar) has good ideas." "Omar always helps," he remarked.

Learners should have a say in how their courses are designed, with an emphasis on co-creating material and activities that reflect their real-world needs and goals. This method encourages a sense of agency and relevance. In my research, group activities in which students collaborated to complete tasks were quite efficient at promoting mutual support. I employed interactive approaches, such as problem posing and coding, to let students reflect on the challenges that adult immigrant learners frequently experience. Learners worked in groups to exhibit photos or codes of conditions that were most important to them on a power-point presentation. Students in the class were asked questions like, "What do you see in this picture?" Where is everybody? Who are these people? What is the issue? What can be done? However, because of my research participants' low language skills, it took longer to plan, to make learners understand what we were doing and to encourage them to contribute verbally, as many had limited speaking skills or lacked the confidence to speak. Also, if not done correctly, the interactive technique might backfire; learners may become discouraged if they do not have a positive experience with it.

This connects to a wider methodological challenge. A 2025 study found Participatory Action Research effective in engaging adult ESOL learners in changing their learning environment, which simultaneously led to improvements in their language skills (Santos, Sládková, Gaias and Tigert, 2025). However, the parallel project involving teachers was less successful, as teachers viewed their participation as an addition to an already busy workload, a tension that resonates with my own experience of the practical demands participatory approaches place on ESOL teachers.

## Digital skills can help ESOL learners negotiate their identities:

As discussed in Chapter 1, migrants undergo a dynamic process of identity construction and self-discovery, one that is affected by the loss of religious or cultural values, a familiar social support system and the rigours of adapting to a new environment.

In addition to being a student, ESOL students often juggle the roles of parent, worker and learner the identity positions allocated to ESOL learners in society, as well as the way they internalise or oppose these identities, can have an impact on their ESOL learning. They may have a strong desire to learn English, but they may not be invested in the class or their learning at that moment. (Court, n.d.)

Little and Erickson (2015) assert that students of English as a second language can challenge or negotiate the assumptions about them. During the process of learning a new language, these learners can develop and reassemble a mental model of themselves. (Little and Erickson, 2015, p. 121)

To make sense of who they are and reinvent themselves in their new environment, ESOL learners must employ new linguistic and semiotic tools. They can gain access to such resources through a diverse range of pedagogical experiences, including classroom use of digital tools. By utilising new literacy tools in classroom settings, they can assert identity positions that go beyond those provided by legislation and institutions (Simpson and Gresswell, 2012).

Regardless of their diverse backgrounds and nationalities, the majority of ESOL students enrol in these programmes because they believe that improving their language skills would help them succeed in the future and help them become more active members of the communities to which they belong. It is commonly believed in today's political climate that English as a Second Language (ESOL) students come from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds, have little to no education and will be forced into low-wage manual jobs. Gutiérrez and Orellana (2006) noted that students' cultural and linguistic differences are interpreted as deficits, reinforcing the idea that these students are different from mainstream students. In this sense, students whose primary language is not English are seen as a problem, instead of as an asset for the community (Gutiérrez and Orellana, 2006).

Benson notes that in the past, limited English language resources hindered English as a second language classrooms. However, the internet now offers numerous resources, allowing them to escape classroom limits through online mode. In the past, programs emphasised self-direction, but digital literacies increasingly enable English language learners to create social spaces for creative inquiry.

Byfield et al. (2015) focussed on how English language learners (Els) can negotiate identities through digital literacy in second language learning. They contended that ELs' identities are intrinsically linked with technology by investigating the connection of identity formation, digital literacy and second language acquisition. Teachers have more responsibility to design learning environments that will support language development and equip students to negotiate technologically varied learning contexts. (Byfield et.al;2015)

The stories of Omar, Seza, Fatima and Rebwar in chapter 5 reveal that with caution and discern, digital skills can aid English as a Second Language students, particularly those seeking asylum or who have fled persecution, in negotiating the identity that has been bestowed upon them. Gaining proficiency in digital skills can facilitate their integration into the host community, facilitate communication with others going through the same experiences, educate them on their rights, empower them to make educated decisions, speed up their acquisition of the English language and lead to better career opportunities. Many of my ESOL students used digital platforms such as Padlet, Microsoft Teams and community forums to interact with people from their home countries and their ESOL classmates while simultaneously participating in English-speaking communities. Some students like Omar and Rebwar used digital skills to seek employment and access online training. This gave them confidence to assert themselves, regain their identity and integrate in the new environment.

Learners like Seza and Fatimah learnt how to fill out online forms, talk to their children's teacher on school apps, schedule appointments and access government services which helped them identify as autonomous individuals rather than dependents.

### Digital skills can help fill in the gap in learning hours:

In Chapter 5, less guided learning hours for ESOL students to improve their English has been a major issue. It takes much longer to learn English than the hours available. According to Hullford-Wood (2024), the use of digital tools allows for a greater range of learning outside of the classroom. Students can use technology to extend their study time and cover gaps in their

guided learning hours (GLH). This is especially significant in ESOL instruction, because learners' prior education and literacy levels differ, making it impossible to standardise the number of hours required for progress.

Digital technology may help learners bridge the gap between their formal education and the hours required to make considerable progress in English language proficiency. My ESOL students' usage of digital resources, such as online apps and language study sites like Wordwall and live worksheets, shows their desire to broaden their learning outside the classroom. It can make up for the limited guided learning hours (GLH) provided in traditional ESOL courses. Online educational tools and apps enable students to practise English independently outside of the classroom, reinforcing what they have learnt in class. They also allow learners to practise at their own pace. Many students report using their phones outside of class to look up new vocabulary, listen to English videos or improve pronunciation, so self-guided study could help bridge the time gap.

However, I would like to reiterate that engaging in English outside of the classroom is a little more complicated and using digital skills to fill in GLH gaps is only one side of the coin; there are numerous factors that prevent adult ESOL learners from engaging in English language learning outside of the classroom. Learners frequently find it difficult to engage in learning English outside of work due to reasons such as lack of time, especially for mothers with multiple children, shift workers, learners with mental health issues and anxiety, lack of motivation, lack of guidance from teachers on how to engage in learning outside the classroom, lack of confidence, lack of independent study skills, etc**.**

## Issues related to digital divide still persist

The COVID-19 lockout highlighted the digital divide and the difficulties encountered by ESOL learners, particularly those with limited literacy and digital skills. Graham-Brown and El-Metoui (2021) article focussed on the disruption created by the pandemic. Remote instruction became the only alternative, forcing many educational programs to innovate. Teachers from the Facebook group "Digital Pedagogy for ESOL Teachers" shared their experiences working much past their scheduled hours to help pupils access online platforms. One teacher stated, "It took me two weeks and multiple phone calls to get them (students) to download the Teams app to their phones during the Easter holidays in 2020." "Very stressful".

My short research project (Khan, 2021), undertaken during the first COVID-19 lockout in March 2020, found important barriers to online/remote teaching of ESOL learners, with learners' low reading abilities and lack of ICT skills being one of the most significant.71% of the primary barriers instructors faced during lockdown were their students' inadequate reading and digital skills, lack of appropriate ICT resources and differences in students' engagement levels.72.1% of students utilise a cell phone, which has limited resources due to small screens, while just 20.9% use a laptop for online learning. Most students regarded their internet connection as 'acceptable' rather than 'good' or very good'.

The digital divide remains a persistent concern for many ESOL students, particularly those from marginalised communities. While some participants, such as Omar, were able to overcome initial challenges, some others had consistent challenges in accessing gadgets or internet connectivity at home.

## Recommendations for ESOL teachers and curriculum managers

Building on the above lessons, I would use this opportunity to provide some recommendations to my fellow ESOL Teachers in the UK, ESOL Learning support Assistants and ESOL curriculum managers.

## Integrate Digital Skills within ESOL Classes:

According to Gateway qualification's webinar on digital skills and ESOL (Muallem and Smith, 2020), ESOL learners must do everyday tasks that require both technology and linguistic skills. They use digital abilities to search, assess and organise information. Carrying out ordinary transactions increasingly requires more than simply English language abilities. The ability to use technology to raise questions, solve issues and find solutions promotes learning. Digital literacy is an important component of language learning. (Muallem and Smith, 2020)

Essential Digital Skills credentials have been established since the pandemic to raise awareness and introduce students to the digital environment. It covers fundamental digital literacy abilities such as device use and information management, creation and editing, communication, transactions and online safety and responsibility, among others. The University of Leeds' Digital Education Service created online courses focused on employment skills, which have seen a 2000% rise in enrolment since February 2020.These courses, part of the 'Digital Skills for the Workplace' collection, address subjects such as maintaining a professional online presence and learning basic computer programming. They have attracted a varied range of students, including individuals looking to improve their digital skills for improved professional opportunities. (Leeds, 2020)

Many FE institutions and community organisations, including my own, have begun to offer essential digital skills courses specifically for ESOL learners. The problem is that while some learners attend these courses to improve their language and digital skills, many others must choose between these sessions and ESOL classes. Many learners are unable to pursue both qualifications at the same time, so they often stick to ESOL. In 2023, 1.5 million people were unemployed and seeking work, yet in 2022/23 only 17,510 total people including those seeking work started an Essential Digital Skills qualification (Good things foundation, 2024). This is why it is critical for ESOL teachers to incorporate digital skills into ESOL classes, as not all ESOL learners are taking these courses and have to rely on their ESOL classes for basic digital awareness. These essential digital skills courses introduced after the pandemic have positively impacted ESOL learners in the UK by improving their digital competencies and aiding social integration; ongoing efforts are needed to address digital inequalities and ensure all learners can fully benefit from these educational opportunities.

## Recommendations for policy makers:

### Bridge the Digital Divide

Although most of my learners had access to smartphones, desktops and free Wi-Fi connection at college, many of them still struggled with stable internet connection at home. According to The Good Things Foundation, the digital inclusion charity in the UK, (Good Things Foundation.org, 2022), the UK government's plans and action plan over the last few years have significantly reduced the Digital Divide. However, although the digital divide has shrunk during the last two years; it has also deepened. Action on digital inclusion must be accelerated, with a focus on those facing the most significant impediments.

A personalised and trustworthy approach to assisting the most disadvantaged is required. Some people require a digital inclusion package that meets their specific needs, including devices, internet data and support. And this offer is best delivered by trusted local organisations that are coordinated nationally, resulting in a higher impact than if they delivered alone. The UK requires robust social infrastructure for digital inclusion. (Goodthingsfoundation.org, 2022)

As of 2023, UK Parliament statistics show that 2.4 million people in the UK still lack the basic digital skills needed to perform even one simple task that would allow them to use the internet. By 2030, 5 million workers will be acutely under-skilled in basic digital abilities. 1.7 million homes do not have broadband or mobile internet connection. Every year, the UK economy loses £63 billion due to a general lack of digital skills. 1 million consumers have reduced or discontinued their internet services in the last year due to affordability difficulties (Government Events, 2024).

According to the Good things foundation (2025), the UK economy would gain £13.7 billion by closing the digital divide. Digital inclusion would help attract and retain workers; achieving the 80% employment objective would improve the economy by £151 billion a year. According to the Digital Inclusion Action Plan, there is 'no silver bullet' to close the digital divide, but the government will have to implement "long term, systemic change." (Good Things Foundation.org, 2025).

Already marginalised communities may see their social isolation deepen as a result of the rapid speed of digital innovation. A widely accepted strategy for bridging the digital gap must be developed by government organisations in conjunction with related stakeholders. Making sure everyone has affordable Internet connection by 2030 is crucial to bridging the digital divide. This necessitates that governments work towards the goal of universal access to information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, tackle the issue of affordability, raise the bar for digital literacy and competence and raise the profile of the advantages of being online. Targeted and multi-faceted initiatives are also necessary for the digital inclusion of disadvantaged and marginalised groups, such as indigenous peoples, people on the move, women and people with disabilities. (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2021)

## A Proposed Model for ESOL Curriculum Design

Drawing directly on the findings of this study, I propose that ESOL curricula for Entry 1 and low-level learners be restructured around three principles that proved central to learners' progress in this research: experiential learning, participatory pedagogy and multimodal assessment. The table below sets out what this would look like in practice.

| Principle | What it replaces | What it looks like in practice |
|---|---|---|
| **Experiential learning** | Decontextualised grammar/vocabulary drills as the primary mode of digital skills teaching | Embed digital tasks inside real-life goals: every learner creates a working email account, sends a real email to the teacher, books a real (or simulated) GP appointment online, builds a CV on Indeed or other UK based job sites. Digital skills are taught through the task, not as a separate "IT lesson." |

| Principle | What it replaces | What it looks like in practice |
|---|---|---|
| **Participatory pedagogy** | Fixed, pre-planned syllabus delivered identically to all cohorts | Begin each term with a learner consultation (as in this study's pre-intervention phase) to identify the digital tasks and services most relevant to that cohort. Build problem-posing activities around real issues learners raise (e.g. council correspondence, school apps, job applications). |
| **Multimodal assessment** | Reliance on traditional tests as the primary evidence of progress | Build a portfolio of evidence per learner: a Padlet post, a recorded spoken task (e.g. via Flipgrid), a completed CV or form, a sent email. Assessment captures what learners can do, not only what they can write. |

This model does not require additional funding or specialist software, it requires a shift in how existing time and tools (Padlet, Teams, email, online forms) are used and a willingness to let learner need drive content rather than a fixed pre-planned syllabus.

**Implementation**

Implementing this model requires three practical shifts. First, ESOL teachers need protected time, even one hour per term for a learner consultation phase, similar to the pre-intervention phase used in this study. Second, awarding bodies and curriculum frameworks need to recognise multimodal evidence (recordings, digital artefacts) alongside written assessment, which may require dialogue with examination boards. Third, institutions need to ensure baseline digital access (devices, Wi-Fi) before asking learners to complete digital tasks, addressing the digital divide highlighted earlier in this chapter. None of these shifts is cost-free, however. Protected consultation time competes directly with existing timetabling pressures. Recognising multimodal evidence will only work if awarding bodies are willing to move away from standardised, easily-audited written tests, which the inspection and quality-assurance culture in FE does not currently incentivise (a tension I return to below). Closing the digital access gap remains, in the end, a funding decision rather than a purely pedagogical one. Realistically, then, this model is best introduced incrementally, piloted with one cohort, or one principle, at a time, rather than adopted wholesale, so that early evidence of impact can be used to make the case for the funding and policy changes that the fuller model ultimately requires.

## The Wider Case for Curriculum Reform

The model proposed above is not an isolated suggestion, it aligns with a growing body of literature calling for fundamental reform of the ESOL curriculum, much of which echoes the principles identified through this research.

The Bell foundation has recently made recommendations regarding changing the ESOL curriculum. They stressed that the 20-year-old ESOL curriculum needs revision. It is crucial to determine whether learners have enough English to move beyond ESOL and pursue their own goals, often academic or professional. Classroom activities including completing online forms, collaborating on shared papers and using community resources should incorporate digital

skills. Integration ensures learners develop language and technology skills simultaneously (Lloyd, 2024).

The current formal language learning is based on a “narrow and prescriptive curriculum which assumes refugees come to the UK with few or no skills”. It should rather focus on using fewer formal methods that develop refugees’ social connectedness with the native-speaking community (Morrice, 2007, p. 1158, cited in Salvo and de C Williams, 2017). Chick (2023) argues that the way adult education is funded in the UK means teachers are obliged to follow an assessment system to measure language competence. That constraint frequently results in classroom time being focused more on passing exams than on developing fluency. As a result, teachers have to follow a curriculum that shows learners’ progress, which leads them to focus on preparing students for ongoing tests and assessments. This leaves little time to address the real-life needs, interests and concerns of ESOL learners. It also means chances to create a sense of belonging get replaced by lessons on topics like verb conjugations and English tenses. Changes are needed both in how ESOL is funded and organised, and in how ESOL professionals are trained to see the language classroom (Chick, 2023).

According to Shepherd (2024), everything from our ESOL training to inspections, standardised observation and quality assurance systems etc teaches us that a "good" syllabus structure consists of neat, tidy steps that build complexity from simple to more complex and even more complex language systems. He argues for an emergent, responsive curriculum, which is not focused on pre-planned and teacher-defined outcomes, but rather on classroom activities and interactions that inform the syllabus. Many ESOL teachers prefer to start with a worksheet and some presentation slides and then design their lessons around them. Emergent curriculum is the opposite. The focus is on how do we want the lesson to proceed? What is there to learn in this lesson? What activities could help to improve those things? Then creating the materials that fit that. Emergent curriculum is the most obvious fit for a higher-level group, and while there may be a greater need for control over language exposure with beginners, emergent language pedagogy can be just as effective. It levels out the status between teacher and student by acknowledging the value and relevance of students and what they have to say. (Shepherd, 2024)

There are several similarities between participatory ESOL and the emerging curriculum. They are both student-centred and student led. Participatory ESOL teachers play a unique role that differs from typical language teaching methods. Teachers may not always be responsible for providing language or themes. It is a shared obligation to ensure student participation. It challenges conventional teacher-student hierarchies. Students take charge of their learning by proposing games, organising the room layout, setting up activities, deciding on timings and breaks, negotiating word and phrase definitions, bringing themes for discussion and evaluating sessions. Participatory approaches recognise the value of using published resources in language classes to introduce new ideas, views and language. However, these materials are used in a variety of ways, mostly as introductions.

After the task has been completed, students build a visual tool by discussing the topic and expressing their thoughts in words, images, or both. Students 'put in' recommendations while seeking translation assistance as needed. They create a graphic representation of their ideas, using their own words. During this period, students might contribute ideas by speaking, writing, or drawing. The ultimate product is a student-created 'text' that may be used in a variety of ways to investigate issues of language and literacy. Students and teachers approach all texts critically, including pedagogic ones, as they contain ideological messages. This involves exploring one's own perspectives on an issue before interpreting other texts (Auerbach, 2005, cited in Bryers, Winstanley and Cooke, n.d.)

Language plays a crucial part in social control and language teachers can influence this process through classroom instruction. It is vital to challenge our own language and material selection throughout the language development process. (Bryers, Winstanley and Cooke, n.d.)

## Recommendations for ESOL managers, policy makers and other stakeholders:

**Provide Holistic Support Services to ESOL learners:** Over the years, I have realised that ESOL learners recognise English as a crucial factor to move towards autonomy and integration, but they also encounter numerous barriers that prevent them from reaching their full potential and improving their English. This includes post-traumatic stress disorder, social anxiety about their inadequate English, visa and immigration issues, housing issues, childcare issues, restricted opportunities to practise everyday English, unaddressed cognitive and neurodivergence issues.

Policymakers and institutions should collaborate with community organisations to address learners' external challenges, such as childcare, housing and mental health. Comprehensive support systems enable learners to focus on their studies without the burden of external stressors. Providing psychological support could facilitate the process of acquiring English and thereby promote their integration alongside their psychological well-being. To help develop learners 'digital skills, institutions must prioritise equitable access to technology through device loan schemes, internet subsidies, or public digital hubs. Addressing these gaps ensures all learners can fully participate in digital literacy initiatives.

## The current situation of ESOL

As expected, according to the data by Bell foundation, the number of ESOL learners have increased by 17% since 2021/22 and the demand for ESOL learners is continuing to rise. Over the past twenty years, many governments, think tanks and reports have stressed the benefits of ESOL for both individuals and society, calling for more investment and a national strategy to guide its delivery. However, ESOL policy, strategy and funding have been unclear and fragmented, with small initiatives, budget cuts and constantly changing eligibility rules. As a result, the policy and funding landscape has been weakened by cuts and uncertainty, making ESOL courses underfunded and hard to access (Kovalchuk, 2024).

According to The Bell Foundation, the demand for ESOL is continuing to rise, with a 17% increase in learners since 2021–22. However, access to ESOL classes depends on where you live. In some places, it's very difficult to find a class, while in others, it's much easier. The campaign calls for changes to remove the barriers that currently exist, to provide a curriculum that is fit for purpose and suggests incentivising employers to provide ESOL in the workplace. (New City College, 2024)

Despite the rise in demands, the funding for ESOL in the UK has faced significant cuts over the past decade. Between 2009-10 and 2016-17, ESOL funding was reduced by 56%, affecting accessibility and provision (FE Week, 2023). Although exact figures for 2024-25 are limited, there has been no significant increase in funding, leading to continued challenges for ESOL providers (FE Week, 2023).

Despite funding constraints, there have been some targeted initiatives aimed at supporting ESOL learners. The government has renewed the ESOL Childcare Fund for 2024-25, inviting bids to enable refugees to participate in English language training. This fund helps community sponsorship groups provide childcare support, allowing parents to attend ESOL classes (Training Reset UK, 2024).

## Artificial Intelligence (AI) and ESOL

I think it would be remiss of me to conclude my research on digital skills for ESOL learners without addressing the biggest transition of the present century: Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its implications for ESOL learning and teaching.

## How AI is currently used in language learning

According to the British Council report (Edmett et al., 2024), AI is being used to promote the four language skills in numerous ways. One study found that the personal voice assistant Alexa provides learners with a conversational partner for practising speaking. Automatic speech recognition tools have been used to improve pronunciation. An AI-powered grammar-checking tool, Grammarly, has provided learners with feedback on their writing. Machine translation tools like Google Translate have served as reference sources for writing in English. Some research suggests that automatic speech recognition technology can help reduce learners' anxiety about speaking in public. AI is also being used for adaptive learning to provide a more personalised approach. However, traditional teaching methods remain dominant in AI-powered tools, such as lectures and explanations, raising questions about whether pedagogy is evolving alongside technology.

A global survey found that 76 per cent of English language teachers already use AI-powered tools for various tasks such as language learning apps, language generation AI and chatbots. More than half of the teachers reported using AI to create lesson materials and help learners practise English, and 43 per cent said they use AI to create lesson plans. Asia accounts for two-thirds of the published research on AI in ELT, with a steep increase in research articles from China in 2023 (Edmett et al., 2024).

Research by Crompton et al. (2024) draws similar conclusions. A significant observation is that most studies (72.09%) on AI and English Language Teaching and Learning (ELT/L) are from Asia, suggesting a need for more research in other regions, particularly the US and UK, which are key players in the global ELT industry. Additionally, most studies focus on higher education, so there is a clear need for more research across different geographies and educational settings.

Another limitation of the current body of research is the insufficient exploration of the challenges associated with AI in ELT/L. Many studies emphasise the positive aspects of AI, potentially due to publication bias. As a result, there is a need for more research on the difficulties and obstacles of AI in this field. Specifically, further investigation is required into newer AI technologies like ChatGPT and similar large language models to determine how they can enhance ELT/L, with expectations that research on these tools will increase from 2024 onwards.

Speaking and writing have been the primary focus of AI-related studies, but questions remain about whether AI can effectively develop all language skills or if its impact is more prominent in productive skills. Furthermore, research often overlooks the subskills required to develop these language skills. In the area of writing, feedback has emerged as a key pedagogical focus, but there is potential for further exploration of how AI can assist with procedural knowledge in writing. Translation tools have shown promise in helping students access a broader range of vocabulary; however, the long-term impact of using such tools is still unclear, particularly whether students' language skills improve when these tools are no longer available (Crompton et al., 2024).

A more recent review reinforces these gaps. AI tools are being used to improve speaking, writing and reading skills, but appear to be less utilised for developing listening skills and there remains a significant gap in peer-reviewed research on AI in adult English language teaching and learning specifically (BERA, 2025). The review also found that AI-powered tools can support students with goal-setting and self-directed learning, although traditional lecture-style teaching remains the dominant mode despite these technological advances.

## Opportunities and risks for ESOL learners

According to Hayden (2023), AI can help connect teachers with ESOL learners and make them feel included and important. Tools like Google Bard and Canva show how AI can help teachers work more efficiently so they can focus more on their students. But AI needs to be used carefully, making sure both teachers and students understand how to use it well. There are risks, such as the potential for inaccurate translations in tools like HeyGen and the misuse of AI, such as unauthorised replication of someone's identity, highlighting the need to educate learners about ethical and legal concerns (Hayden, 2023).

Another pressing concern highlighted in the British Council report (Edmett et al., 2024) is the skills gap. Although most teachers reported using AI, only 20 per cent feel they have received adequate training on incorporating it into their teaching. AI is having a greater impact on language education than on other disciplines, suggesting a need for more teacher training in this field.

Inclusion is another key issue. AI can reinforce standardised language use, potentially excluding certain groups or language varieties. This raises concerns about the choice of AI models to ensure linguistic diversity. Additionally, AI may widen digital divides, as better-resourced education systems adopt it more rapidly than those with fewer resources. On the other hand, AI-powered tools could also improve accessibility for some learners, such as those with visual impairments using speech interfaces. These tools can convert written text into spoken words, help navigate online platforms through voice commands and even describe images. This kind of support can make learning more inclusive and enable greater independence for learners with additional needs.

Hulme (2023) asserts that AI tools can be used to analyse learners' progress, generating data based on learner profiles, existing capabilities and so on. This has serious advantages, but there are also concerns regarding the application of these tools. Some might view using OpenAI as a shortcut to build educational materials. Organisations should use extreme caution when reviewing content to guarantee it is suitable and free of prejudice or stereotyping; these tools are not a shortcut at all when used appropriately and with care, with text reviewed to ensure it is suitable (Hulme, 2023).

Ethical concerns regarding AI in ELT include inherent biases in AI tools, the influence of large tech companies on language learning and issues related to data privacy and security. Some teachers worry about the potential overreach of Big Tech in shaping ELT classrooms. There are also concerns about AI's limitations, technology failures and learner apprehension, particularly regarding data privacy. Cognitive overload and academic misconduct, such as plagiarism and cheating, have become more prominent concerns. Clear ethical guidelines and data privacy measures could help build trust in AI use in ELT (Edmett et al., 2024).

## AI, generative tools and adult migrant learners

A 2025 study addressed a gap in research by examining the opportunities and challenges of generative AI use among adult English as an additional language learners from migrant and

refugee backgrounds (Tour, Creely, Barnes, Henderson, Waterhouse, Agudelo Pena and Vijaykumar Patel, 2025). The findings revealed a hesitance among educators, particularly regarding beginning-level learners, to incorporate generative AI into their teaching, while many adult learners themselves showed enthusiasm for learning about its potential benefits despite having limited understanding of the technology. The study concluded by advocating for a systemic approach that includes generative AI as a core part of learning programmes for adult migrant and refugee learners, rather than treating it as an optional extra.

This gap in the lack of research on AI in adult ESOL contexts, as opposed to mainstream EFL or higher education, is precisely the space my own research occupies, albeit with a focus on foundational digital skills rather than generative AI specifically.

## My experience with AI tools in the ESOL classroom

The Good Things Foundation argues that the current Essential Digital Skills Framework is out of date, and that basic digital skills for a future-looking workforce will need to include AI literacy (Good Things Foundation.org, 2024). Based on my experience, I feel that when it comes to OpenAI tools, they are good at giving suggestions and brainstorming ideas to make a lesson interesting for ESOL learners. However, they might not be able to dive deep into the intricacies of the adult ESOL curriculum, learners' backgrounds or creating resources or texts aimed at ESOL learners. Their ideas often align more with language learning in general than with adult ESOL specifically. I have also noticed that OpenAI tools can also make mistakes when it comes to deeper linguistic aspects.

A colleague I spoke to recently had a blunt take on AI: "AI usage is going crazy, in some assignment-based courses, teachers are creating assessments with AI, students are answering with AI and then teachers are marking those answers with AI. It is like a full loop of automation. Why? Because, let's be honest, humans are inherently lazy." This comment reflects a growing unease about how quickly AI is being integrated into every stage of the teaching and learning process, often without much critical reflection.

## Conclusion

This brings me to the end of my research and some internal musings about what all this means. Digital tools have certainly transitioned ESOL learning and teaching by offering flexibility, autonomy and access to resources that were once out of reach for many learners. It can improve cohesion and integration in society especially for those who might otherwise struggle. AI is ever-growing and has transformed the language learning landscape by streamlining and reducing teacher’s workload through automating assessments, identifying learners’ strength and weaknesses, creating customised lesson plans and Schemes of Work, differentiating lessons, giving students practise with speaking and much more. However, there is a sinister aspect to everything as well. Over-reliance on digital tools and AI might further exacerbate the issue of digital inequality and exclusion.

The relationship between AI use and cognitive abilities has been examined in new research done by Gerlich (2025), which raises many concerns. The study discovered a negative relationship between regular use of AI and critical-thinking skills, indicating that people who depend significantly on automated systems can have trouble thinking for themselves. One of the contributing factors is cognitive offloading, which refers to the tendency for AI users to favour rapid AI-generated solutions over in-depth, contemplative thought. (Gerlich, 2025)

An overemphasis on technological resources, efficiency and automation should not come at the expense of the interpersonal, emotional and social components of language acquisition. Going forward, the focus should not be merely on using digital tools and developing digital skills but using it in a way that it benefits ESOL learners. The focus should be on harnessing the benefit of digital tools and AI without losing sight of the learners themselves.

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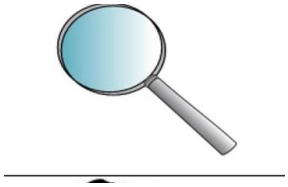
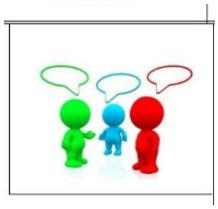
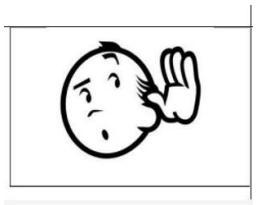
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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet

*Researcher: Sara Khan, ESOL Teacher, research student at ETF – University of Sunderland.*

This research will help us understand how your digital skills (using computers, phones, apps and the internet) affect your English skills.

| | |
|---|---|
|  | • I want to collect information called research. |
|  | • I would like to invite you to take part. |
|  | • You can talk to someone you trust about this if you wish. |
|  | • You do not have to take part.<br>• If you say 'No' then that is OK.<br>• It is your choice. |
|  | • If you say yes, then I will chat to you about my research.<br>• I will write some things down about what I can see you doing or hear you saying in the class.<br>• I will ask you some questions about using apps, internet and computer etc in the class and outside.<br>• I will use an audio recorder machine so that I can remember what you tell me. |
|  | • **Taking part may help people understand why using computer, internet, apps and websites etc is important to students similar to you.** |

| | |
|---|---|
|  | • I will talk to my teacher, who is called a supervisor, about what I have learnt. |
|  | • I will need to write more about what I learnt. |
|  | • I will not use your real name in my work.<br>• I will lock the information away.<br>• This is to keep your information safe so that others can't take it. |
|  | • If you change your mind and don't want to take part at any time, that is OK too.<br>• You don't have to tell me why. |

## Appendix 2: Participant Consent Form

Please initial all boxes and sign below:

| Statement | Initial |
|---|---|
| 1. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet dated 10/02/2023. | |
| 2. I understand about the study and what it means. | |
| 3. I have asked any questions that I needed to ask and I am happy with the answers. | |
| 4. I am happy for the researcher to observe me in class and interview me. | |
| 5. I understand that I may have my photo taken during class activities, but my face will always remain hidden. | |
| 6. I am happy for my voice to be recorded on an audio-recording device. | |
| 7. I want to be informed of the results of this study once it has been completed. | |
| 8. I understand that I can stop taking part at any time, and I do not have to give a reason. | |
| 9. I am happy to take part in the above study. | |

| Name of Participant | Signature | Date |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| **Name of Researcher: Sara Khan** | **Signature** | **Date** |
| | | |

*When completed: 1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher file.*

## Appendix 3: Pre-Intervention Student Interview Questions

1. Where are you from originally?
2. What languages do you speak?
3. How long have you been studying English?
4. Have you used a computer or a smartphone before?
5. What did you do on a computer or a smartphone?
6. Have you searched for information in English on the internet?
7. Have you used language learning apps or websites? Which ones?
8. How comfortable are you using a computer or a smartphone?
9. Have you faced any challenges with using a computer or a smartphone? What were they?
10. Do you want to improve your digital skills? If yes, what skills do you want to improve?
11. Do you do your homework online using Liveworksheets, MS Teams?
12. Can you search online for things like jobs? What do you search for?
13. Have you ever booked a doctor's appointment online? How did you do it?
14. Have you sent an email before? Who did you send it to and what was it about?

### Kurdish Sorani Translation

ئایا پێشتر کۆمپیوتەر یان سمارتفۆن بەکارهێنیت کردووە؟

کارەکانی کۆمپیوتەر یان سمارتفۆنت چیان بوو؟

ئایا تۆ لەسەر ئینتەرنێت بۆ گەڕانی زانیاری بە زمانی ئینگلیزی بەکارهێنیت کردووە؟

ئایا تۆ ئەپلیکەیشنەکان یان وێبسایتەکانی یادگیری زمان بەکارهێنیت کردووە؟ ئەگەر بەڵێ، کوێیان؟

ئایا تۆ لە بەکارهێنانی کۆمپیوتەر یان سمارتفۆنت چۆنیتی دەتوانی ئەرکەشەیت بکەیت؟

ئایا توانایی بەرگەڕانکردنەوەی هەڵبژاردەکان لە بەکارهێنانی کۆمپیوتەر یان سمارتفۆنت پێدراوتوو؟ ئەگەر بەڵێ، چییەکانیان؟

ئایا دەتوانیت ئامرازەکانی دیجیتاڵت بۆ تواناییکردنیت بەرزتر بکەیت؟ ئەگەر بەڵێ، ئامرازەکانی کوێیان کوێ؟

ئایا ئازادیت لەکاتی کردنی وەرکبووکەکانیت ئەبێت بە ڕاژەی Liveworksheets؟ چۆنیتی ئەوەی ئەنجام بدەیت؟

ئایا توانایی بەرگەڕانکردنەوەی بڕی کاری ڕێگەپێدانەکان لەلایەن ئینتەرنێت بەکار

ئایا پێشتر چۆنیتی دەستکاریکردنی مەرجەکانی دۆکتۆر بە ئینتەرنێتیەوە هەیە؟ چۆن کرتەکەی بەڵگەنراوت؟

ئایا پێشتر ئیمێل نێردراوت؟ بۆ کی نێردراوت و چی بوونی هەموو لەبارەیان

## Appendix 4: Observation Checklist for Students Using Digital Tools in my Entry 1 ESOL Class

*Teacher Information: Name / Date of observation / Digital tools being used / Level of English proficiency of the class.*

**1. Engagement and Interest**

- Are the students actively engaged and interested in using the digital tools for language learning?
- Do the students demonstrate enthusiasm and curiosity towards the digital activities?
- Are they motivated to learn English through the use of digital tools?

**2. Language Development**

- Do the students effectively use the digital tools to develop their language skills (e.g. reading, writing, speaking, listening)?
- Do the students show progress in their language skills as a result of using the digital tools?

**3. Collaboration and Peer Interaction**

- Do the students collaborate and interact with their peers while using the digital tools?
- Are they engaged in meaningful discussions and exchanges related to the digital activities?
- Do the students support and assist each other in using the digital tools for language learning?

**4. Task Completion and Time Management**

- Do the students successfully complete the assigned tasks using the digital tools?
- Are they able to manage their time effectively during the digital activities?
- Do they demonstrate a sense of responsibility and meet deadlines while using the digital tools?

**5. Technical Proficiency**

- Do the students demonstrate proficiency in using the specific digital tools mentioned above?
- Are they able to navigate and utilise the tools without significant difficulties?
- Do they show improvement in their technical skills and familiarity with the digital tools over time?

**6. Teacher Support and Guidance**

- Do I provide clear instructions and guidance on how to use the digital tools for language learning?
- Am I readily available to support and assist students when they encounter challenges?
- Do I facilitate their understanding and effective use of the digital tools?

**7. Integration of Digital Tools**

- Are the digital tools aligned with the language learning objectives and lessons?
- Do the digital tools enhance the learning experience and contribute to language acquisition?

**Additional Observations or Comments:**

## Appendix 5: Post-Intervention Student Interview Questions

*Each question is given in English followed by its Kurdish Sorani translation.*

1. Have you studied English in a classroom setting before?

*هەرگیز لە هەوڵدانی تۆژینەوەی کلاسی ئینگلیزی دەسوختیت؟*

2. What are some challenges you have faced while learning English?

*چەند چالاکیت هەیە کە دوایی ژیاندنی ئینگلیزی لەسەر هاتووە؟*

3. Have you had any positive experiences while learning English? If so, can you describe them?

*هەڵسەنگاندنێکی هەڵبژاردەیەکی خۆش لە کاتی ژیاندنی ئینگلیزیت هەیە؟ ئەگەر بەڵێ، ئاگر توانایی ئەرکەشەیت بکەیت*

4. Why do you want to learn English?

*چیچانیت بۆ فێرکردنەوەی ئینگلیزی؟*

5. Do you have any goals for your English language learning? If so, what are they?

*هەڵبژاردەیەکانی تۆ لەسەر بەشداربوونی زمانی ئینگلیزیت هەیە؟ ئەگەر بەڵێ، چیانە؟*

6. Did using digital tools in class improve your English skills?

*ئایا بەکارهێنانی ئامرازەکانی دیجیتاڵ لە کلاسەکەت بەرزتر کردووە؟*

7. Were you able to use digital services without any help after using digital tools in class?

*ئایا بەکارهێنانی خزمەتگوزارییەکانی دیجیتاڵ بێ بەرکەوتوویەکی تر بەکارهێنانی ئامرازەکانی دیجیتاڵ لە کلاسەکەت؟*

8. How did using digital tools affect your confidence in using English outside of class?

*چۆن ئامرازەکانی دیجیتاڵ ئەکەین بۆ پێویستیکردنەوەی زۆرتر لە بەکارهێنانی ئینگلیزی لە شوێنی ژیانی یەکگرت*

9. Did digital tools help you talk better with classmates and teachers?

*ئایا ئامرازەکانی دیجیتاڵ یارمەتیت دەدات بۆ پێویستیکردنەوەی زۆرتر لە چات و پێشەکیان؟*

10. Do you feel more connected to your classmates and community because of using digital tools in class?

*ئایا بەهۆی ئامرازەکانی دیجیتاڵ لە کلاسەکەت، لەگەڵ هاوکاران و ئەندامانی کۆمەڵایەتیت، هەڵبژاردەیەکی زیاتری بۆ تەندروستیکردنیت*

11. Did digital tools help you better understand the culture of the UK?

*ئایا ئامرازەکانی دیجیتاڵ ئەکەن بۆ بەڕێنانی فێربوونی هەڵبژاردنی ئەو ئیرانەی کۆماری یەکگرتوویت؟*

12. Have you used digital tools outside of class to practise your English? If yes, which ones?

*ئایا ئامرازەکانی دیجیتاڵ بەکارهێنانیت لە سەرەوەی کلاسەکەت بۆ ئەوانەی کە ئینگلیزیت دەست بکەیت؟ ئەگەر بەڵێ، ئەوانەی کە*

13. Are you more comfortable using digital tools now than before learning English?

*ئایا ئامرازەکانی دیجیتاڵ بەکارهێنانیت لە ئێستادا ئازادتر و تازەتر کردووە نسبت بۆ پێش لەگەڵی ئینگلیزی یادداوە*

14. Did you face any challenges while using digital tools in class? If yes, what were they?

*ئایا هەڵبژاردەیەکانی ئامرازەکانی دیجیتاڵ لە کلاسەکەت بەدەست هێناوە؟ ئەگەر بەڵێ، چیانە؟*

15. Would you suggest using digital tools in class to other ESOL learners? Why or why not?

*ئایا ئامرازەکانی دیجیتاڵ لە کلاسەکەت بۆ خوێندکارانی ئینگلیزی یان زمانەکانی تر بە شێوەیەکی تەواو پێشکەش دەکەیت؟ چونکە چی؟*

## Appendix 6: Sample Interview Transcript (Fatima, Post-Intervention)

The following is a cleaned extract from the verbatim transcript of Fatima's post-intervention interview, conducted via Microsoft Teams on 19/05/2023. Repetitions, false starts and conversational fillers (e.g. "umm", "uh-huh") have been minimally edited for readability while preserving the learner's own words and meaning. The full verbatim transcript, including timestamps, is held on file.

**Sara Khan:** What language do you speak?

**Fatima:** I speak Farsi.

**Sara Khan:** What are some of the difficulties that you faced in learning English?

**Fatima:** I have a problem with speaking, yes and spelling... new word. I cannot speak... but slowly, slowly.

**Sara Khan:** Do you have any good experience of learning English?

**Fatima:** I think going to college is good because I can speak with other people. And writing — it's clean, and I learn grammar.

**Sara Khan:** Why do you want to learn English?

**Fatima:** I can find work and connect with other people. More people.

**Sara Khan:** Did you know how to use the Internet, Microsoft Teams, Padlet and how to make a poster before I told you in my class?

**Fatima:** Yeah, I used Microsoft in my country before. Yes, I was learning, but I didn't work with it. I just learned and I forgot.

**Sara Khan:** Do you think you're more confident now in using all those?

**Fatima:** Yeah, I think I can.

**Sara Khan:** Can you make a PowerPoint presentation, a poster, a CV online on Microsoft Word now?

**Fatima:** Yes, yes, yes.

**Sara Khan:** Can you talk to your classmates on Teams and send them email now?

**Fatima:** Yes, yes.

**Sara Khan:** Other than in the classroom, how do you use the Internet outside the classroom?

**Fatima:** Email, Google and Google Translate, Google Maps.

**Sara Khan:** What translator do you use? Is Google Translate good?

**Fatima:** Google Translate, every time. Yes, I think it's OK.

**Sara Khan:** If you have to book a GP appointment online, can you do that?

**Fatima:** Yes, yes... I booked an appointment at my daughter's school online.

**Sara Khan:** If I ask you to search for a job as a nail artist, will you be able to go online and search a job for yourself?

**Fatima:** Yes, yes.

**Sara Khan:** What challenges did you face using the computer, searching, or creating a PowerPoint presentation?

**Fatima:** I think when I search anything... the internet, not everything you search is right.

**Sara Khan:** Do you think students should learn Internet in ESOL classes? Why?

**Fatima:** Yes, yes, yes. I use internet in class. Internet helps me — when I don't understand a word, I can find it. I can practise English speaking, listening... BBC... I practise more.

## Appendix 7: Coded Transcript — Fatima (with Research Question and Theme Mapping)

The table below illustrates how extracts from Fatima's transcript (Appendix 6) were coded using semantic and latent coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017), as described in Chapter 4. Each extract is mapped to one of the study's three research questions (RQ1, RQ2 or RQ3) and to the theme it evidences. RQ2 addresses autonomy and independent access to everyday services. RQ3 addresses confidence, integration and sense of belonging.

| Transcript extract | Semantic code | Latent code | Research Question | Theme |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| "I have a problem with speaking, yes and spelling... new word. I cannot speak... but slowly, slowly." | Identified difficulty with speaking and spelling; notes incremental progress | Gradual self-improvement as coping strategy; learner retains motivation despite struggle | RQ 1: How do Entry 1 ESOL learners develop basic digital skills to support language learning? | Language development |
| "I used Microsoft in my country before... I just learned and I forgot." | Prior digital exposure lost through lack of practise | Skill atrophy without application; prior knowledge present but dormant — classroom intervention reactivated it | RQ 1 | Emergent theme: Educational background and digital skills development |
| "I think I can [use digital tools without help]." | Self-reported digital competence after intervention | Growing belief in own capability; shift from dependence to confidence | RQ2: In what ways do basic digital skills enable access to everyday services more independently and autonomously? | Confidence / Autonomy |
| "I booked an appointment at my daughter's school online." | Independent use of a digital tool for a real-life task | Increased self-reliance; reduced dependence on husband or interpreter | RQ2 | Autonomy / Independence |
| "I can find work and connect with other people. More people." | Motivation to use English for employment and social connection | Digital skills seen as a bridge to economic and social participation | RQ3: How does digital skills development shape confidence, integration and | Integration / Sense of belonging |

| Transcript extract | Semantic code | Latent code | Research Question | Theme |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | sense of belonging? | |
| “Internet helps me — when I don’t understand a word, I can find it. I can practise English speaking, listening... BBC... I practise more.” | Self-directed digital learning beyond classroom hours | Digital tools extending learning beyond guided learning hours (GLH) | RQ 1 / RQ2 | Emergent theme: Digital skills filling GLH gap |
| “Yes, yes, yes [students should learn Internet in ESOL classes].” | Learner advocacy for digital skills in ESOL curriculum | Metacognitive awareness of own learning needs; desire for structured digital learning | RQ 1 | Language development / Participatory pedagogy |

## Appendix 8: Sample Interview Transcript (Seza, Post-Intervention)

The following is a cleaned extract from the verbatim transcript of Seza’s post-intervention interview, conducted via Microsoft Teams on 19/05/2023. Seza is a Kurdish-speaking learner from Iraq who came to the UK in 2016 to join her husband. She had no prior computer or internet experience before joining the intervention. Repetitions, false starts and conversational fillers have been minimally edited for readability while preserving the learner’s own words and meaning. The full verbatim transcript, including timestamps, is held on file.

**Sara Khan:** Where are you from?

**Seza:** I am from Iraq.

**Sara Khan:** When did you come to the UK?

**Seza:** I come to the UK in 2016.

**Sara Khan:** What language do you speak?

**Seza:** Kurdish.

**Sara Khan:** How long have you been studying English?

**Seza:** I went to college in 2017 but I had a baby, so I stopped. And last year I started again — 2022.

**Sara Khan:** Did you study English in your country?

**Seza:** Yeah, but it was simple. Only when I was a child, I went to school — just ABC and numbers.

**Sara Khan:** What problems did you face when you came to the UK because of your English?

**Seza:** I didn’t understand. I couldn’t speak. Sometimes I wanted to go to the GP, I wanted to go some place. But I couldn’t — only with my husband and interpreter. It was very hard.

**Sara Khan:** And now? Is it a little better?

**Seza:** Now little bit it is good because I go to college and teacher teach me something. And GP, or any place anywhere and you can make appointment. Today I called GP. I made the appointment for myself. Before I couldn't. Thank you.

**Sara Khan:** Do you remember when we practised that in class last year?

**Seza:** Yeah, yeah, when you teach me. I said 'I want to make appointment for myself' — today I remember.

**Sara Khan:** Did you use computers or the internet in your country?

**Seza:** No, no.

**Sara Khan:** When did you learn to use the computer and the internet?

**Seza:** When I come to England. And computer — last year, when your class. Our first time.

**Sara Khan:** Did it help your confidence?

**Seza:** Yeah.

**Sara Khan:** Can you send emails to your teacher or classmates now?

**Seza:** Yeah. Yeah, it's good. I can.

**Sara Khan:** How do you use the internet outside class?

**Seza:** I use my mobile. SIM card internet. When I make appointment — phone call.

**Sara Khan:** Do you use English or Kurdish when you search on Google?

**Seza:** Before I used Kurdish to help me with English. Now — sometime I use Kurdish, sometime I use English.

**Sara Khan:** Would you tell other ESOL students they should learn digital skills?

**Seza:** Yeah, sometimes I tell my friend to use [digital tools]. For English. You can search on Google — picture — you know.

**Sara Khan:** Do you use any translator on your phone?

**Seza:** Kurdish dictionary. Yeah. On my phone.

## Appendix 9: Coded Transcript — Seza (with Research Question and Theme Mapping)

The table below illustrates how extracts from Seza's transcript (Appendix 8) were coded using semantic and latent coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017), as described in Chapter 4. Seza's case is particularly significant in evidencing the emergent theme of educational background and digital skills development: she entered the programme with no prior digital experience, having had minimal formal schooling in Iraq. Her journey from complete dependence on others to independently booking her own GP appointment is one of the clearest illustrations of the RQ2 finding on autonomy.

| Transcript extract | Semantic code | Latent code | Research Question | Theme |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| "Sometimes I want to [go to] GP. I want to some place. But I couldn't. I couldn't — only with my husband and interpreter." | Complete dependence on others for basic tasks before intervention | Absence of digital and language skills creates dependency; autonomy severely restricted | RQ2: In what ways do basic digital skills enable access to everyday services more independently and autonomously? | Autonomy / Independence |
| "Now little bit it is good because I go to college and teacher teach me something... GP or any place anywhere and you can make appointment. Today I called GP. I made the appointment for myself." | Independent GP appointment made post-intervention | Direct transfer of classroom-taught digital skill to real-life task; measurable increase in self-reliance | RQ2 | Autonomy / Independence |
| "Computer last year, when your class. Our first time." | First-ever computer use was in Sara's class | Complete digital novice entering the programme; intervention provided foundational access | RQ 1: How do Entry 1 ESOL learners develop basic digital skills to support language learning? | Emergent theme: Educational background and digital skills development |
| "[Did it help your confidence?] Yeah." | Brief but clear affirmation of increased confidence | Confidence growth through digital competence; brevity of response reflects limited language — not limited experience | RQ3: How does digital skills development shape confidence, integration and sense of belonging? | Confidence |
| "Sometimes I tell my friend use [digital tools]. For English. You can | Peer-to-peer sharing of digital | Learner becomes advocate | RQ3 | Integration / Sense of belonging / |

| Transcript extract | Semantic code | Latent code | Research Question | Theme |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| search on Google — picture — you know." | learning strategies | within own community; informal digital literacy spreading beyond classroom | | Participatory pedagogy |
| "I am using English [to search on Google] now... Something I use Kurdish, something I use English." | Shift from L1 to English for online searching | Digital environment prompting autonomous language switching; evidence of growing English confidence in digital context | RQ 1 / RQ2 | Language development / Autonomy |