

# Learning English: **the gateway to wellbeing**

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Women's Network for Development  
and Educational Resources

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On 25 March 2015 The Wonder Foundation attended the HEAR network event 'Working together for Health Equalities' held at Amnesty International HQ, where we presented our case study ' Learning English: the gateway to wellbeing'. We raised awareness of the need for and value of continuing migrant women's education and empowerment in London.

## Background

Health inequalities for people from minority ethnic communities are greater in London than anywhere else in England (RCN, 2014). Language is a key factor contributing to communication barriers with healthcare professionals, reduced use of healthcare services and overall poor health outcomes (Jayaweera, 2014). London is home to people speaking over 300 languages, making this a relevant issue that deserves attention (Kaur, Oakley and Venn, 2014).

Research has shown that language barriers stop individuals from seeking and receiving primary and preventative care. This can lead to many adverse health effects, including poor knowledge and comprehension of diagnosis, poor adherence to treatment and an increased risk of medical errors (Kaur, Oakley and Venn, 2014).

Maternal mortality in the UK is a sad example of the contributing impact of language: among a fifth of mothers who died, during the surveyed period, possessed little or no English fluency (Jayaweera, 2014). The adverse effect of limited language proficiency also impacts on children's health: children are triple as likely to have poor health when they have parents with limited English proficiency (Flores, Abreu and Tomany-Korman, 2005).

## ESOL classes at The Baytree Centre

Looking beyond the role of interpreters and translation to overcome language barriers, the Wonder Foundation spent time over the last few months to focus on the role that education and empowerment plays in improving health and wellbeing. More specifically we looked at the role

that English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes play in reducing health inequalities for migrant women in London.

We conducted a small qualitative study in collaboration with our local partner The Baytree Centre (TBC). TBC is a Brixton based charity that provides ESOL classes as part of their activities to promote social inclusion for inner city women and their families.

All levels of instruction contain a dedicated section on health and healthcare services. Teachers provide language tools to improve verbal and written communication with healthcare professionals and practice healthcare related scenarios to boost students' confidence. During the classes the UK healthcare system is also discussed and students are informed of the available primary and secondary healthcare services.

## Method

In collaboration with TBC teachers we conducted two one-hour focus group interviews with a total of eighteen migrant women: eight women at beginners level and ten women at elementary level. The topics of discussion were personal experiences with the ESOL classes, the effect learning English is having on the ability to access healthcare services and the effect it has on overall wellbeing.

As the focus group interviews were conducted as part of the ESOL classes, it was required to have the teachers involved and enable them to comment, give feedback when appropriate and facilitate continued learning. Even though this limited our ability to lead

the discussion at times, the trusted and familiar presence and questions of the teacher aided students to share their experiences.

## Findings

The main themes that were identified during the analysis of the conversations and discussions were as follows:

- ESOL classes provide a 'safe social space' in which women can be amongst women, ask questions and exchange experiences. Women expressed to experience this as a great learning environment.
- During the ESOL classes, women are able to acquire language tools and skills to use in their daily lives and improve their communication. This includes learning 'medical vocabulary', which the interviewed women deemed essential during a visit the doctor or GP practice.
- Before taking the classes, women felt that lack of English proficiency made them dependent on male family members or children to translate and

speak for them. With the help of the teacher and ESOL classes women felt empowered to speak for themselves and attend doctor's appointments on their own.

## Conclusion

Although we recognise that there is a variety of factors contributing to the health and wellbeing of migrant women in London, this case study shows the positive effect that ESOL classes at The Baytree Centre have. The knowledge, communication skills and independence gained from the classes empowered women to access available healthcare services, receive and understand any treatment required and improve their health and wellbeing.

As this case study only had a limited group of participants it would be interesting for similar case studies to be conducted in other London areas in order to expand our knowledge on the impact that ESOL classes have on reducing health inequalities for migrant women.

*When we come here I must go [to the doctor] with my husband.*

*But now I can, my English is not very good, but I can go alone! I feel really good!*

- ESOL student

*The English classes really helped me. When I was in my country I couldn't speak at all with someone. I was really shy. But when I come here, with help of the teacher, I can talk properly.*

- ESOL student

## References

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