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**PART 2: TEACHING IN THE GLOBAL REFUGEE CRISIS**

**Teaching English to refugees and migrants in Eidomeni and Diavata, Greece**

***by Vafeidou Avgi, Aristotelio College, Greece***

*A road that is a long one, full of adventure, full of discovery* (C.P. Cavafy, *Ithaca*)

One of the biggest problems for the thousands of refugees and migrants that came to Eidomeni and Diavata– Greece in 2016 is language. All of them are from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan where the Greek language is definitely neither spoken nor taught. Luckily, most of them speak some English, German or French. However, success in the *“harbours they’re seeing for the first time”* will depend on them communicating with comfortable intelligibility in a language that is widely spoken, and this is definitely English. Beyond any doubt, one thing is clear: the refugees in these camps will have long term needs such as life skills, language skills, access to ways to earn a living, and education for kids.

According to data from the government’s coordinating agency for the refugee crisis, the number of refugees and migrants trapped in Greece due to the closure of borders in the north on 16th April 2016 came to 41,464.  In Eidomeni and Diavata, the energy and efforts of the volunteers are usefully employed in manifold activities. PRAKSIS (Programs of Development, Social Support and Medical Cooperation) which is an independent Non Governmental Organization as well as R.S.M.T (Refugee Solidarity Movement Thessaloniki) and Humanity Crew (Help#Crisis#Worldwide), organizations of enthusiastic volunteers from all over the world, consolidate and coordinate the efforts of activists concerned with the rights of refugees. Three axes constitute their job: a) prevention, b) direct intervention/support and c) lobbying and advocacy. They all try to cover most of the refugees’ basic needs: psychological and social support, housing, legal counseling and basic hygiene services (clothing, hygiene kits, etc). Additionally, creative workshops for little kids and teenagers provide some of the keenest participants with many opportunities to develop their English language skills.

Teaching the English language to the refugees in Eidomeni and Diavata does not require specific skills, just a desire to help and a friendly smile. Six volunteers (including myself) try to help with the migration crisis by teaching English at a very basic level and mostly by offering children and adults the opportunity to spend some time in a creative way. The volunteers who teach English are not necessarily qualified; anyone who speaks the language is welcome to offer their services, mainly because the whole “project of providing schooling for those interested” is still in its infancy. However, it has to be said that some of the refugees are highly educated, keen to start a new life, have specific aims for their children, their friends and themselves and are thus emotionally available and very cooperative.

The refugees might have felt disillusioned when they first arrived in Greece, the ‘sunny land of hope and promise’, but with the help of the volunteers they soon realized that they would have to be patient because the Greek refugee reception centres are far from being organised. So two ELT colleagues and I, who all belong to R.S.M.T, agreed to design and run “The English teaching project”: we decided to meet some of the refugees and migrants twice a week for a couple of hours to teach them the basics and get them started. No official organisation, nothing formal, almost zero equipment. This situation is unique in that we almost never have the same ‘students’ from one week to the next, so we repeat the same lesson over and over again. The lessons consist of the English alphabet, the numbers, simple verb specific sentences, and ‘survival’ everyday questions and answers. News about us is spread by word of mouth, some children and/or adults turn up and disappear again, others are very regular attendees and have become a close-knit group. Sometimes the ‘classes’ have an intergenerational nature: younger learners and older adults with different motivations and aptitudes coexist in the same EFL classroom context and struggle to absorb the necessary knowledge with Jovian patience. We all find the experience rewarding as it gives us the ability to help practically and possibly enable our ‘students’ to communicate beyond their own group and to move about independently.

“Why do I do it?” - I have increasingly realised that I do it not for altruistic reasons but because it makes me feel good. No matter what the difficulties are (including the distance to Eidomeni and Diavata), I try to keep my enthusiasm and a rare excitement stirs my spirit and my body. It is satisfying for me to see that some of the ‘students’ have made small progress steps with the language. Helping them with various practicalities and seeing them respond to each other and to me in a relaxed and happy atmosphere for a couple of hours is indeed time well-spent.

It goes without saying that all the volunteers aspire to be a bridge between the refugees’ old life and their new life, help them recover from the post traumatic stress disorder most of them are experiencing, aid them with their daily struggles, and generally help with transition, integration and intercultural understanding. Therefore, all the participants involved, i.e. organisations, movements and individuals, among many other things organise play time for smaller kids and all kinds of activities for older kids in English with a view to making things easier for children to both learn a new language and make new friends, and maybe “feel at home”. Knowing that they can express themselves in even minor ways will hopefully build their confidence, make them feel good about themselves and help them integrate better. I wish more people would realise how rewarding it is and that no specific skills are required: just a desire to help and a friendly smile.

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**Teaching English in The Jungle: A Diary *by Ann Cowie***

**Part 1: February 2016**

When I train new teachers I always include an activity where trainees have to imagine they are going to teach in a school where there are no resources at all, and they need to decide what they would take in 1 suitcase. We usually suggest ‘Outer Mongolia’ as their destination, but I never imagined that conditions like this could exist so close to home. The Ecole Laique is a makeshift structure with no heating in a muddy refugee camp just outside Calais. There are some notebooks, coloured crayons and a few donated books, mainly so far at the wrong levels. There are tables and chairs set out - with English language teachers at one end of the room and French at the other end. It all works very informally – a teacher sits down at a table and people turn up – in varying numbers. You could be working with just one person then another 4 turn up, possibly at different levels. The challenge is to keep going using lots of gesture and mime and the people in the room as resources (pure Dogme approach). I've never worked with people so keen to learn - a pleasure to teach and a lot of fun too, against the background of desperation when you hear people's stories. One person I worked with (an accountant from Khartoum who got on the wrong side of the government and had to flee for his life) had spent 3 years getting here, and having tried to make a go of it in several countries on the way (he claims to have been beaten up in 8 different countries) he decided to join his brother in London, only to realise after 3 months in Calais that this was the end of the road - the only way to get any further is to risk death jumping on a ferry or a train, and now in his forties, he says he is beyond all that. Like many people I spoke to, he has no idea what to do now and is just existing in limbo.

What comes across very clearly is that so many people in the camp are escaping situations that have been caused or exacerbated by western foreign policy - Iraqis and Syrians, Syrians most obviously , but even my Sudanese friend 10 years ago would have been able to make a good life for himself in Libya. But this is no longer an option. He described how the country is in complete chaos as a result of the decision to remove Gaddafi and with him all effective government - there are apparently rival gangs roaming the streets and setting up road blocks on every corner - you can't get home from work with any possessions - even your food shopping is taken off you at gunpoint at the road blocks.



The camp is a terrible place to live - it's partly built on a dump where slabs of exposed asbestos have been found - literally freezing cold and very muddy with big pools of filthy water around. There are portaloos but not enough and you really don't want to use them after about 10 am as they get progressively filthier during the day. We had a chance to have a better look around and discovered all kinds of social spaces and services that have sprung up - an Eritrean church, another school, vaccination centre, a youth centre, an arts centre, shops, restaurants, clubs and even a "hotel". These places are a testimony to the resourcefulness of the residents and the commitment of some very dedicated volunteers. They make the camp that little bit easier to survive in, as there is an opportunity to get out of your tent and spend time with other people.

Shamefully it is many of these spaces that are due to be bulldozed by the French authorities in the very near future, along with a large area of tents. It is not clear what people are supposed to do when their homes are destroyed - there are some containers (with no windows) that have been provided by the French authorities but they resemble a prison camp, there are not enough of them and apparently they are not for the children. I imagine many residents will end up sleeping on the streets of Calais where they are vulnerable to increasing hostility and attacks from racists, who have already been attacking the camp at night. The adult school where we worked, the children's school next door, a meeting space and climbing frame, all built by a volunteer, are all due to be flattened. It worries me what effect this will have on the people who worked so hard to build them and those who have been using them.

It's difficult to know what to do about all of this. .The camp is awful but while people have nowhere else to go it is better than a flattened camp, so we have to stop the bulldozers. In the long term people can't stay there indefinitely. The camp is no place for children, and there is a petition going around to sign. It is no good for adults either and this point needs to be made to MPs. There is not a huge number of people in Calais - probably about 4,000 to 6,000 - they could easily be accommodated in the UK, and should be, given the part the UK played in creating the conditions for their situation. I will definitely be going back to help in the school when I have more time, and there is plenty of work in the warehouse for others to do if you’re interested.

[[](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10154066445792275&set=pcb.10154066473897275&type=3)](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10154066444547275&set=pcb.10154066473897275&type=3)

**Part 2: March 2016**

I have just returned from a 2nd visit to the Calais camp, this time with Teresa Ortiz, Linda Ruas and Juliet Kay; we heard that the school is still standing, despite the destruction of huge swathes of the camp around, and teachers are wanted, so a few of us went out again. The French court had apparently ruled that buildings providing a public service should be spared, and so amongst all the destruction, you can still find a church, a library and our school (apparently the original mosque didn’t survive). From a distance it looks like they are standing in acres of ploughed fields, but when you get closer you can see the remains of people’s possessions – shoes, clothes, toys and tents – the meagre possessions of people who fled their countries with only what they could carry – now bulldozed into the soil. We heard that the residents had been led to believe that the bulldozing of the camp would happen gradually, but in fact it was done so quickly and brutally that many residents were unable to rescue their belongings, and lost everything. There now seems to be a secondary clear-up going on now whereby these sad remains are being scooped up by diggers and a layer of sand is being spread over the surface –I've no idea why.   
It is now quite a walk from what remains of the camp to the school, so people are not able to just call in to see what is going on, and few children seem to be making it to the children’s school and play area. However word went round and soon we had more students than there were chairs for. Again, people wanted to learn some English and French, and were so keen that many sat there for 4 hours making the most of every minute, then more hours in their tents painstakingly copying out everything they had learned for each other, and were word perfect the next day. (Any colleagues will confirm that you never expect ESOL learners to remember every detail of a lesson, but these students seem to be the exception). Like last time, it was also a rare pleasure for the teachers – this pared down approach , far away from the trappings of marketization that encroach on so many of our lessons at home –exam preparation, ILPs, embedded numeracy and Prevent - here you can just focus on what is needed and have some fun too. We had a better idea of the conditions this time and brought some home-made materials that went down very well. There is now a website where people can share resources, so it feels like things are getting more organised.   
I was disappointed not to find the young Darfuri refugees that I worked with last time and couldn’t find any news of what had happened to them. Apparently a lot of people left Calais after the bulldozing, either going to smaller camps in France, such as Dunkirk, or just camping out in the countryside in small groups taking shelter under bridges and in barns, where they must be incredibly vulnerable and also out of easy reach of any kind of support. When talking to people about the future, they seemed more despondent than before. Probably experiencing 1st hand just how brutal and callous the authorities are prepared to be, has made them realise that there’s not much hope of safely making it to Britain. On the other hand, if you know that your family has made huge sacrifices to get you to Europe, and you’ve spent the last year or so slowly working your way towards this island, experiencing terrible things on the way, you are not going to give up on that dream too easily. Some of the residents have decided to make asylum applications in France and other countries, but others, especially those with family in the UK, are still in limbo, waiting for a miracle, and with no easy alternative option to take.



On the third day, we visited the Care4Calais warehouse, and Linda and I did a “How to teach ESOL” training session this morning with some of the volunteers - they will be teaching in the school after the rest of us have to go back home for the next term. We discussed 8 key principles:maximum student-talk, grade and cut teacher language, repetition, recycle and review, develop study skills, relevance, sensitivity and build on what they know . We then demonstrated with the sets of laminated flashcards we’d made teach with, several possible lesson sequences about ‘useful things in the camp’, ‘food’ and ‘health’, moving from eliciting vocabulary from visuals, to ranking, requesting items and asking for directions in role-plays. The volunteers tried them out in small groups, then we agreed on further materials we could make for them to send.

**Part 3: May 2016** Teresa, recently made redundant from her ESOL teaching job in London, decided to go back to Calais in April and organise the teaching. She took a lot more materials, now has a laminator, and has lower levels in the mornings and intermediate levels in the afternoons and early evening. She plans to stay until July and is very self-sufficient, as she’s taken her bike to get to the camp and back every day. If you have a week or so spare this summer and would like to teach, Care4Calais is a good charity to contact: <http://care4calais.org/>

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**A Greek EFL teacher’s view on the refugee issue *by Niovi Chatzinikolaou, Greece***

Since migration in Greece reached a peak, more and more people have become sensitized over the issue; at first, by sending clothes and food supplies and later on by actively undertaking different tasks in the large refugee camp in Eidomeni and other reception camps in Northern Greece. Now, in most of the camps there is a big network of NGOs and solidarity groups such as PRAKSIS (Programs of Development, Social Support and Medical Cooperation), R.S.M.T (Refugee Solidarity Movement Thessaloniki), UNHCR, Doctors without Borders and Oikopolis which coordinate all volunteer activities. These include cooking and food distribution, distribution of clothes and first need equipment, medical care and legal counseling.

I wouldn’t call myself an activist. It takes great physical and mental effort to be a real activist. I would rather say I am an educator who is sensitive to global issues and is ready to support and provide help when it is needed. My initial motive when I first visited Eidomeni around Christmas was to see the situation myself. I went there with a volunteer team from Oikopolis, one of the most active solidarity groups in the camp. The borders were open then and Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers were free to cross after they had their papers checked by the police. NGOs were mostly in charge of food distribution to make sure refugees will leave Greece and continue their long journey well equipped.



After the borders closed, people were stuck in Eidomeni for months. Everyday there were protests for the opening of the border, hunger strikes and clashes between the refugees and the police. Tear gas, chaos and violence led to an explosive situation. New immediate needs were created as refugees had nowhere to go but the camp. Hundreds of tents were set up and some basic infrastructure (hygiene and medical care services) was constructed. Since refugees would have to permanently stay in the camp for an unknown period of time there was an increasing need for volunteers. I felt compelled to offer my services once again. On my second visit, Eidomeni already looked like a town. It was tough and it still is but it seems that with the help of volunteers, refugees are getting used to their everyday life. All the volunteers I met in the camp, whether long term or short term, are people who are committed to what they offer. They want to provide refugees with some stability and joy during a difficult transition period in their lives. They believe that despite the bad living conditions, life in the camp doesn’t have to be nightmarish.

To this end, they have taken initiatives to reduce tension and anxiety among refugees and create an environment where they can feel safe and secure. There is now a child-friendly space where, amongst other things, drawing workshops are organized for children. Unaccompanied children are also offered psychological support by professionals to overcome trauma. In the cultural center of Eidomeni, volunteers regularly organize recreational activities, mainly based on singing and dancing. Other reception centers run similar activities. In Diavata reception camp, there is a group of graduate and postgraduate students (some of them newly qualified teachers) who visit the camp daily to engage refugee children creatively through team games, circle time, arts and crafts. I couldn’t resist joining them in one of the activities. I wanted to share their joy. Children, who would otherwise be wandering around the camp without any supervision, now had a reason to be excited. Their everyday routine was not meaningless anymore. I could see that developing a sense of belonging to a community, they felt less intimidated.

Of course, language is still a barrier for the vast majority of refugees. Very few of them speak any language other than Arabic. While volunteering in the food distribution point in Eidomeni, I’ve experienced the frustration of so many refugees who couldn’t communicate their needs and feelings just because they didn’t have the means. As a result, there have been a number of misunderstandings, quarrels between refugees and volunteers, even fights. Gesturing and nodding cannot make up for communication breakdowns. Learning the language of the host country will certainly help refugees integrate and function in a society which would otherwise be hostile. English is also a survival language for them.

Recently, NGOs and solidarity movements have responded to this need and have informally set up schools to teach refugees some basic English and Greek in both the Eidomeni and Diavata camps. Teaching English and Greek in a refugee camp does not require any specific skills. In hard times it’s not qualifications that matter but the desire to help and to offer one’s service. When I first learnt about the school, I decided I wanted to get involved in this. I visited Diavata camp where volunteers run two different schools, one for children and one for adults. English is taught by Arabic-speaking volunteers or English-speaking refugees who stay at the camp. Lessons take place in an empty space inside an abandoned building. No actual classroom setting, no equipment, just a small portable whiteboard and a few desks and chairs.



During my first time at Diavata camp, I was present at the setting up of the “classroom” for the English lesson. The students, mostly children between 7-14, were in charge themselves. They carried desks and chairs into the building and put them in a row. Some of them were carrying schoolbags, others had a notebook and a pencil in hand. I couldn’t believe the amount of joy and excitement this class generated. It seems that the class has brought a ray of hope to all involved. Volunteer teachers told me that they have started with few supplies but full of good intentions. They have launched a crowd funding campaign to raise money for school materials. I have already donated some spare notebooks, dictionaries and English grammar books myself.

Even though I have no clue about Greek lessons running in the camp, I noticed that refugee children are dealing equally well with both Greek and English. I remember when I first entered the school building, I was approached by an 8 year old Syrian girl who was trying to impress me by counting up to twenty both in English and Greek. I was so touched. I even felt proud as, for a moment, it reminded me of the pride I take whenever my own students show off what they have learnt. I looked around and wondered “How is it possible to have such a passion for knowledge while having to live in such a place?” I kept looking at the children’s faces. I saw happiness and satisfaction. I almost forgot I was there to help people recover from their miseries. It seems that children no matter where they are, what they have witnessed or been through, never lose their innocence and enthusiasm for new things. Their enthusiasm is contagious. It really is. It gives us, volunteers, a reason to keep struggling to build a safe environment for them. I have now joined the volunteer teacher team and try to support them in their efforts. Last week, I brought fairytales to read to the students after an English lesson. Even though English is still too complicated for the younger ones who have just learnt the alphabet letters, they respond well. Children have an amazing ability to pick up new language once exposed to it. After all, fairytales are fun especially when children are in a friendly, inviting environment. This made me think that if children have an advantage over adults regarding language learning, we, as teachers, need to make the most of it.

I am very glad that other ELT colleagues have shared my concern, supported the initiative and are now running a project on teaching English to refugees. I wish more and more people could get involved in this not only through crowd funding for the setting up of schools but actively joining this enthusiastic team of teachers to help refugees start a new life.

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