

# Latin Americans in London: Barriers to English Language Skills

IRMO Research Briefing

Helen McCarthy - June 2016



## Introduction

English language skills are essential for people to access services, jobs and opportunities as well as being important for people's sense of belonging. Demand for IRMO's English classes from the Latin American community continues to rise and this briefing focuses on English language skills and access to ESOL for the Latin American community. Due to the pivotal role that English language plays in people's lives, it has been described as a facilitator of integration (Ager and Strang 2005).

Between early December 2015 and mid January 2016 IRMO conducted a survey with our beneficiaries in order to get a snap shot picture of the issues the community faces in access to English language skills. People were approached at IRMO and invited to take part in the survey which was given in paper in Spanish. People were able to complete the survey in their own time. People from all our projects and services were invited to take part. In total 199 responses were received. In some cases not all the questions were answered and some surveys were returned with certain sections left blank. These were removed from the analysis. The responses were fairly evenly split between men and women, with women slightly overrepresented.

## Key findings

- More than 71% respondents were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their level of English
- Almost all respondents (97%) reported that they wanted to improve their level of English. Barriers to access classes included lack of time/work hours, lack of information, high cost and lack of childcare
- 89% have relied on someone else to speak English for them. Friends, children and relatives were most frequently listed first. However, a number of people also relied on strangers to help them with English.

## About IRMO

IRMO is a community-led organisation, and registered charity (1080813), that provides Latin Americans with tools and information in an empowering process to build fulfilled, independent and integrated lives in the UK using a rights-based approach.

IRMO currently provides free English classes at four levels through our English for Work project. Last year over 500 people accessed classes.

## Precarity and poverty faced by the Latin American community

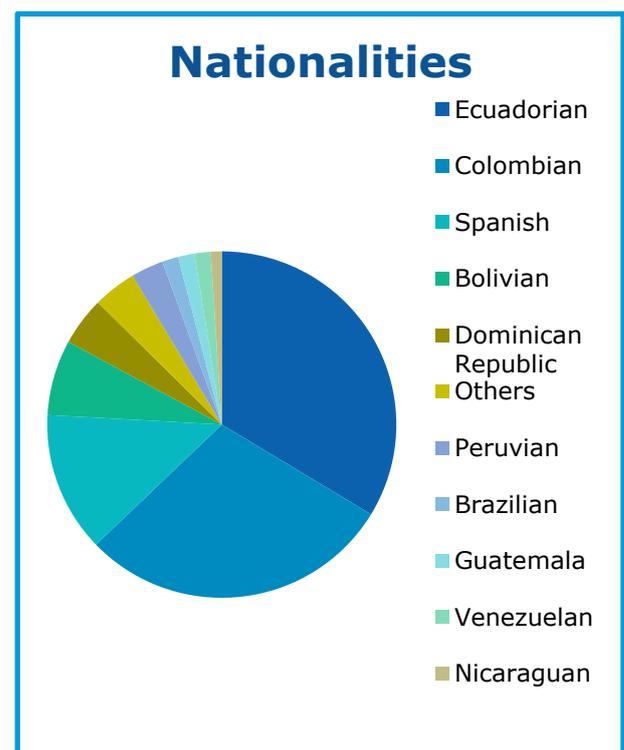
Whilst the Latin American community is made up of a number of nationalities and people from diverse backgrounds, previous research on the community in London, particularly the No Longer Invisible report from 2011, has revealed that many face precarity and in-work poverty (McIlwaine, Cock, Linneker 2011). The majority (85%) of Latin Americans in London are in work, a higher rate than the London population as a whole. Whilst a majority of Latin Americans are well educated (70% have post secondary education), many experience de-skilling and occupational decline on arrival in London. 47% working in low-skilled jobs such as in cleaning and catering, and those who have arrived since 2000 are more likely to be working in those jobs. 22% have no written employment contract and 11% earn below National Minimum Wage (a rate ten times higher than the general population). A third work part time and another third combine more than one job (McIlwaine et al 2011). These conditions leave many open to abuse and exploitation in the workplace.

All in all, the employment situation of a significant portion of the Latin American community is shaped by low-pay, lack of prospects and precarity, impacting on other areas of their lives. Working anti-social and fragmented hours can affect people’s ability to access other mainstream services such as English classes. Research has revealed that many Latin Americans are not accessing health care services (McIlwaine et al 2011, Granada and Paccoud 2014, Mas

Giralt and Granada 2015) due to barriers such as language and lack of information. As a result community organisations, such as IRMO, are important sources of information and support to people facing difficulties. This is particularly true for those on the lower end of the income scale (less than £500 per month), among this group, 45% reported accessing a community organisation (McIlwaine et al 2011). Previous research with Latin Americans revealed that 29% cannot speak English and 58% of Latin Americans identified lack of language skills as the main barrier to further integration (McIlwaine et al 2011).

## Who is the community served by IRMO?

The findings described above are indicative of the community that IRMO is serving. Overall 18 different nationalities were represented in the survey of IRMO’s beneficiaries, of these Ecuadorian and Colombian were the largest represented nationalities and made up more than half of the



responses. Almost half (47%) who took part in the survey reported that they had two nationalities. The largest second nationality reported was Spanish, followed by British.

Unsurprisingly the majority of our beneficiaries are in work, over 75% saying they were working. Of those who are working, 68% are working part time and almost 75% are working in cleaning. This reflects that IRMO is serving people on the lower end of the income scale who are facing precarity and in work poverty.

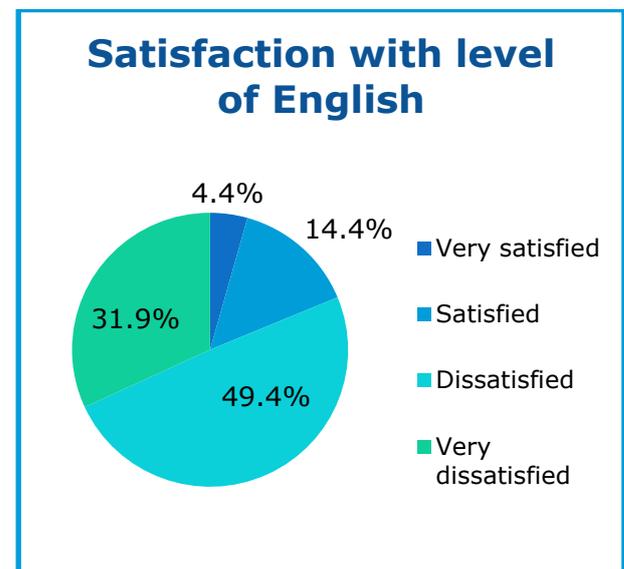
The majority of those who were surveyed had come to IRMO on more than one occasion. Over a third (39%) had been in the UK for more than 2 years, however, 36% have been in the UK for less than a year (with 10% having been in the UK for less than 3 months). This shows that even those who are very recently arrived in the country are able to access the support that IRMO provides.

### **English language skills and access to ESOL courses**

English language skills are consistently identified as key to integration by researchers and policy makers alike (Phillimore, Humphris & Khan 2015, Gidley and Jayaweera 2010). English language skills have been shown to account for different rates of employment and wage differentials between native and foreign born individuals (Wood and Wybron 2015). However, between 2010 and 2015 public funding for ESOL has been cut by 40% (Wood and Wybron 2015). As a result, provision has been reduced and

demand has increased. This reduction in funding has meant that many groups, such as low paid workers, are no longer eligible for subsidised (or free) classes (Wood and Wybron 2015).

Among IRMO’s beneficiaries, more than 71% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their level of English. Almost all of our respondents (97%) reported that they wanted to improve their level of English.



Slightly over half of our respondents were attending English classes (51.7%) of those the vast majority were attending English classes in IRMO (over 90%) which is perhaps unsurprising given that the survey was conducted in IRMO (although not only with people coming to English classes). Of those not attending English classes, over a quarter (28.6%) reported that they wanted to.

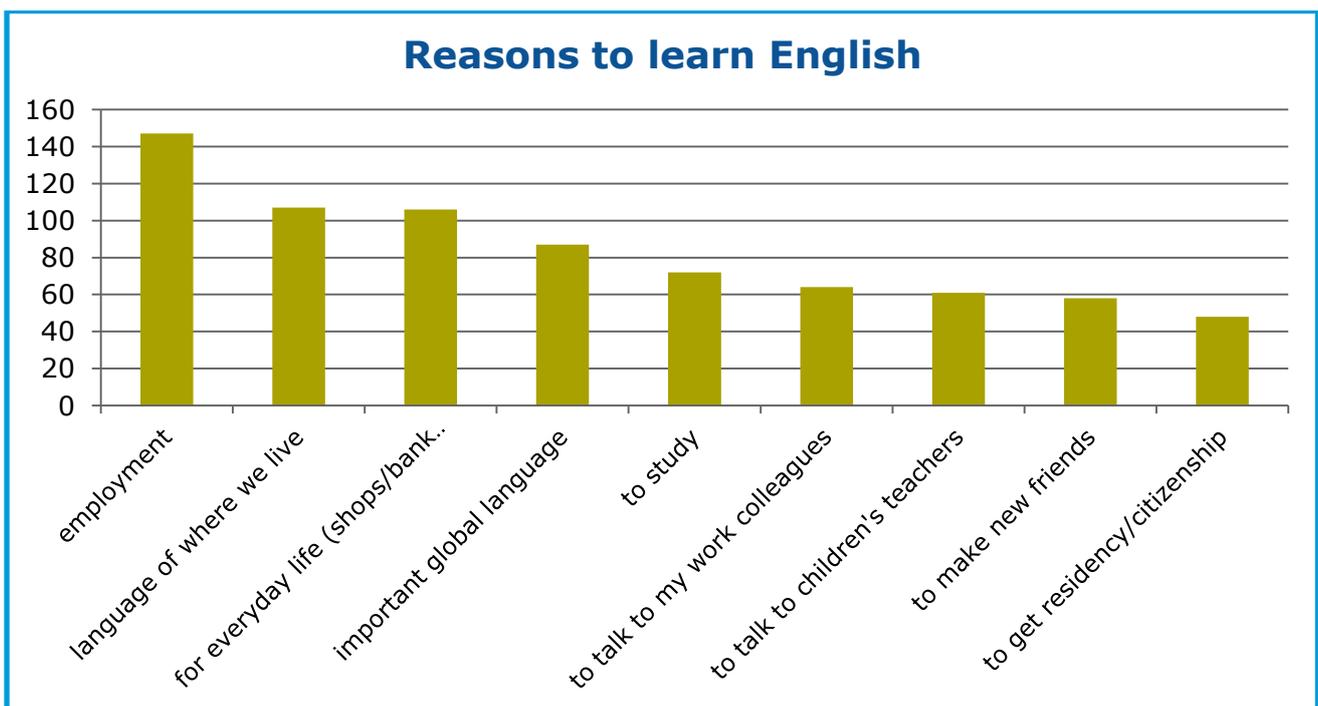
Research has also demonstrated the benefit of accessing English classes soon after arrival both in terms of likelihood of progressing with English learning but also in terms of making social

connections (Gidley and Jayaweera 2010, Phillimore et al 2015).

Of those who said they wanted to access classes but were not, the biggest barrier was lack of time or irregular work hours (36%) followed by lack of information (23%), high cost (17%) and lack of childcare (14%). This corresponds with other evidence from other research that has found that a major barrier for accessing ESOL is long working hours (Gidley and Jayaweera 2010, Granada 2013).

People were also asked about their motivations for learning English, or the

reasons they thought it was important. The most widely cited reason was to improve employment opportunities. This could be described as an instrumental reason, however, there were a number of motivations that expressed a more integrative reasons such as “because it’s important to speak the language of the country where I live”. In fact the range of reasons is, as might be expected, fairly broad and this correlates with other research that has found a range of motivations for learning the language (Granada 2013). Interestingly, gaining residency or citizenship seems be a less important factor for learning English.



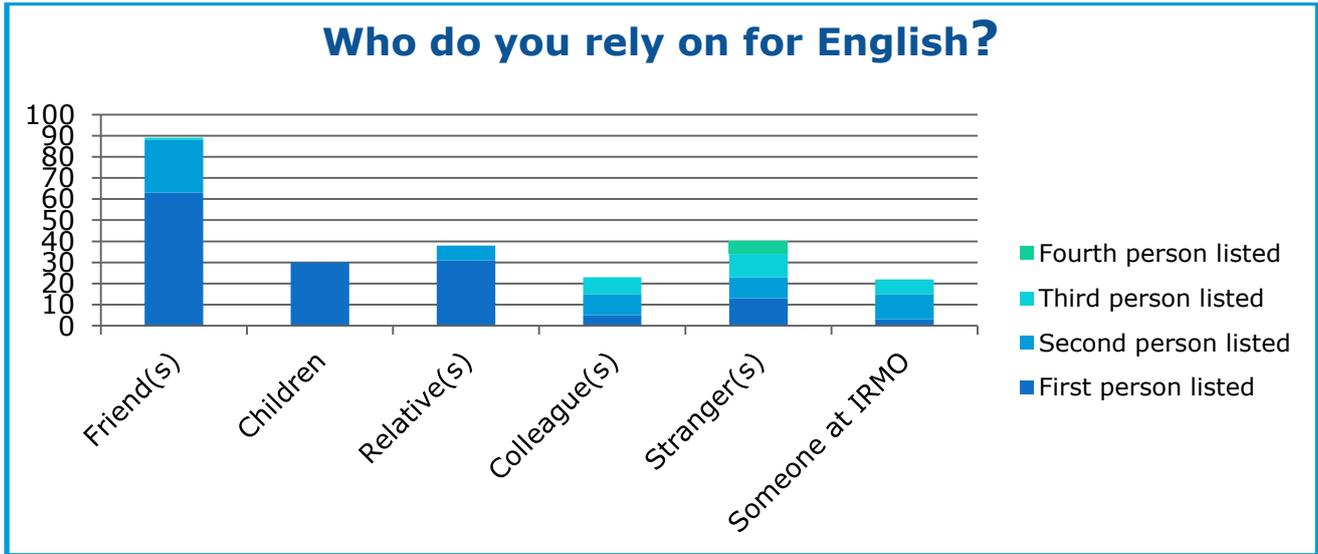
It seemed that most people experienced a real need for English in their daily lives, as 89% had relied on someone else to speak English for them. People often reported that they had relied on other people to speak English in a number of different situations. People had relied on others in a range of situations, including most commonly

speaking to the doctor, filling out forms, in the bank. It was less common to rely on someone else to speak English at work.

Respondents were asked who they relied on to help them with their English. Friends, children and relatives were most frequently listed first.

However, a number of people also relied on work colleagues but also strangers to help them with English. It's worrying that people did not have anyone within their networks able to help them. Although we had not asked this question, five people volunteered information that they had paid strangers for help with their English. It is unclear

how common practice this is, but anecdotal stories reveal that certain people will offer themselves to go to the doctor or the job centre and speak English in exchange for money. This should be explored further in future research, as these could potentially be exploitative situations.



A suggested solution to the difficulty of ensuring enough high quality provision of ESOL is that employers should be encouraged to provide or subsidise English classes, particularly as it is argued that employers will benefit. We asked our respondents whether their employer had offered any kind of

support in accessing ESOL, either classes or subsidies for classes. The majority of our respondents (81.3%) had not been offered them any support in accessing English classes, suggesting this remains an untapped potential source of support for ESOL.

**Conclusions**

As the government continues to cut funding for ESOL, demand for English classes continues to grow. These cuts have hit the low paid in particular, and as a result, many of the low paid in the Latin American community have been affected. Provision such as IRMO's struggles to keep pace with demand, particularly in the current funding climate. There is a strong desire within the community to improve language abilities for a range of reasons. Other models, such as more provision or subsidies by employers have so far not materialised.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of English for accessing services and better opportunities. A huge percentage of the community have had to rely on others for English, and some have reported relying on strangers (and even paying

people) in these situations. This reveals the vulnerability that people experience in these situations and shows the importance of supporting people to develop their English language skills so that they can communicate for themselves in everyday situations.

## About the author

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