
The struggles around ESOL provision

We print here an article adapted by Alice Robson from the talk given by her at a meeting of the Independent Working-Class Education Network in London on 6 October 2012

'ESOL' or 'English for Speakers of Other Languages' provision is an area of adult education unique in its close relationship with migration. For much of its history, there have been struggles around the very existence of such classes for migrants and minimal state funding has been provided. While this changed after the bringing of ESOL into the Skills for Life strategy in 2001, this was paralleled by increasing compulsion for migrants to learn English. Today there are struggles again over the existence of ESOL, with changes recently proposed to access to free classes, against a backdrop of cuts to further and adult education generally. In fighting these attacks, it is also important to think about the kind of ESOL provision we want. How can ESOL teaching be class-conscious and anti-racist? In a field which has historically seen so much volunteer involvement rather than adequate state funding, what does it mean for ESOL to be 'independent'? How does looking at the past help ESOL teachers grappling with the challenges we face today? And can ESOL classrooms be spaces for organising?

What is ESOL?

ESOL refers to English classes for migrant and refugee adults who are settling in the UK. This is distinguished from 'EFL', English as a Foreign Language, which refers to English classes for people learning English in their home country, or coming to the UK to study for a short time before returning. The distinction has never been a completely clear one, and the increase in migration from southern Europe countries with high

levels of unemployment is a contemporary example of how people may not neatly fit into one category or another. ESOL classes take place in further education colleges, in adult learning centres, in schools, children's centres, community centres, workplaces (less so now funding has been cut for this), in private training providers (sometimes on contracts from Job Centre Plus) and by volunteers in a range of community settings.

ESOL is an area of education unique in its close relationship with migration, and of government and societal views of migrants – and, over the past decade, increasingly bound up with immigration policy and controls. The racism experienced by ESOL learners, in their interactions with public services, on the streets through racist abuse and discriminatory policing and through the pernicious effects of immigration controls (such as waiting for asylum or leave to remain decisions, the threat or reality of detention, doubts over whether family reunion will be permitted) are issues learners bring with them into the classroom. In 2002 the Nationality, Immigration, and Asylum Act was passed, requiring those seeking citizenship to show 'a sufficient knowledge of English, Welsh or Scottish Gaelic and about life in the UK'. This was then extended to indefinite leave to remain applicants, and is now at a much higher level than what was previously demanded due to further immigration rule changes. The link between English and the very right to stay in the UK makes English, and ESOL, an increasingly important part of the Government's agenda of ever-tightening immigration controls.

ESOL in the UK: historical context

For most of its long history, however, the actual teaching of ESOL in the UK has been largely ignored in policy circles. Whilst this allowed considerable scope for what has been taught – such as examples of innovative radical anti-racist education in ESOL classes in the 1980s – it has been chronically under-funded, frequently poor quality and often taught by untrained and unpaid teachers. In more recent years, where state attention has been given to ESOL, the funding this has brought has come alongside sustained attempts to use ESOL as a tool to promote both a certain view of migrants – as a placid and willing source of cheap labour – and of whatever version of ‘Britishness’ is currently dominant in official circles. Struggles and debates around teaching English to migrants are not limited to the 21st century. Can the history of ESOL provide us with any perspectives on the problems we face today, and of how we might make our classrooms spaces where critical, class-conscious, anti-racist education can take place? Looking at a few examples from ESOL’s history suggests some possibilities, as well as highlighting some challenges.

The history of Jewish migration to Britain was cited by Ed Miliband in his December 2012 immigration speech. He described the arrival of ‘penniless shopkeepers’ from eastern Europe in London’s East End in the early 20th century, before going on to talk about his parents’ arrival in the UK as refugees escaping Nazism, with his father’s study of English at Acton Technical College and subsequent career as a professor of sociology presented as a positive example of migrant achievement (he carefully left out any reference to his politics). One of the many deeply problematic parts of Miliband’s speech is the implication that ‘integration’ is almost synonymous with migrants’ English-language competence. The limitations of this view were something that was recognised in one of the periods Miliband cites: the arrival of Jewish migrants from eastern and central Europe in the early 20th century. The press, then as now, denigrated the new arrivals, one publication exclaiming that ‘many of them do not speak English and they mix very little with Englishmen’. Certainly the migrants’ common use of Yiddish and their concentration in Whitechapel, often working in Jewish-owned and staffed workshops, meant that Yiddish remained for many the primary language of communication. However, as well as some Jewish migrants attending English classes, during this period of expanding municipal adult education provision, English classes were offered alongside classes in the language spoken by migrant communities including Yiddish, German and Irish. The emphasis was thus not just on new migrants learning English but also on

mother tongue provision, and on others having the opportunity to learn the language of the new migrant communities.

After the Second World War, migration from the New Commonwealth prompted government concerns about the language needs of new migrants, but largely focused on children. Of the Section 11 funding for New Commonwealth migrants used for education (both English and mother tongue provision), it was estimated that only 1 per cent was spent on adults. The government approach in this period of restricting immigration through a series of immigration acts whilst claiming to improve the condition of those already here, in part through the measures in the 1968 Race Relations Act, was the context for the setting up of the Community Relations Commission to promote ‘harmonious community relations’. Part of this strategy involved establishing adult community language schemes, an approach which presages the central role of learning English to New Labour’s more recent ‘community cohesion’ strategy. Much of the ESOL provision from the 1960s was voluntary-run, with classes taught by volunteer teachers who were usually untrained. Such teachers often worked alone, as ‘home tutors’ teaching in students’ homes. The role of volunteers in ESOL provision is a very timely issue, with David Cameron’s ‘Big Society’ bringing with it a vision of adult education including volunteer-run classes and ‘self organised learning groups’.

The Industrial Language Training Programmes which ran from the late 1970s to the late 1980s provided work-based ESOL for migrant workers, but saw communication as something people needed to share responsibility for and thus also provided training in cross-cultural and language awareness for employers and other employees. These programmes did not shy away from the acknowledgement of racism in the workplace. This is in sharp contrast to New Labour policy which, particularly following the 2001 Bradford and Burnley riots, is premised on laying blame for a lack of ‘community cohesion’ on migrant communities (particularly migrant women), without an acknowledgement of shortages in provision or on the racism and class inequality that persists in British society. After the programmes were terminated, funding from the Industrial Training Units was transferred to the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (as the Basic Skills Agency, now part-run by the private, multi-million pound profit-making consultancy firm Tribal, was then called) – thus also serving as an example of the increasing privatisation of further and adult education.

The history of ESOL in the last decade has been characterised by the bringing of ESOL into the Skills for Life strategy alongside literacy and numeracy in 2001, the rhetoric of responsibility (read: compulsion) for migrants to learn English in politicians’ speeches

since the Bradford and Burnley riots, the introduction of fees for ESOL learners (but not literacy and numeracy learners, a discrimination strongly felt by ESOL learners) in 2007, and the ever-tighter links between ESOL and immigration policy. The ESOL materials produced by the then DfES in 2001 are an insight into government views of what migrants should be. The twin focuses are 'community cohesion' and 'employability'. Workers are taught through all the stages of getting a low-paid job (helpfully assisted in this by their local Job Centre), and how to communicate in deferential fashion when they get one (being shown politely asking for time off to go to an appointment). All interaction with service providers and those in positions of authority is problem-free, ignoring dynamics of class and race which so often structure these exchanges; the underlying message that if you don't get what you need it is your fault not that of the authority figure. However, many teachers reject this, do not use the materials (there is no requirement to do so as long as the curriculum is covered) and some ESOL classrooms are spaces where genuinely participatory, learner-centred, class-conscious education takes place.

Recent struggles for ESOL

Labour introduced fees for ESOL learners not in receipt of benefits in 2007. In 2011, the Conservative government sought to further restrict access to free ESOL, proposing to increase the group of people made ineligible for free classes. The Tory plans were to limit access to free (fully-funded) classes to those in receipt of so-called 'active' benefits, ie Job Seekers Allowance and the Work-Related Activity Group of Employment and Support Allowance. This move would have meant that huge numbers of ESOL learners would have been prohibited from accessing provision, as they would have been expected to pay unaffordable fees. The percentage of students who would have been affected by this varied from area to area, but in several London boroughs this figure was as high as 80 per cent. Women with young children, commonly recipients of Income Support rather than Job Seekers Allowance, would have been disproportionately affected.

The 'Action for ESOL' campaign was launched early in 2011, following a London meeting attended by ESOL teachers, union activists and migrants' right organisations from across the country. From the start, there was consensus that whilst an immediate goal was to stop the funding changes being implemented and thus maintain current access to free ESOL classes, the campaign needed to go beyond this. Not only was the very premiss of fees contested, but so were many things that had become part and parcel of

teaching ESOL. These included relentless attempts to measure learner progress, such as through exams (and in some cases the removal of learners who do not progress quickly enough from courses), attempts to use ESOL teaching as a tool for the state's drive towards 'integration' and the unstable working conditions of hourly-paid ESOL lecturers. So whilst the immediate goal of the campaign was clear, an important part of it was that it went beyond simply defending the status quo.

Alongside the vibrant demonstrations and marches and the huge student letter-writing campaign was a conscious attempt by people involved in ESOL to think critically about the current state of the profession. In September 2011, a day-long meeting of Action for ESOL saw the beginning of the collective writing of Action for ESOL's 'ESOL Manifesto', a document containing the collective demands, beliefs and values of its authors. Crucially, the manifesto also showed engagement with pedagogical questions – often notably absent from campaigns to defend education. These included the rejection of a narrow approach to language learning which prioritises the mastery of discrete items of language over meaning and the understanding of how language is used in real-world contexts, the importance of a participatory ethos in the ESOL classroom, and emphasising the potential of education for developing critical thought and effecting individual and collective change.

How can we contribute to today's class struggle? ESOL as a space for organising

Recognising the potential for the classroom as space for critical reflection on people's lives – the material conditions that underpin them, the values that shape them and the contradictions and struggles that abound in them – shows the influence of the ideas of the late Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in some parts of the ESOL teaching community. There has been a long interest in Freirean pedagogy in adult education, particularly adult literacy, in many areas of the world outside Brazil. Recently in the UK, Freirean ideas have been fused with the techniques of participatory rural appraisal in the 'Reflect ESOL' approach developed by Action Aid. Reflect ESOL lessons start from learners' existing knowledge and experience, aiming to intertwine critical reflection on this lived experience with language development. An important stage in the Freirean process, following this reflection, is action.

I was one of a number of ESOL teachers who used a Freirean approach in lessons about ESOL cuts. With other colleagues, I shared the conviction that for students to play a key role in the struggle against the cuts, time in the classroom needed to be set aside.

Students worked in groups to create different 'codes', a visual or textual representation of the issue, and these were used as the basis for discussion and further work. There was space for learners to articulate their opinions on and to debate the reasons behind the cuts. Discussion on action was the logical next step, and we shared ideas on what we could do against the cuts, with petitions, letters to MPs, protests and marches all being raised by the students. In the classroom, students worked on letters to local MPs, a process which involved developing personal testimonies of the importance of ESOL. Without a doubt, the lessons on ESOL cuts were very engaging for the learners, and at times during the process the classroom was really an exciting place to be – a space for action to take place and be planned. However, despite the learners' active involvement in letter writing, organising petitions and taking part in protests, there was distance between the learners' action and the Action for ESOL campaign. Or rather, the learners' actions fitted neatly into the teacher-led campaign: the students had been involved in 'action', but this was piecemeal rather than strategic. This raises important questions about how the classroom can genuinely be a space for learner-led action, and the conditions necessary for this.

Trade unions have also recognised ESOL as a potential space for organising migrant workers, or to go alongside this organisation. This too has a historical antecedence: after the passing of the Polish Resettlement Act in 1947, a Polish settlement of the TGWU was established. For the first three years of its existence, it ran classes in English. There are many contemporary examples of trade union-organised ESOL classes today, often in conjunction with local colleges. For example, Unite in Ipswich ran a class for workers in food-processing, and GMB in Southampton set up a Migrant Workers' branch which runs ESOL classes, both provided by the local college. Running classes with a college may limit who can attend, as this funding brings with it restrictions on access according to benefits and immigration status. Alternative examples include the collaboration between the more explicitly political, voluntary-sector ESOL provider English for Action and London Met Unison, who ran ESOL classes for the university's catering and cleaning staff at London Met last year.

ESOL classes have also been used as spaces for organising outside the trade union movement. One example of this is the X-talk collective: a sex worker-led co-operative which approaches language teaching as knowledge sharing between equals and regards the ability to communicate as a fundamental tool for sex workers to work in safer conditions, to organise and to socialise with each other. X-talk provides ESOL classes alongside political campaigning for sex workers' rights, and involvement in feminist and anti-

racist struggles. All the teachers are qualified ESOL teachers (paid by the collective, which is grant-funded) who are or have been sex workers. The project is explicit about the potential for language as a tool to communicate and empower as well as oppress. There is a lot of emphasis put on the importance of a pedagogy reactive to the needs of the people in the group which takes into account and respects the diversity of experience within it.

Class-conscious education in a changing context

There are, therefore, examples from both the past and present of ESOL which show it as a potential space for explicitly class-conscious, feminist, anti-racist, participatory education. The success of the recent Action for ESOL campaign went beyond maintaining current access to classes, but made some important first steps to teachers thinking about the kind of provision we want. Student involvement in this process warrants attention. And there is much thinking to do, particularly given the contemporary context, which brings further challenges. As further cuts are planned to further education, how will this affect ESOL as a sector? Working in a field so tightly bound up with migration, as teachers we see events and situations abroad affect who is in our classes. In recent months, the fiscal crisis in Europe has brought with it an increase in students migrating from Spain and other countries, many of whom are working in low-paid jobs or seeking work. And what of the increase in the language requirement for those from outside Europe seeking to settle in the UK? The Tory plans for the 'Big Society' are a particular threat to ESOL teachers (and learners) as English is seen as something that anyone can teach. 'Self-organised learning groups' were proposed in a recent government document. With self-organisation now being touted by the right, questions about what 'independent' working-class education means, and the kind of education we want, are particularly pertinent ones for adult education workers to grapple with.

Further reading / websites

- Sheila Rosenberg, *A Critical History of ESOL in the UK, 1870-2006* (2007)
 Elsa Auerbach, *Making Meaning, Making Change* (1992)
 Rebecca Galbraith, 'Act now for ESOL!' *Post-16 Educator* 62 (March-April 2011)
 Action for ESOL: actionforesol.org
 Reflect ESOL: www.reflect-action.org/reflectesol
 X-talk project: www.xtalkproject.net
 English for Action: www.efalondon.org