The Future of ESOL? A speculative commentary a decade after *Skills for Life*

Melanie Cooke and **James Simpson** consider key issues for the future of ESOL

The history of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) under New Labour is characterised by financial, political and pedagogic ups and downs. It started with a bang – an injection of funding under the Skills for Life policy ten years ago – but like the New Labour government itself is ending with something of a whimper, as college ESOL places and jobs come under threat, and as provision is shifted into the workplace or organised by local councils in the 'New Approach'. This article casts its gaze into the future of ESOL, asking how current trends and policies are likely to affect adult migrants, their teachers, and the broader communities in which they live, the towns and cities of the UK[1]. We consider a quartet of issues: ESOL and immigration policy; ESOL and the funding crisis; ESOL and community cohesion; and ESOL and employability. In each section we describe the current state of play and allow ourselves predictions about what the future might hold.

ESOL and immigration policy

A succession of policies on immigration and the treatment of citizens born overseas has brought the ESOL sector into close contact with the Home Office/UK Border Agency. The first of these policies was the 2002 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act, which instigated language and citizenship testing for people applying for British nationality. Under this legislation, those unable to take the citizenship test at the required level (Entry 3) may bypass it but must show evidence that their English is improving by attending ESOL classes with a citizenship element. Thus has ESOL teaching been brought firmly into a larger government agenda of migration control and nationality, which arguably discriminates against the most marginalised members of society (Cooke 2009).

Since the 2002 Act the legislation controlling immigration, citizenship and English language competence has become tougher, gradually introducing regulations which were unthinkable ten years ago. Citizenship testing was extended to those wishing to apply for settlement in the UK ('Leave to Remain'), while at the same time immigration control became tighter, with the introduction of a points system which favours immigrants with a good level of English language. A further proposed piece of legislation is the testing of the English level of spouses intending to come to the UK from overseas, even before they are given entry visas (Home Office/UKBA 2008a). This is a scheme which, apart from being unworkable in practice, discriminates *prima facie* on grounds of language.

Other forthcoming legislation will introduce different levels of citizenship, beginning with a probationary stage and a new model of 'earned' citizenship (Home Office/UKBA 2008b). Proposals under consultation require that applicants will have to show not only their knowledge of English and of UK society but also that they make extra financial contributions to public services and participate in the wider community. Prospective citizens will gain points for activities such as voluntary work or 'canvassing for a political party' (Home Office/UKBA 2009) – though it is not made explicit which party that might be! The current proposals include changes to citizenship testing which will introduce two levels of testing: one at the 'probationary citizenship' stage in which people will be tested on their knowledge of English and basic facts about life in the UK (in the same way they are at present), and one in which they will be tested on the 'historical and political context' of UK citizenship when they apply for full citizenship. Provision for people who take the alternative 'ESOL classes' route to citizenship will be toughened up, and applicants will be expected to show greater improvement in their English when they apply for full citizenship. Alarmingly, but predictably, this proposal has been made with no direct consultation with the ESOL sector and with no additional proposals for funding or training should ESOL teachers be the ones to implement this change. Thus policy continues on a trajectory of progressively strengthening the links between immigration control and the teaching and learning of English, a direction that was unforeseen by ESOL teachers ten years ago.

ESOL and the funding crisis

Incorporation into *Skills for Life* in 2001 brought with it recognition and funding for ESOL. Yet after a few short years, the Government changed its tune: too much of the *Skills for Life* budget was being spent on ESOL and the level of funding it received was not deemed sustainable. The introduction of the LSC rule which insisted that 80% of all courses be qualifications-bearing meant that in some colleges cuts have been made to ESOL provision at lower levels, especially in what is termed 'community provision'; this has inevitably hit students who did not receive much schooling as children, and those with literacy needs, as well as disproportionately affecting women and older members of migrant communities. On top of this, 2006 saw wholesale backtracking on the *Skills for Life* guarantee of free classes for all who needed them and the re-introduction of fees for certain groups of people, most notably those who were not in receipt of means-tested benefits.

ESOL is marginalised and devalued at institutional level as well as in policy. Looking into our crystal ball, we predict further disputes such as the recent one at Tower Hamlets College, sparked off when management attempts to cut ESOL and other courses and jobs was met with resistance by ESOL students, practitioners and trades unions.

ESOL and community cohesion

Changes in the way ESOL is organised and funded has a direct effect on teachers and their jobs. It seems likely that the latest policy and funding development, 'The New Approach', will be another change for the worse for ESOL teachers and migrant communities. While this policy is driven by an economic imperative, it is presented by the Government as a way to promote 'community cohesion' in migrant communities. The rationale for the New Approach goes something like this: Despite the funding received by ESOL since 2001, some groups still remain 'hard to reach', failing to access ESOL provision. The best way to reach these people is at a local level, through local councils who know their communities well and are able to pinpoint those who are not accessing provision. From September 2009, councils have been expected to work with local

communities and providers to produce lists of priority groups for their areas and to create strategies for addressing their needs.

While on one hand it is logical to suppose that local needs can be best understood at local levels, on the other there are numerous pitfalls with the New Approach. Not least of these is that the foundations upon which the New Approach rests are themselves contentious. The category 'hard to reach' is an invention which provides a rationale for this shift in policy; it is in fact not people who are hard to reach but provision. Some colleges have an exemplary record in community ESOL which has now been compromised, leaving the lowest levels in particular without ESOL classes. Classes at these levels typically comprise spouses who are recent arrivals to the UK, women with childcare needs, and beginner ESOL literacy students. These people are likely to be the groups identified by the council as priorities – but how did they become priorities in the first place? Because they are feckless and will not access ESOL? Or because existing provision has been cut?

The concept of 'cohesion' is also a slippery one whose definition varies across government departments and policy documents. In much Government discourse, 'cohesion' is a by-word for 'good behaviour', and in political rhetoric migrants are blamed for its supposed breakdown. A well-rehearsed notion has it that there are those who raise 'particular issues for community cohesion.' Who are these people who refuse to cohere? Muslim extremists, perhaps? Is 'cohesion' being used as a proxy for 'religion' and 'ethnicity'? The real problems that exist in some communities are more to do with housing, high levels of mobility, the economic downturn, poverty, and alienation of disaffected youth. None of these is *caused* by lack of English, although for some individuals a lack of English might exacerbate them.

ESOL and Employability

The suggested list of priority groups for the New Approach seems to include all but asylum seekers and the low paid. Yet everyone who is in the UK, even temporarily, needs access to good quality language provision, especially if they are cleaning our toilets, picking our marrows and serving our cappuccinos. If they are contributing in a vital way to our economy and to the functioning of our towns and cities, they have the right to communicate and have a voice. Government-sponsored research into effective practice in ESOL (Baynham, Roberts et al, 2007) shows that long-term residents in the UK who do not speak English well failed to acquire it when they first arrived because of their jobs. Long hours in factories with others speaking your mother tongue are not conducive conditions for learning the English needed for promotion or social mobility, yet these low paid workers are the very people who are excluded from the New Approach. To imagine that their employers will be prepared to pay is unrealistic.

What is available for low-paid workers? The continued use of the *Leitch Review of Skills* as a reference point has left the language needs of many low paid workers unaddressed: they are unlikely to be met by the courses that have sprung up as part of the 'Skills for Employability' agenda. What many low paid workers need is intensive beginner ESOL literacy courses, the very courses that are being cut as a consequence of current funding policy. What they might gain access to are short, modular, employability-focused courses, provided through *Train to Gain* and the like, and often unsuitable for ESOL students.

Conclusion

Students and practitioners alike well know that the field of ESOL is not a neutral, value-free area of adult education, for it also serves as a receptacle for policy on skills education, employability and citizenship and is regularly invoked in public and political discourses of ethnicity, religion, immigration and national security. ESOL teachers can look forward to continued uncertainty, with temporary, part-time contracts increasingly the norm. The growing emphasis on voluntary sector involvement is in line with a general trend: the New Approach repeats the Government's appeal to the 'third sector': volunteers will provide cheaply or free the services which were previously provided centrally as part of the welfare settlement. Use of the voluntary sector in teaching compromises quality and undermines the right of qualified ESOL teachers to equity of pay and conditions with teachers in other areas of education.

For students, the queues on enrolment day get longer, and it becomes ever more difficult to gain access to an appropriate, convenient ESOL class. No amount of prioritising and new approaches will help unless persistent issues such as lack of childcare and the inaccessibility of high quality beginner ESOL classes are addressed.

Both the Government and the opposition are wearing the hair shirt of austerity, and public sector funding for ESOL is likely to become yet more scarce and insecure. How is ESOL provision to survive, even at today's levels? As a safeguard, we support a guarantee in law of English language education for new arrivals to the UK. The Australian system, which one leading commentator describes as 'privileged on a world scale' (Burns 2006), provides up to 1000 hours of free tuition to adult immigrants and refugees. At a time when a knowledge of the English language is assumed in political and public discourse to be central to 'cohesion', what better way to promote the linguistic dimension of integration?

1 In this paper we use the term UK when talking generally about ESOL because many of the issues we raise – especially those related to immigration policy – are the same in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. When discussing *Skills for Life* and questions of funding we recognise that this applies to England only.

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