Challenging agendas in ESOL: Skills, employability and social cohesion

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Abstract
Adult migrants who are learners of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) sit at the centre of several problematic policy agendas that impinge directly upon ESOL practice. Because of the marginalised status of ESOL learners and teachers, challenging these agendas can be difficult. In this paper we examine some of the socio-political structures that affect ESOL practice in England: three 'challenging agendas' of skills, employability and social cohesion. We argue that teachers can respond to unwelcome policy initiatives by developing a critical stance towards all aspects of their practice.

Introduction
It is axiomatic that learning English is important for adult migrants to the UK (Baynham, Roberts et al 2007; Cooke and Simpson 2008). ESOL learners recognise the need for English, not only for work and integration and to alleviate the problems they encounter in their daily lives, but because English is the predominant global language and thus a valuable source of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1986). Research shows that students are aware of the gains of attending classes to learn English: they know that the group processes of classroom learning are important, especially when the ESOL class is one of the few places where they get a chance to develop oral competence. Moreover, membership of an ESOL class can promote a sense of stability and security that is often missing from migrants' everyday lives. These are basic facts which ESOL students and their teachers know very well. But the field of ESOL is not simply the means by which adult migrants gain valuable English language skills. It is also used as a receptacle for policy on skills education, employability and citizenship. It is invoked in public and political discourses of immigration, ethnicity and religion. And it is subject to the same pressures of audit and assessment that bedevil the education sector and much of public life today. ESOL teachers are thus caught between the need to address students' English language learning concerns on the one hand, and the obligation to respond to the multiple pressures of policy and bureaucracy on the other.

In this paper we examine three challenging agendas in contemporary ESOL: ESOL as a 'Skill for Life' (the skills agenda); ESOL and work (the employability agenda); and ESOL and citizenship (the social cohesion agenda). Drawing on interview data and classroom observations from a number of different studies, we maintain that these agendas come into conflict with the beliefs and values of ESOL practitioners, and we suggest reasons why, despite such conflict, practitioners can find it difficult to resist initiatives that contradict their understanding of what is necessary and important in ESOL practice. There is an underlying explanation for the difficulty practitioners have in resisting unwelcome pressures. ESOL is exposed to the whims and vagaries of policy because ESOL students are themselves relatively powerless. This leads directly to the marginalisation of ESOL as a subject and of ESOL teachers as a professional group.

Marginalisation, audibility and the right to speak

ESOL students, as migrants to the UK, are positioned in public and everyday discourse as being of a lower status than the local-born population. There is little doubt that in the popular media in particular, migrants are negatively represented to the point of demonisation. Immigrants *flood*, *pour*, *stream*, into the country; asylum seekers are *bogus*, *fake, illegal*; Britain is *invaded* by *rivers*, *tides*, *waves* of refugees, and so on (Gabrielatos and Baker 2008). The day-to-day interactions in English of migrants to the UK bear sharp testimony to the pervasive anti-migrant and xenophobic discourse of the popular press, which they have little recourse to resist. As well as being positioned in this negative way, they also find that they do not have a voice. In this extract from an interview (translated from Arabic), Yasmin, a student from Yemen in a beginners ESOL class in Leeds, describes her experience of attempting to open a bank account.

> I have no confidence in anything, no control. I went to the bank to open an account. I took my sister with me to interpret. The cashier said, 'you don't know English?' 'No, I don't.' 'You can't open the account'. I froze in my place. I said, 'what, don't I have any value or anything?' He says to me 'you don't know English. Go and get an interpreter'. My sister said she was interpreting. 'You must pay money for an interpreter'. So I said, 'Let's go'. The man shook me up. In my country my brother opened an account for me. Nobody said anything. You get a strange feeling when you come to a strange country. You've left everything, and then people talk to you like this. (Yasmin, Yemeni woman, Leeds)

Yasmin's experience is a clear example of not being *audible*. Audibility is not simply to do with being able to speak the dominant language of the country. David Block (2007:41) defines audibility as 'a combination of the right accent as well as the right social and cultural capital to be an accepted member of a community of practice.' Thus, to be audible is not only to have competence in the dominant language but is also to have 'social and cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1986) i.e. the social resources (status and affiliations) and the knowledge, skills and education that are valued by the dominant or hegemonic group. By their nature, migrants' daily encounters with the local-born population are unequal and asymmetrical in terms of power differentials; sometimes migrants are literally not heard.

This additional dimension of communication – audibility, in terms of social and cultural capital as well as linguistic competence – is what migrants to the UK often simply do not have, at least in the early days after their arrival, and frequently for many years afterwards. With ESOL students so inaudible, ESOL practitioners struggle to get their own voices heard above the babble of public rhetoric. Practitioners are often part-time and hourly-paid, and are mostly female, and are therefore themselves relatively inaudible when attempting to counter the positioning of ESOL as a 'waste paper basket of social policy' (Halsey 1972).

ESOL as a Skill for Life

The relative powerlessness of ESOL teachers and learners is hardly new. Elsa Auerbach, writing over 15 years ago, said: 'A fact of life for ESL educators is that we are marginalized' (1991:1). Auerbach was writing about ESL in the USA, a notoriously disorganised context, but the same seems to be true of ESOL in England today. Yet only a few years ago, a policy came into being which promised to bring ESOL 'in from the cold'. Early in Tony Blair's first

New Labour government, a review of basic skills (DfEE 1999) recommended implementing a national strategy to reduce the number of adults with low levels of basic skills, literacy and numeracy, *Skills for Life*. ESOL was not originally included as a 'skill for life' but activists lobbied hard for its inclusion: here was a chance for proper funding, as well as an opportunity to be taken seriously. Pressure from practitioners contributed to the government working group report (DfEE 2000) which led to ESOL being brought into the strategy, and to a very welcome and long overdue injection of cash. Looking back it seems difficult to imagine that anyone in ESOL could have resisted its inclusion in *Skills for Life*, but despite the added resources, we contend that the continued sidelining of ESOL results in part from its position as a 'skill' in the context of the *Skills for Life* policy.

Auerbach went on to say that the marginalisation of ESL in the US was no accident, and that at the root of the marginal status of the entire ESL profession was its status in policy as a 'skill', in service of other areas and disciplines, rather than a bona fide subject of study in its own right. She continued:

> The official rationalization for our marginal status is that ESL is a skill, not a discipline; we're preparing students to do something other than learn English, and it is that other something that counts. … As such, our work is defined more as training than educating; language is seen as a neutral tool, a set of decontextualized skills … (Auerbach 1991:1)

There are clear echoes of this situation in ESOL in England today. The 'something other' that students are prepared for is quite clearly employment, and menial employment at that. ESOL students are being educated in the 'skill' of English so they can play a service role in socioeconomic structure, as we discuss in the section on 'ESOL and work', below. Positioning ESOL as a 'skill' has also enabled the government to take a close interest in its management. *Skills for Life* brought with it the creation of statutory core curricula for ESOL, Literacy and Numeracy, new teacher-training and inspection regimes, and qualifications mapped against national standards. Hence the government can dictate the nature of the English language education that migrants can gain access to, through the curriculum and through restriction to certain types of syllabus. By bringing ESOL under the *Skills for Life* umbrella, the government effectively bought control of ESOL.

Moreover, the way ESOL operates within the framework for curriculum and qualifications contributes to its marginal status, even within *Skills for Life*. NRDC research (Simpson et al 2008) has drawn attention to the differing value of ESOL and literacy in institutional discourse: ESOL in some cases is seen as 'lower' than the equivalent level of *Skills for Life* literacy, often viewed as the favoured route to 'the mainstream' and to higher education. Our first example is one illustration of how the subordination of ESOL is perpetuated by its status as a 'Skill for Life': the use of the National Literacy Test as the assessment instrument for ESOL at Levels 1 and 2 on the National Qualifications Framework.

Example 1 ESOL and the National Literacy Test

At Levels 1 and 2, ESOL students' reading skills are assessed using the National Literacy Test. This comprises a 40-item multiple choice test, often taken on computer. There is no assessment of students' writing in the National Literacy Test, a factor which is at odds with even the narrowest skills-based definition of literacy as involving the writing as well as the

reading skill. Thus, the very construct validity of this assessment as a test of *literacy* is in question. Beyond this, the test poses specific difficulties for ESOL students, raising further questions about its validity. These difficulties relate to the assumptions of students' prior knowledge of culture and the world that lie behind items in the tests, and to the fact that they contain language which might cause particular difficulties for literacy students who are also ESOL learners.

In this example, Seleh, a young male Kurdish Level 1 ESOL student, is carrying out a practice test on the Move-On website (www.move-on.org.uk). This particular practice test contains a text about highwaymen, entitled 'Gentlemen robbers'. The first paragraph and the first question on the text read as follow:

Gentlemen robbers

I wonder how many people share my mixed feelings when they hear the word "Highwayman"? Highwaymen were robbers mounted on horseback whose heyday was in the 18th century. They were regularly helped by inn-keepers who would tell them when coaches were expected to arrive and help to sell the stolen property. [...]

According to the document, the writer appears to
A strongly disapprove of highwaymen
B quite like the historical picture of highwaymen
C want to see highwaymen return to modern times
D approve of violent robbery and theft

Seleh answers 'C – want to see highwaymen return to modern times.' It is clear from a discussion during the lesson that Seleh's understanding of the cultural background behind the question remains very limited:

> (R: Researcher; S: Seleh)
> R: …do you know what highwaymen are?
> S: actually no but you don't have to know what the highwaymen only you need to know what they doing and what that highwaymen doing and where does he live and what she I don't know what does that mean and only you need to know what that highwayman doing ... that papers explain for you what's doing and what it is

Seleh maintains that he does not have to possess an understanding of a particular key word to be successful in the test, and that the word is explained in the text. This may well be the case, yet despite this, and even after completing the test reasonably successfully, his understanding of the word *highwayman* remains limited:

> R: what is a highwayman then?
> S: highwayman I think maybe big woman or famous I don't know maybe highwaymen I don't know all maybe the man go with you and goes everywhere I don't know it's a man yeah?

Quite clearly Seleh would have benefited from a prior knowledge of essential vocabulary for this test item – that is, the word *highwayman*. It is not enough for him that it is glossed in the text. In fact the reading strategy he seems to have employed does not involve making appeal

to the definition in the text at all. Instead, he notices the orthographical form of *highwayman* is similar to *high woman* ('maybe big woman or famous').

Although the focus of much current literacy instruction is on the 'bottom-up' decoding of individual words, much of the skill in the successful completion of a reading comprehension test rests in the ability to draw on background knowledge of a particular area that is being tested. This background knowledge is known as *schematic* knowledge, referring to the *schema* or mental representation of a typical concept or idea (Cook 1989). One way in which literacy for ESOL students differs from literacy for local born expert speakers of English lies in the schematic knowledge people need to invoke to interpret a text, and to make meaning from it. Seleh is 19 years old, and arrived in the UK from Kurdish Iran as an unaccompanied minor aged 15. It is unlikely that students like Seleh would have a typical idea of *highwayman* as part of their schematic knowledge. Conversely, it is quite probable that British born students might know enough about highwaymen to reject 'C' as an answer to this question, even without reading the rest of the text. In this case, all they would need to do is decode the word *highwayman*, thereby triggering associations of tricorn hats, flintlock pistols, Dick Turpin and Black Bess. But Seleh is approaching the literacy test as a language learner with limited background knowledge; to address the question posed in the first lines of the text, Seleh does not share *any* feelings when he hears or reads the word 'highwayman', because, for him, this is the first time he has encountered it.

Adequate ESOL-specific tests at levels 1 and 2 for writing and for speaking and listening do already exist. The questionable overall validity of the national literacy test, as well as its inappropriateness as a test of *ESOL* literacy, begs the question of why the national test is used as a test for reading for ESOL students in the first place. It can only serve to position ESOL as subordinate to other *Skills for Life* areas.

ESOL and work

The second challenging agenda is that of 'employability'. Employability is tightly connected to the skills agenda: 'skills' are deemed necessary to become employable, and ESOL students are often viewed in terms of how they can become more economically productive. The employability agenda is also linked to the funding crisis which has affected ESOL in recent years. Given that funds are no longer available for free classes for all, there is growing private sector involvement in ESOL provision. Moreover, colleges are increasingly expected to market themselves and teach their courses in workplaces, and ESOL departments have to provide work-related courses and cooperate closely with local employers. This is not always straightforward for ESOL departments who struggle to work with employers who have little knowledge of the teaching and learning of language. There is a deeper cultural clash at play too, as this ESOL manager suggests:

> We came into the public sector and we could all be earning more money if we were doing other things, but we had a belief in education, in colleges, in students or the politics of asylum or whatever it was, but this new agenda has nothing to do with that, it is all about being business focused, and we're not business focused people, that's why we're here.

Despite this, and because of the lack of alternative funding, ESOL teachers have found themselves with little choice but to follow the shift towards employer-led provision, and

towards teaching ESOL for Work courses whose contents were stipulated by the government. There are several problems with work-focussed ESOL provision in its current form, to the extent that it meets neither students' nor employers' needs very well. Firstly, there is confusion between the broader aim of English language education and the narrow pedagogic focus of ESOL for Work courses. While many ESOL students do need to improve their English language skills for employment purposes, it is not at all clear that the way to do this is to concentrate in class on generic employment-related concerns. Secondly, it is unclear exactly which students will benefit from a general ESOL for work course. Professionals such as doctors and nurses are not likely to encounter the language and literacy practices they need on such courses. Students who are already workers need a complex set of competencies, including the specific institutional and occupational discourses of their jobs. On ESOL for Work courses they are usually given only the most generic, de-contextualised focus on writing letters of application and CVs, and preparing for interviews. Few materials are based on real-life examples of language in use, leaving teachers with invented models of job interviews and workplace interaction (for alternatives see Roberts et al 2007, Roberts et al 1992). In addition, as the work of the UK Government-funded Industrial Language Training Unit (1974-1989) showed, workers need the interactional competence to form relationships with their colleagues and negotiate their rights. The work done by the ILT gave the UK a blueprint for language training at work which has not been bettered since, yet ESOL teachers are being asked to re-invent the wheel – this time with far less funding and support, and with the focus solely on the requirements of employers, not the workers themselves.

A further, more worrying problem for many ESOL students is that many of them have needs which are unlikely to be met by short-term employer-funded training, which we illustrate in our second example.

Example 2 ESOL and the textualisation of the workplace

With the changing requirements of work, literacy is a necessity for even low skilled jobs which previously did not require it. Iedema and Scheeres (2003) call this phenomenon the *textualisation of work*. That is to say, the bureaucratic demands of contemporary workplaces involve talking and writing about the job as well as doing it. The following is from an interview with Abbas, an Afghani refugee who struggles with literacy but has always previously found work in warehouses and driving:

> Most of the companies now they are saying you must have reading and writing English as you need to know about safety and so on. Most of the warehouses they are saying you must have basic writing because they are saying sometimes we will give you the basic paperwork we don't have time so you have to write the reports. For example, where I used to work, when you are handling the goods for the customers, if the box is damaged they don't accept it they ask why it is damaged so they say they want compensation. So now they say you should write a report, what are the damages, what happened and what the customer is saying, what compensation he wants, so this is the kind of thing they want in all the warehouses. Writing is the most important thing now, it's everywhere. The first question when you apply for a job is this.

Along with students like him, Abbas faces several problems. Firstly, he has to find a class which can provide the intensive, sustained instruction he needs to improve his literacy, which would involve consistent support and detailed feedback. This is not available to him at the training centre he attends because the tuition there is funded only for six months and because his teacher, although well qualified, has no experience of teaching people with low literacy. Aware of this, Abbas has made several attempts to get a place at the local college where literacy expertise is available, but each time has been placed on a long waiting list.

Abbas is even less likely to find the support he needs in the workplace. Companies tend to invest in skills training which is tailored to their needs as employers; they are less likely to put long-term investment into the language, literacy and general adult education needed by workers such as Abbas. ESOL cannot counter the textualisation of work, and has instead to focus on the new literacy needs of its students. But literacy learning for Abbas will not involve a short-term quick fix. A long-term commitment to beginner ESOL literacy development is needed if Abbas and thousands like him are ever going to move from the margins of work. At present, however, it can remain only an outside chance that employers who are unwilling even to ensure basic rights for their workers are ever likely to invest in training of any kind, let alone in what Abbas needs.

These issues point to the wider problem of how migrant workers are viewed in the economy. Everyone who is in the UK, even temporarily, needs access to good quality language and literacy provision, especially if they are cleaning the country's toilets, picking its potatoes and serving its *caffe lattes*. Such people are contributing to the economy and to the functioning of towns and cities. Asking poor but working students to pay for their ESOL classes sends the message that they do not even have the right to be audible, to have at least a voice in English, if not a vote.

ESOL, citizenship and social cohesion

The third challenging agenda we focus on is that of citizenship and social cohesion. This agenda first appeared in government discourse around 2001, after street disturbances between Asian and white youths and the police in several northern towns. Reports published after those events talked of people living 'parallel lives' and there were warnings from prominent public figures about 'sleepwalking into segregation'. Behind the focus on English towns and cities are larger debates over multiculturalism, the meaning of Britishness, the so-called war on terror and the links in public and media discourse between immigration and security. Threading through these ways of speaking are the themes of 'shared values', (standard) English as the common language of Britain, and the implication that multilingualism is a major cause of fragmentation and segregation of communities (Blackledge 2006).

Since 2001 social cohesion has become central to Government policy, and the connections between language, ethnicity, immigration and security have been strengthened both discursively and in law, as a slew of recent legislation shows (Home Office 2002, 2003). Yet the concept of cohesion remains ill-defined. In much Government discourse, 'cohesion' seems to be a by-word for 'good behaviour', while in the rhetoric of politicians, migrants are blamed for a supposed breakdown in cohesion. However, the blame for this, if there is such a breakdown, is more likely to lie at the door of a lack of affordable housing, the economic downturn in certain industries and social inequality. None of these issues is *caused* by lack of

English or lack of knowledge of life in the UK, although for some individuals, this might exacerbate them. Cohesion is always presented as a one-way street: it is the poorest members of society, and never the wealthy, who are commanded to cohere. Despite the contested nature of cohesion, the ESOL sector has been part of this agenda from the start, and at no point more clearly than with the introduction of the language and citizenship test in 2002.

Example 3 Life in the UK: The citizenship test

The citizenship test was introduced as part of legislation designed to address concerns with national security, a policy from which the ESOL sector might normally have kept a cautious distance. However, one explanation for why the ESOL community became involved – despite many reservations in some quarters – was that the citizenship test and education programme were presented by politicians not as barriers but as *entitlements* designed to empower new citizens and avoid ghettoization. The liberal justification for language and citizenship testing is that new citizens are entitled to participate in society with a full set of rights (and obligations) which they will only be able to access by learning English and gaining knowledge of British laws, culture and political systems (Kiwan 2008).

Many in the 'Life in the United Kingdom' Advisory Group, set up to explore how to approach adult citizenship education and testing, regarded the introduction of a citizenship programme as an opportunity to further the access of migrants to English, and the recommendations of the board's report, *The New and the Old* (Home Office 2003) included some creative, even radical proposals to assist the process of integration. Although most of these were not implemented, one victory for the board was to secure an alternative to the computer-based test in the form of ESOL citizenship classes for those whose level was below the level required. ESOL teachers thus became teachers of citizenship almost overnight.

The materials developed for teaching citizenship were generally well-received by teachers and students (Taylor 2007). However, despite their popularity, several factors militate against their effectiveness for those wishing to apply for nationality or settlement. The first is the chronic shortage of ESOL provision, exacerbated by cuts to the funding of ESOL. The link between ESOL classes and eligibility for citizenship has made the consequences of this shortage of provision even more serious, as these ESOL students explain:

> [S1, S2, S3: students; R: Researcher]
> S1: OK we have to know the English, we have to learn some English but in a different way. Why should it be like this for the passport?
> S2: they should ask us to go to school. We would be happy with everybody going to school to learn English, how to read and write, but not because you want to get your British passport.
> S1: it's too headache, we get worried, this is too much
> S2: why did the government make the test? to make it hard for new people coming into England. Maybe they are afraid of terrorism
> S3: it has made it hard for every one of us
> R: so do you think the government doesn't want immigration?
> S2: they want immigration but not from all the countries. Muslim countries no, I think. They prefer the immigration from Poland and from Europe more than the Muslim countries because they think they make problems … before, we didn't have

> these problems, they are because of terrorism. We didn't have these problems before. I am a Muslim and before I never had any problems.

These students were keen to learn English and enjoyed the content of their classes but were indignant at the link between language classes and nationality, especially given that for many of them simply finding a place on a course had been a huge hurdle. These students' knowledge of current affairs includes an acute awareness of their own position at the sharp end of immigration policy and fears over national security. Far from fostering a sense of integration and inclusive citizenship, the result of this policy has been to promote a feeling of *exclusion* and a message that some migrants belong more in the UK than others. The hardest lesson of all for teachers might be that illiberal legislation addressing concerns such as the 'war on terror' is at the heart of this policy. ESOL educators attempting to work within the policy in the belief that it espoused a liberal tradition and in the hope of gaining extended ESOL provision were misled, at best.

Conclusion: resisting challenging agendas

What the future holds for the ESOL sector is far from clear, but if these agendas are not challenged the field will continue to be subject to interference from a government happy to treat ESOL as a scapegoat for social ills. Through organisations such as NATECLA and the University and College Union, the ESOL community has succeeded in influencing and modifying certain policies. Recently it has made its voice heard by responding to government consultations and through active resistance, as with the campaign against the funding cuts in 2007. All teachers, including those at the beginning of their careers, need to develop a critical stance towards their practice, and towards the broader socio-political background within which this practice is situated, now as never before. This stance involves both knowledge and active resistance. We suggest that this might be sustained through:

Being informed: Knowledge is power, and it is essential to be informed, not only about the core principles of language teaching and learning, but also about the social and political contexts of ESOL. Knowledge can be developed by keeping abreast of new legislation and policies, analysing popular and political discourse, understanding the history of the ESOL sector, and reading and drawing on relevant research as evidence to be marshalled against unwanted policy changes.

Asking not 'how' but 'why': Instead of asking '*how* can I incorporate the latest policy initiative into my practice?' we need to ask '*why* should I do something that goes against my core principles as an ESOL educator?'. There are many issues which ESOL teachers might critically engage with and resist: for example, the lack of provision for lower level ESOL and beginner ESOL literacy classes; or the continued wave of unnecessary bureaucracy. Within a framework involving knowledge and active resistance, issues like these might be addressed by invoking core principles for a critical stance towards ESOL practice.

Incorporating criticality into pedagogy: As teachers we need to be aware that there are approaches to ESOL teaching other than that which dominates *Skills for Life*. Freirean-inspired participatory curricula such as Reflect for ESOL and 'Problem-solving at Work (Auerbach and Wallerstein 2006) can provide a forum for students and teachers alike to explore issues pertinent to their everyday lives and struggles. Within mainstream ESOL, teachers maintain some control over the content of their lessons; ESOL citizenship, for example, might

include looking critically at the government agenda, as well as lessons on joining a trade union and on the TUC Migrant's Charter.

Getting organised and becoming audible: Along with the need to foster our students' right to speak, there is an equal need for teachers to develop their own audibility. With knowledge comes the confidence to resist. Organisations such as NATECLA are essential to the audibility of ESOL teachers, as is the commitment of teaching unions such as the UCU. Until ESOL becomes a central issue for the TUC and is taken up by high profile campaigning it will remain difficult for teachers to have an impact on policy and to gain improvements in their pay and conditions.

Although the challenging agendas we have discussed in this paper are serious, and government policy, especially that which seems to offer something we need, is tempting to embrace, ESOL has a tradition of resistance and advocacy upon which we can build an even stronger, audible and critical voice.

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