# Participatory ESOL

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## Abstract

**This article explores the meaning of participatory ESOL. It is loosely based on a workshop delivered at the 2015 NATECLA conference. It discusses some of the key features of teaching ESOL in a participatory way both in terms of language learning inside the classroom and taking action for social justice outside the classroom.**

Participatory education is a broad church. People's understanding and application of the term ranges from the benign but fairly meaningless "learner-centred" (what teaching approach would not claim to be learner-centred these days?) to a relentless, possibly slightly joyless, pursuit of Paulo Freire's *conscientizacao* (dialectical process of raising awareness of oppression and taking action to challenge it) (Freire, 1972, see chapter one). In this article I will attempt to share something of what participatory ESOL means to me and my colleagues at English for Action (EFA), the ESOL charity that promotes participatory approaches and taking action from the classroom. I will focus on four elements in particular: co-construction of knowledge, challenging of hierarchy, where content comes from and taking action for social change.

At the NATECLA July 2015 workshop the participants created tableaux, frozen images as if from a theatre scene, to communicate their understanding of participatory ESOL. They worked in two groups and both groups focussed on a rejection of the "banking" model of education. In the banking model the all-knowing teacher deposits his vast collection of facts into the empty heads of the students until the students' heads are satisfactorily full and their learning deficit is remedied.

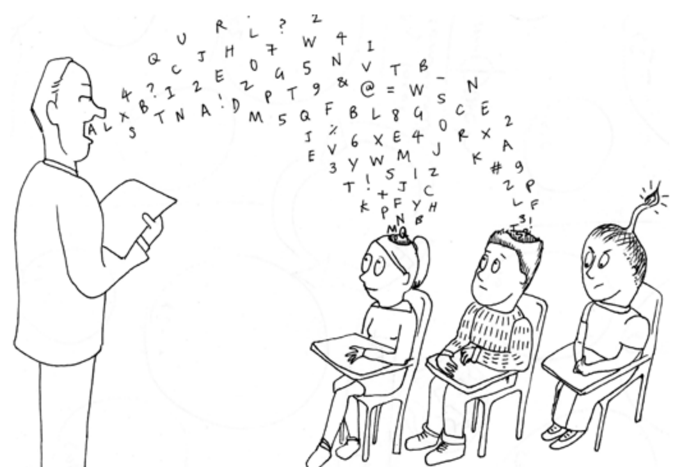
In participatory education on the other hand, knowledge and skills are co-constructed and exchanged. The teacher is also a learner and the learners are teachers. This can sound a bit glib however. What does it mean in practice, when in an ESOL class, the students lack English (isn't that why they are in the class?) and the teacher has it?

Firstly, in participatory ESOL the students are considered as users of language and not just learners of language. This means that their existing linguistic resources are tapped into, either the learners' first language, or any additional languages including English. Students are asked things like "How do say that in your language?", "Do you use the same metaphor in your language?", "Have you heard that before?", "Can you explain what is means?", "Can you think of an example?" An EFA group was struggling with the difference between stereotype and prejudice and one of the learners, at around Entry Level Three (circa CEFR B1), said: "Stereotype comes from outside, prejudice comes from inside. You use stereotype to example your prejudice." In this way language knowledge is co-constructed by the group.

Secondly, the participatory ESOL teacher – and there is no archetype, only people positioned and constantly moving (in both directions) along a spectrum line of "*participatoryness*" – is also learning during the process. As an expert speaker of English she may not develop a huge repertoire of new lexis, although she may pick up the odd word and phrase. I learned the word "milliner" from a student, for example. But, in terms of learning about how language works, how people learn and how to teach, the learning curve may be very steep indeed. She will also learn about the topic, about the community around the class, about the students' lives and world views, and about her own.

In addition to co-constructing knowledge and skills, participatory ESOL is also about challenging and critiquing hierarchy. This is not to say that everyone sits in a circle and pretends there are no leaders (not that we have anything specifically against circles at EFA), but that we explore the issue of power and how it is distributed. There are inequalities of power that impact on who speaks in the class for example. We recently did a speaking line in class – students lined up from the person who had spoken the most to the person who had spoken the least during a discussion – and the front three positions were occupied by men. One of them argued that this was because they were the most advanced speakers and this was met with objections (quite rightly, all the students were studying at the same level after all). The point was not to shame these men into silence, but to raise the issue in a visible way. There was clear and positive change in the group dynamic from that point on.

In participatory ESOL the teacher cannot deny that she is in a position of leadership even if she is reluctant to be so. Hierarchy and inequalities of power and privilege cannot be magicked away. The (in)balance of power between teacher and student is relevant to a) who sets the learning agenda (choosing activities and content for example), and of course b)



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who sets the action agenda (as one EFA workshop participant recently challenged). The first question is familiar and most people are comfortable with the teacher setting that agenda, but participatory ESOL with an explicit focus on taking action for social change raises the second question which is a little more uncomfortable.

In terms of who sets the agenda regarding classroom content there is a useful concept developed by US educator Elsa Auerbach called "active listening" (Auerbach, 1992: 49):

In a participatory approach the teacher is always on the look-out for hot topics that emerge spontaneously when they are least expected. This kind of active listening between the lines is probably the most powerful way of finding students' concerns. This means being tuned into the conversations that occur before and after class, the changes in mood (when students appear distracted, unusually quiet, sad, or nervous), their reasons for absences, and the times when students suddenly switch to their first language. Casual questions, like, "what made it hard for you to come to class last week / yesterday / today?" can elicit information about problems that students are struggling with.

Active listening is a fruitful alternative to asking the students what they would like to study at the beginning of a course or term, which is not too different from the dreaded ILP (individual learning plan). That might work, but on the other hand you might get a sea of faces imploring you to 'just get on with it'. Sometime students replicate what they are expected to say whether or not, when you scratch the surface, they are genuinely interested in the topics or discourse areas they have selected. Sometimes the results of the activity will be quietly forgotten (I must confess that I've done that on more than one occasion) as the teacher gets subsumed by institutional requirements or life or other things simply come up.

At EFA we have developed a process that can help when you chance upon one of these "hot topics" or decide to test one out that you predict will be of interest. We call this process "making meaning, going deeper, broadening out" (Bryers, Winstanley and Cooke, 2013). Topics, or generative themes, we have used with this include money, health, integration and London. The topic should be broad and flexible enough for the group to weld it into the shape they choose, or even push it somewhere only tangentially connected. The first stage, "making meaning", is the entry into the new topic and it can last for several sessions. It is open and exploratory. Students share anecdotes and opinions. Tools that work well at this stage are the card cluster (students write facts or comments about the topic on pieces of card which are then organised collectively into clusters) and the picture pack (students are presented with a pile of photos and pictures and are instructed to choose one that speaks to them about the topic). The next stage, "going deeper", is more analytical and is concerned with cause, consequences and possible solutions. A sub-topic or two are selected for in-depth exploration. The teacher might lead the group through a critical exploration of the issue using a code (usually an image) as a prompt. This is called problem-posing and originates from Paulo Freire. Another tool that works well at this stage is the problem tree (students analyse a problem using metaphor such as roots to represent causes, the branches are consequences and the fruit, possible solutions). "Broadening out" is the final stage and it involves engaging with the world outside the classroom in a more explicit way. Outside "expert" voices are brought into the classroom in the form of written texts, audio or guest speakers. The class, or a sub-group of it, may also choose to take action on something they have identified as unjust.

Returning to the problematic question of who sets the action agenda, it would be dishonest and unhelpful to deny that the teacher in a participatory ESOL does not have a leadership role when it comes to taking action. Indeed Paulo Freire identified the teacher in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) as a revolutionary leader, even though he also qualified this by asserting that "leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people – they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress." (Ibid, pg. 178) Many teachers are uncomfortable with the idea of leading action for social change and with good reason. Questions such as: "have the students signed up for this?", "am I imposing my own views?", "taking action is all very well in the third sector but what about in FE colleges?" are all pertinent. One possible way forward is to discuss the role of the teacher and the role of ESOL with the group. At EFA we have had a lot of joy discussing pedagogic questions with students and it also helps to be open about the values of the teacher and the organisation so that the students know what is possible and what is not. I will be very enthusiastic for example if a student or group of students propose taking action to prevent the closure of a local children's centre, but I will be less enthusiastic, to say the least, if the group proposes taking action to restore the death penalty. Whilst no student has ever proposed lobbying the government on capital punishment, I have used my silencing power when a student has said something that I felt was racist or homophobic. If education cannot be neutral, as Freire asserts, adult migrant language education seems particularly politically charged. Yes, it is a political choice to encourage your students to take action for a fairer and more equal world but is it not also a political choice to retreat to the (decontextualized) past simple when a student talks about the damp in her flat that is making life a misery?

Participatory ESOL certainly is student-led and learner-centred, hopefully in a meaningful way as I have touched upon in this article in relation to where content comes from. It is also inclusive and respectful, but again hopefully in a way that goes beyond standard institutional discourse around equality and diversity. Students are included in the conversation about learning, their opinions impact on course content and their prior learning respected as knowledge and skills are co-constructed. It is also about rejecting the banking model of education and challenging hierarchy as we discussed in our workshop. But in addition to these important things we can also say that participatory ESOL is unashamedly political. It is political in terms of exploring issues of power that are both inherent in language and in classrooms. And it is also political, in terms of encouraging, and sometimes agitating, the teachers and students to put a commitment to social justice into action.

## References

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**Dermot Bryers** set up and co-runs adult education charity EFA London. He currently teaches ESOL in three communities across London (Greenwich, Streatham and Battersea) and delivers training for teachers across the country. Along with his colleagues and students he is involved in several campaigns, including the London Living Wage campaign, Action for ESOL (defending ESOL from funding cuts) and local campaigns led by students. He is committed to learning about and developing a participatory approach to ESOL.

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