Participatory ESOL

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Dermot Bryers, Becky Winstanley and Melanie Cooke

Introduction

In this chapter we describe a small but growing movement of ESOL teachers who have been inspired by the work of the Brazilian Marxist educator, Paulo Freire. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1972), Freire theorised an approach to education that opposed what he termed a 'banking' model, in which the teacher deposits a predetermined body of knowledge in the mind of the learner. Instead, Freire advocated the use of dialogic methods that draw out and build upon the experiences of students to develop a shared critical understanding of language and the world. These ideas have greatly influenced the participatory education movement, and educators such as Elsa Auerbach, Henry Giroux, Ira Shor and Peter McLaren have adapted them to contexts outside Latin America.

In the UK participatory pedagogy has been practised by a minority of educators since the 1970s, particularly in the teaching of adult literacy, and was advocated for the teaching of ESOL in the 1980s (see, for example, Baynham, 1988). It has only recently, however, been taken up seriously around the UK, thanks largely to the efforts of Reflect ESOL, a programme initiated by the international charity, Action Aid, which was already using Reflect methods extensively in developing countries (see Moon and Sunderland, 2008). More recently, small organisations such as English for Action have developed these ideas further and combined participatory pedagogy with community action. As an integral part of language and literacy development, participatory approaches involve reflection on the material conditions of learners' lives and experiences and, where appropriate, involve students in action to effect change.

The participatory curriculum

One of the fundamental principles of participatory ESOL is that the concerns and issues which affect students in their daily lives should be the driving force behind the curriculum. As Auerbach (1992:19) puts it, the direction of the instructional process is 'from the students to the curriculum rather than from the curriculum to the students.' This in effect turns the traditional approach to planning on its head; in participatory curricula there is no set scheme of work, or syllabus. Instead, students are at the centre of their own learning processes, identifying their own issues and preparing their own learning materials. As teachers we might sometimes be able to predict what the concerns and language needs of students

[1] www.efalondon.org

are ahead of meeting them, but collaborative investigation and the ongoing process of classroom interaction can help us to do so much more effectively.

In Freire's original conception, classroom content, far from being subservient to grammar learning or literacy acquisition, was the driving force behind the curriculum and the catalyst for learning. Freire was aware, however, that participatory curricula would not come about just by asking people what they wanted to learn, especially if those people had little or no experience of education or had been educated in a very traditional system. Instead, he proposed that in order to plan an educational programme, educators (or 'facilitators') needed to immerse themselves for a period of time in the daily lives of the students' communities and identify critical social issues, which would then become the basis of the curriculum.

After a period of time researching the community, Freire identified what he called 'generative themes' which would form the basis of classroom dialogue; one of the famous examples from Brazil was favela (shanty town). Dialogue around a theme would involve delving deep and exploring all of the issues. Another technique he used was to turn the generative themes into 'codes' – abstract graphic representations of the issues presented in such a way as to provoke discussion and debate.

In this approach, 'content' is central to the curriculum and creates the motivation for students to learn the vocabulary, grammar, discourse and literacy skills that arise from it, not vice versa as in most traditional pre-written language syllabuses and schemes of work.

Most subsequent Freirean-inspired projects have had to dispense with the initial exploratory ethnographic phase, as it is rarely seen as practical for teachers to engage in this kind of time-consuming, intensive activity. Furthermore, 'communities' in urban centres in countries such as the UK and USA are often highly diverse, so identifying issues uniting a single community outside the classroom can be challenging.

This does not mean, however, that the principle proposed by Freire – i.e. investigating the concerns of people in their day-to-day lives as a base for an educational programme – has been jettisoned by participatory practitioners; indeed, listening to students themselves is one of the main strategies for identifying the issues and concerns upon which learning can be based. Many of the teaching materials that have been produced by participatory programmes such as Reflect are also based to some extent on the Freirean principle of investigating communities and tend to incorporate perennial issues facing students, such as housing, discrimination, racism, access to education and social justice (see the Reflect ESOL Resources Pack; Auerbach and Wallerstein, 2005). Of course, not all of these topics and issues will be relevant or interesting to every group of students and nothing can substitute actually getting to know the real concerns of people in the class.

Participatory language learning

As participatory language teachers we adhere to a series of important principles in our classroom work.

The first of these is that the driving force of participatory ESOL is content, the topics and the issues that students bring to class, rather than language form. The work that we do around these issues is an end in itself rather than serving purely as a means to learn aspects of language. Genuine interest in, and engagement with, what is being said in the classroom is key for effective language work. A lot of time is used in discussion and debate, making participatory ESOL classrooms notably language rich. Some of the topics which emerge can be highly political or sensitive in nature. Rather than avoid these, we allow them to become central to our lessons.

The second key element is the use of dialogue. In participatory education the teacher takes a dialogic stance, posing problems and initiating open-ended discussions, rather than acting as the exclusive knowledge holder who needs to provide students with ideas and information about language. This shift opens up the opportunity for more genuine interactions between teachers and students as well as among students. This is not just about providing opportunities for discussion in the classroom, but providing a space for genuine exploration of ideas where all participants, including the teacher, enter into the unknown.

Ira Shor (1987), a contemporary of Freire, working with ESL adults in the USA, points to the human aspects of language, which are very often forgotten amidst the technical complexities of language teaching.

> *Dialogue as a teaching method returns us to the root of human talk, our desire to learn about, talk about and act upon the world we are in, together. This is a mutual inquiry, not a one-way didactic lecture by the teacher to the students.*

Moreover, Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, argued that human cognitive development is rooted primarily in dialogue with others, i.e. interaction happens first and is subsequently internalised in an individual's mind.

Another key point is that language work in participatory classrooms begins from the whole text. This means that teachers work with students to create and develop stretches of meaningful texts, spoken or written. This is very different from a language curriculum in which specific language items are introduced and practised, and students are expected to approximate or copy idealised models. As an example, if students engage in a whole-group discussion on an issue, we allow the discussion to develop and finish with sole focus on content and communication.

The focus on meaning-making results in increased student talk as the group exchanges and develops ideas. This gives us a large amount of contextualised language with which to work. We then follow it up with an explicit focus on any useful, innovatory or impressive language the students used, or any gaps in language knowledge or competency emerging from the discussion. The teacher

normally leads this process, by picking out and noting down aspects of language which appear to be most salient. After the completion of, for example, a discussion, the teacher may open up a space to talk about some of the language aspects arising, with students also participating in the process. Often they will ask for a certain phrase to be repeated or written up, or will want to go back to particular structures. Using board work, quick drills and practice activities, we highlight relevant language at discourse, sentence and word level.

Following these 'meta sessions', we notice students consciously re-using language we had drawn their attention to and this process of incorporating new language into individual repertoires is often immediately effective. We discuss this approach with students so that they are aware that participating in group discussion is not just a chaotic free-for-all but an essential part of their language learning and that too much error correction or focus on form at the wrong moments is counter-productive.

Finally, ESOL students are respected as users as well as learners of language. Treating ESOL students only as learners is to deny the wealth of linguistic experience that students already possess in English and other languages. Instead of presenting or explicitly teaching new forms, discussions are initiated about appropriate language. Teachers might ask how students would say a particular thing in both English and other languages (for example: 'How would you disagree without upsetting someone?'). Teachers and students then engage in a meta-level discussion about language, with discussions about nuance and connotation as well as differences in how concepts are expressed in the languages spoken by members of the group.

Tools and activities

In order to achieve some of these aims in ESOL, participatory practitioners use various techniques adapted from Paulo Freire, Action Aid's Reflect literacy work and other traditions.

Problem posing

One particularly important technique is called problem posing from a code. An issue important to the group is depicted (codified in Freirean terms) and then analysed (decodified) in order for the group to arrive at a deeper understanding of the issue. Problem posing follows a systematic process starting with clarifying the image, then defining the problem, before personalising it, discussing causes and consequences and imagining an alternative. The teacher leads the process, although a participant could also be trained to do it, by asking a series of questions to stimulate debate. The teacher may ask three or four questions for each of the stages listed above. Problem posing may of course be used more flexibly than this and can also be used spontaneously in response to something a student says rather than from a code.

Drama

Drama techniques can also be used to explore important issues. Forum theatre, a method developed by Augusto Boal, can be used to dramatise problems the students face and then collectively work out possible solutions. Students work in small groups to create a mini-play to perform to their classmates. As the students prepare their pieces, the teacher has an opportunity to tweak language and make suggestions. During the performances, the rest of the class (the audience) can intervene in the play to suggest ways of changing the situation. In this way the class practises the strategies and language needed to transform a situation, such as discrimination at work or an argument with teenage children. In addition to forum theatre, tableau is another powerful tool. A tableau is a still shot of actors (students) as if they are frozen. It can substitute for an image and be used to problem pose, as described above. It can also simply be used as a text to generate language and the teacher can ask questions such as: 'What is she doing?', 'What is he thinking?', 'What is about to happen?', etc.

Visual tools

Other techniques include collaborative creation of visual tools , which are then used for language and literacy work. A river can be used to tell a story, a tree to analyse a problem and an iceberg to explore the underlying causes of a situation. The graphic tools provoke discussion, help to unlock meaning through use of image and metaphor, keep the focus on content rather than accuracy, and identify priorities for future language learning. The graphics can then scaffold further work such as re-telling the story, reporting back or deeper analysis.

In the process of creating the visual tool, students discuss the issue and record their ideas in words or pictures, or both. At this point, students 'throw in' ideas using whatever language they know. Students use English or their expert language, and get help with translation, where needed. Together, they create a visual documentation of their ideas in their own words. Typically, in this phase some students are speaking and offering ideas, some students are writing and some students are drawing. The result is a student-generated 'text', which can be used in a variety of different ways to do further work on aspects of language and literacy. These visuals often become works of art and students can feel a great deal of ownership of them. Their non-linear nature also means they can be 'living texts' and students can come back to them in subsequent lessons to make changes and additions.

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[2] Like Paulo Freire, Agusto Boal was a Brazilian Marxist active in the 1960s and 1970s. He developed the Theatre of the Oppressed, a series of methods that used theatre as a tool for social change.

3 Many of these were developed by Action Aid's Reflect project and applied to language learning in the UK by Reflect ESOL during a four-year project
www.reflect-action.org/reflectesol.

Introducing 'input' or stimulus materials

Many approaches to ESOL use published texts, texts such as newspaper articles, teacher-written model texts, textbooks, other students' testimonies and online teaching resources as a starting point for generating contexts for language work.

Participatory approaches also see the use of published resources as important in the language class, as they can bring in new ideas and perspectives as well as new language, but we use them in different ways; most notably they are only introduced after work has been done using the tools and techniques described above. Given that all texts, including pedagogic texts, contain ideological messages, it is important that students and teachers approach them critically rather than unquestioningly, and this means having opportunities to explore our own perspectives on a particular issue, 'making our own meaning' (Auerbach, 2005), before going on to 'interpreting' the meaning of other texts.

Teacher-student roles and hierarchies

The role of the teacher in participatory ESOL is significantly different to the one expected in traditional approaches to language teaching. As an example, as we have seen, it is not necessarily the teacher's job to provide language or topics. There is a responsibility, however, albeit a shared responsibility, to enable students to participate.

Participatory ESOL rejects traditional teacher-student hierarchies. As an example, students become initiators, not just passive recipients of instruction, and propose games, organise the layout of the room, set up activities, decide on timings and breaks, negotiate the meanings of words and phrases, bring topics for discussion and evaluate the lessons.

Changing our own role as teachers in this way sometimes proves more challenging for teachers than for students. Balancing the role of facilitator and participant can be difficult. How far should teachers be facilitators and how far should we be active participants speaking with our own voices – and, if the latter, how can we avoid falling back on our role as teachers, instead of participating as equals?

Transformative education

Language development has a key part to play in the processes of resistance, social change and transformation, and we stress the importance of dialogue in these social processes. We also recognise the role that language plays in social control and we are aware that, as language teachers, the language we teach in the classroom can feed into this process. It is therefore crucial that we are able to challenge our own use and selection of language and materials for language development at every stage in the process.

According to Freire, *'dealing critically and creatively with reality'* is a necessary foundation to a transformative pedagogy, but by action we are not just talking about critical thinking. Stopping when injustice has been identified and not asking the question 'What is to be done?' sends the powerful political message that taking action to tackle injustice is either not possible or is outside the remit of education.

A key defining principle of participatory ESOL is that students and teachers are enabled to take action for social/economic transformation. For Paolo Freire, the original inspiration behind most participatory curricula, the process whereby people in an educational or political process come to realise they have power to act and change their world is known as 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1970). Participatory ESOL classes are intended to provide a space in which students and teachers can explore their current realities and the contradictions inherent in them, and, where feasible and appropriate, act upon their reflections.

Transformation is not always dramatic or overtly political; it may be subtle and even incidental and may take years to notice. That said, ESOL students come in the main from working class, minoritised ethnic communities, often suffer high levels of poverty and deprivation and their voices are frequently silenced. The majority of them, as politically aware and engaged citizens, wish to explore these hardships. However, their concerns can be serious ones, which need deep debate and consideration, making it difficult to create the right conditions. Participatory ESOL acknowledges and addresses these concerns in a meaningful and productive way.

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Dermot Bryers is the chief executive of EFA London (English for Action), a popular education charity he co-founded in 2009. He teaches ESOL in several communities across London, trains teachers in participatory pedagogy and campaigns with students and colleagues on a range of social justice issues. He has also worked as a community organiser for Citizens UK and campaigns consultant for Action Aid's Reflect ESOL project. He studied Modern History and English at Oxford University and has a Masters in Development Studies from SOAS. He is particularly interested in the relationship between adult education and taking action to effect change.

Becky Winstanley is an experienced ESOL teacher and teacher educator working in Tower Hamlets and the Institute of Education. Her particular areas of interest include participatory approaches to education, emerging language and language and literacy development for social change. She worked on Action Aid's Reflect ESOL project, adapting the international Reflect model for language learning in the UK and trained with Reflect practitioners in Liberia. She has been an active trade unionist for many years and is interested in teachers' and students' struggles in education and beyond.

Since 2004, **Melanie Cooke** has worked in the Department of Education and Professional Studies and the Centre for Language, Discourse and Communication at King's College, London, having previously taught ESOL in London and EFL in Spain. From 2004 to 2008 Melanie worked on ESOL projects for the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (NRDC). She is particularly interested in participatory pedagogy and the role of socio-political issues in ESOL and is currently completing doctoral research into the teaching of citizenship to ESOL students. With James Simpson, Melanie is the joint author of ESOL: *A Critical Guide* (2008).