

# Whose integration?

## A participatory ESOL project in the UK

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### Introduction

*We* are the people who live in this country. *We are* the community.  
You understand?

If we have education, we have eyes, we can see the world.

These words, spoken by two Bangladeshi students in London, point to several themes underlying the work we describe in this chapter. The first is the struggle in which many migrant communities are engaged for recognition and equality. The second is the importance of access to educational spaces within which they can explore their common experiences and develop the skills they need to engage in this struggle. We describe a small but growing movement of teachers involved in participatory approaches to language education who are working with students of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) on these issues in their classrooms. Inspired by the writing of the Brazilian Marxist educator Paulo Freire in books such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), and others such as Elsa Auerbach in the USA, participatory approaches to ESOL critically explore the shared concerns and resources that learners bring to the classroom. 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. As such, although not by any means new in itself, participatory pedagogy is a radical departure from current mainstream ESOL practice in the UK (Simpson this volume; Cooke and Simpson 2008).

Most teachers in mainstream state-funded ESOL provision in England and Wales are required to prioritise institutional and bureaucratic demands such as assessment regimes, audit and inspection and a centralised curriculum. For this reason, participatory approaches have tended to be adopted in classes held in the voluntary and charity sectors.

However, in recent years a growing number of practitioners in the UK have attempted to implement participatory approaches within mainstream settings. In this chapter we focus on projects which took place in both contexts. We begin the chapter with a brief description of the main features of participatory pedagogy and how it has been adapted for the teaching of ESOL to adults in the UK, mentioning in passing earlier projects which have helped to promote the approach in that country. Our main focus is a project called *Whose Integration?* (Bryers et al. 2013) which we present as an example of an ‘emergent’ syllabus. We end with some reflections on the strengths of participatory approaches in contrast to dominant ESOL practices, and their potential for language and literacy development and social action.

### **Participatory ESOL in the UK**

Participatory pedagogy has been practised by a minority of educators in the UK 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 by a number of ESOL educators around the UK, thanks largely to the efforts of *Reflect ESOL*, a program initiated by the international charity, Action Aid (see Moon and Sunderland 2008). *Reflect ESOL* itself was inspired by a literacy program which is used extensively in developing countries (see for example Archer and Newman 2003). In sharp contrast to current mainstream approaches which require a pre-designed syllabus (the scheme of work), *Reflect ESOL* advocates that participants set their own agenda, devise their own learning materials, take action on the issues which they identify as important and evaluate their progress and the effectiveness of their programs as they go along. The syllabus, therefore, is not brought along by the teacher but rather *emerges* from class to class; the direction of the instructional process is, as Auerbach (1992: 19) puts it, ‘from the students to the curriculum rather than from the curriculum to the students’.

In order to achieve some of these aims in ESOL, we as participatory practitioners use various techniques adapted from *Reflect* and other traditions. For example, in order to draw out the knowledge of students and to facilitate meaningful dialogue, we create a representation of a theme that is important to the group in the form of a drawing or a photo, video or audio recording. These *codes*, as they were called by Freire, can then be understood and analysed by using *problem-posing*, a technique which helps a group to arrive at a deeper understanding of an issue (we discuss these below in the section about *Whose Integration?*). We also use participatory tools developed by *Reflect ESOL*, for example, graphics such as community maps, trees (for exploring the roots and consequences of a problem), rivers

(for exploring narratives or the chronology of a series of events), icebergs (for exploring what lies beneath the surface of an issue) and so on. The joint construction of a graphic involves extended discussion about a key issue in the learners' lives and generates vocabulary, grammar and discourse which then comprises the emergent language syllabus. Additionally, as trained language teachers, we regularly use standard techniques such as process and group writing, tasks which focus on linguistic form, and games and other activities which foster a safe inclusive learning environment.

### ***Emerging Worlds, Emerging Words***

A growing number of practitioners in the UK use a broadly participatory approach in their teaching, although it is probable that many do this only to some extent, using the tools and techniques occasionally rather than as a wholesale approach to their courses. However, one *Reflect* action research project, published as *Emerging Worlds, Emerging Words* (Winstanley and Cooke 2015), was an attempt by a group of ten teachers in colleges in London to design their entire courses along participatory lines. These teachers were all, to a degree, dissatisfied with some of the practices expected of them in their workplaces and felt that these tended to constrain and silence students. A pre-written scheme of work, for example, does not offer a means of exploring topics which arise during the course or issues which are directly affecting students. The teachers had a strong intuition, born of experience, that basing lessons around students' own concerns would foster higher levels of motivation, and consequently more effective language and literacy learning. One of the main objectives, then, was to explore alternative, participatory ways of planning ESOL courses and lessons, to develop a scheme of work which emerged rather than one which was pre-determined, and to observe the impact of this on language development, teacher/learner hierarchies and evaluation.

During the project the teachers therefore set aside their usual syllabuses and instead documented three areas as they emerged in the course of the lessons:

- emerging *topics* (what they were and how they arose);
- emerging *language and literacy* (what spoken and written language students produced);
- emerging *action* (changes which occurred e.g. shifts in power relations in the class; any social, political or community action the participants took as a result of their discussions).

The project produced a large, rich set of data, observations and reflections which we have written about more fully in Winstanley and Cooke (2015). Obviously, there was a variety of stances amongst the teachers and no

unanimous agreement about everything which occurred during the project; some, for example, found this a demanding way of working which needed a lot of thinking about in advance whilst others, although committed to the approach, had to abandon it to prioritise preparation for exams. Some general points on which we did agree though can be summarised as follows:

- Our ESOL classrooms came to be regarded as ‘discourse communities’ in their own right, rather than as mere rehearsals for the world outside the classroom.
- By working collaboratively with visual tools, students were able to build communities in which everyone contributed, even those who were less confident readers, writers and speakers of English.
- Topics and themes which arose from students’ concerns appeared to generate a higher degree of involvement than those chosen in advance by the teacher.
- Language produced by students – both spoken and written – was more complex and of a higher ‘level’ than the designated level of the class. The texts students wrote arose directly from their own needs: for example the *Action for ESOL* campaign (see Simpson this volume) required the production of minutes, posters, reports etc. We observed that when writing for an urgent purpose such as this, students lost their anxiety about spelling, punctuation and grammar but at the same time created texts which were more accurate.
- At some points the hierarchy normally present between teachers and students was broken down, especially when we were all engaged in the same objectives. For example, when teachers and students were all involved in the *Action for ESOL* campaign against funding cuts we were engaged in the same discussions and debates and needed to produce the same types of texts for our meetings, the media, for lobbying and so on.
- Some of the topics which emerged were highly political or personal in nature. Rather than avoid these themes we allowed them to become central to our lessons. In this way we acknowledged that the majority of our students come from working class communities with genuine hardships which they wish to explore and that many of them are politically aware and engaged citizens.

### **Whose Integration?**

These observations formed the basis for the design of a subsequent project, *Whose Integration?* which was funded by The British Council and carried out by a small London-based charity, English For Action ([www.efalondon.org](http://www.efalondon.org)). Whereas *Emerging Worlds*, *Emerging Words* spanned a

whole academic year, involved a number of teachers and was largely exploratory, *Whose Integration?* lasted only 5 weeks and involved just two classes. By working with a specific theme and with tools and techniques we were by now familiar with, *Whose Integration?* allowed us to sharpen our focus and to research more closely a concrete, time-bound example of participatory ESOL in action.

The aims of the project were, firstly, to examine the theme of integration from the perspective of ESOL students, i.e. to discuss with them aspects of a debate which is about them but about which they are rarely consulted. Secondly, we set out to explore the efficacy of participatory teaching methods when used to address a theme of this kind in the classroom. In this chapter we are concerned primarily with our pedagogic approach rather than the theme of integration itself, although of course theme and method are tightly linked. In particular, we discuss in some detail how we worked with a syllabus which emerged as the course unfolded. As we suggested above, we consider this to be one of the defining features of participatory ESOL and, along with the essential political nature of the approach, one which distinguishes it from more mainstream approaches.

We carried out *Whose Integration?* in two different classroom contexts: a class at a large publicly funded college of Further Education in East London, Tower Hamlets College, and a community class in a children's centre in Greenwich, South London, set up by English for Action, a charity which does not receive statutory funding. The Tower Hamlets class was largely made up of intermediate level Bengali and Somali students, the majority of whom were legal residents in receipt of state benefits and with recourse to public funds, whilst the community-based class was quite heterogeneous in terms of language level, social class, immigration status and country of origin.

*Whose Integration?* was not planned in detail in advance, although we did have some idea about the linguistic elements that might emerge, probably the language of discussion and debate. As we argue above, we consider that the very nature of advanced planning implies that control of classroom topics and 'target language' lies exclusively in the hands of the teacher. We did, however, follow an over-arching process that guided us in our week-by-week emergent planning which we divided into three stages, and which we describe briefly here.

### **Stage 1: making meaning**

The first two sessions, which we later named the 'making meaning' stage, aimed to be as open as possible and to allow students to generate their own ideas and share their experiences and opinions without being exposed to other material first. This is in contrast to practices in mainstream ESOL classes in which 'input' material is usually brought

along by the teacher, meaning that students are required to respond to and interpret the ideas of others without first being given the space to explore their own. This is common-sense practice in ESOL and few practitioners seem to question it; furthermore, classroom texts are not often held up to critique, and the ideological stances encoded within them are rarely made explicit.

In the first stage, therefore, rather than 'input' materials we used tools and techniques which allowed students' own thoughts and ideas about integration to be generated first. These included, amongst other things, asking students to choose a picture and say what it suggested to them about integration and creating a 'card cluster' of words and concepts associated with the term. A card cluster is a way for a class to pool knowledge and to lay out the elements of a particular issue. Each student is asked to write three different things about the topic onto cards, e.g. information, opinion or personal experience. These are then clustered into themes and a summary of the statements is created. The activity provides a wealth of opportunities for language development work, as well as themes for further exploration. Inevitably at the beginning stage of the project, students struggled with the topic of integration and frequently asked us for a definition; the initial exploratory discussions, however, flowed without too much direction from the teachers and laid the ground for the subsequent sessions, 'going deeper' and 'broadening out', in which we explored together the problems of defining such a complex term.

### **Stage 2: going deeper**

The second stage, sessions three and four, we termed 'going deeper'. In this phase we selected those topics which had emerged in the 'making meaning' stage which were complex or urgent and which had generated strong opinions and feelings. The tools used, such as problem-posing around a code, served to provoke in-depth discussions in which students explored the underlying causes of some of the emerging issues and were challenged to imagine alternatives to problems. In this stage students and teachers were engaged in dialogue about serious topics related to integration, i.e. gender, multiculturalism, religion and culture, and we were required to test the strength of our ideas and to explain, analyse and justify our views. This stage was arguably the most powerful and productive in terms of the development of language, critical thinking, argumentational skills and the understanding of alternative perspectives.

### **Stage 3: broadening out**

The final stage, 'broadening out', introduced texts on the topic from outside the classroom, including quotes from politicians talking about integration

which were in marked contrast with the students' own stances on the theme. It was a deliberate choice to hold back these 'expert' opinions until the students were comfortable with the topic and familiar with some of the major arguments in the debates. We observed that the way in which students approached the texts and critiqued the politicians' opinions demonstrated that they now had a sense of ownership of the debates and developed their thinking during the process; arguably, students would not have engaged with these texts with the same authority and expertise had they been presented with them at the beginning of the course.

### **What emerged**

Although the process we followed in *Whose Integration?* was relatively structured, neither the themes nor the 'target language' were designed in advance. It was particularly telling that although both groups followed the same process and made use of the same participatory tools, the language and topics which emerged over the five weeks were quite different; for example, racism was a recurring theme for the community group in Greenwich and less so for the Tower Hamlets group, perhaps because many of the students in the Tower Hamlets class live in large 'settled communities' where everyday racism and hostility can seem less of a problem. In addition, we would argue that very few, if any, of the emerging themes could have been slotted into a traditional ESOL scheme of work; they were either large concepts such as 'the meaning of culture', 'the role of religion in schools' or 'generational change within communities' or small snippets of people's lives such as how to tie a headscarf. By way of example, we include here a brief description of a theme which emerged which none of the teachers could have predicted but which caused a long, in-depth discussion amongst students and came to form a key part of the *Whose Integration?* project.

### ***She's gone modern: problem posing with a code***

Just before session three at Tower Hamlets College, there had been an animated discussion about women riding bicycles and the students had brought up various tensions, particularly in relation to cultural expectations of local Bangladeshi women. They coined the term 'gone modern' to describe women who challenge what is expected of them by conservative elements in their community. Although this was not a topic we could have predicted, it was clear that students wished to explore it further. We decided to represent 'gone modern' as a *code*. This was a drawing which we, the teachers, made of a woman in a hijab cycling past disapproving 'community leaders' (Figure 16.1). We then explored the underlying meanings of the code using problem-posing questions.



Figure 16.1 'She's gone modern'

Problem posing questions are graded and stimulate a deepening analysis of the code. The questions are posed by the teacher/facilitator and the discussion takes place among the group of participants. The technique works by edging the discussion deeper and deeper in a systematic way rather than a free-for-all open discussion. Auerbach (1992) suggests five stages:

- 1 Describe the content – what do you see?
- 2 Define the problem.
- 3 Personalise the problem.
- 4 Discuss the problem.
- 5 Discuss the alternatives of the problem.

This systematic questioning led to an hour-long exploration and negotiation of ideas and generated a large amount of language as well as a high level of participation and engagement from the whole group, and led in turn to further – sometimes heated – discussions about gender and the role of tradition in some communities.

### **Language development in Whose Integration?**

During the 'gone modern' debate, and other similar discussions, we observed students developing important strategies for arguing, getting



their voices heard and listening to others' points of view. Although our main focus was to explore students' opinions and feelings about integration itself, students' language development was also inevitably a focus. Of the observations we made, a striking one was that students produced complex language (both thematically and linguistically) which went far beyond the level ascribed to them upon enrolment. For instance, by the end of the course students were able to analyse and critique genuine samples of political texts in English (see Bryers et al. 2013: 24).

We also observed that students were especially open to explicit instruction when they needed particular strategies to help them participate more effectively in their debates. At the same time as we were having discussions with students about serious issues, we were also having 'discussions about discussions' e.g., about equal participation, strategies for taking the floor, putting forward a point of view, agreeing and disagreeing and reaching a compromise. There was evidence of students using discourse strategies they had been taught explicitly when the need arose, such as restating and then countering an opponent's arguments ('so what you're saying is ...'), and partially agreeing before moving on to a more fundamental disagreement ('well, I see what you mean but ...'). In the 'gone modern' debate we describe above, students employed a number of strategies for getting their voices heard, justifying an opinion in the face of criticism from other members of the group and – sometimes reluctantly – accepting someone else's viewpoint.

### **A shared lexicon**

Another observation concerned the lexical development of students. The meanings of new words were often negotiated with the class and not provided by the teachers. For example, in a discussion about the difference between *prejudice* and *stereotype*, we all put forward a working definition. In contrast to the teachers' attempts, a student's definition was by far the most useful and accurate: 'stereotype comes from outside' she explained. 'Prejudice comes from inside. You use stereotype to example your prejudice.'

We also noticed the emergence of what we came to see as a shared lexicon: words and expressions which were born during our discussions and which reappeared in subsequent lessons. In week 1 the phrase 'leave at the door', came up in relation to culture and religion and what you can and can't talk about in different situations. As we have already seen, in the second week 'she's gone modern' emerged, a phrase that was recycled throughout the course and even entered the teachers' lexicon for a while. From Greenwich we got the term 'open gates' to refer to the opposite of 'barriers' to integration. As we stated earlier, in our work in participatory ESOL we have come to view the ESOL classroom not as a rehearsal for

the outside world but as a community of practice in its own right. Coining phrases and recycling language seemed to reinforce the bond of the group, in the ongoing development of our own speech community. It sent the message that students could be creative and innovative with language and that the teachers could learn language from the students. The new phrases were also brought to and from the two classes via the teachers, as well as on a shared blog, and created a form of dialogue between the groups.

## Conclusion

It has long been recognised that an effective ESOL class reflects the lives and experiences of students (Auerbach 1992; Baynham 2006; Cooke 2006). Our projects extend this concept further and show that the participatory ESOL class itself is an important part of students' lives and is not just a rehearsal for life outside the classroom. As such, we suggest that it can play a part in shaping the life experiences of those who participate, and importantly, this can be done on students' own terms. At a time when speakers of other languages are being positioned in political and popular discourse as either unwilling or unable to participate fully in democratic processes, our work has suggested to us that the converse is true. During the two projects we have reported on in this chapter, we noted that the intensity of discussion in the classroom led some students to stimulate the same debates at home and with friends, and as teachers we found ourselves discussing the issues which arose in class long after the sessions were over.

Taking part in class discussions about serious contemporary issues such as integration – of which ESOL students are often the referents, but about which they are rarely asked their opinions – allowed students to develop skills which are immediately transferable to life outside the classroom. In our conversations with students towards the end of this course they told us they felt they were much more likely to take part in discussions going on around them, and even to initiate or lead them. 'Participation' in genuine democratic processes requires that citizens partake in debate and have their voices heard, and education has long been seen as a forum for enabling people to acquire the skills to do this successfully. We hope that *Whose Integration?* went some way in supporting our students – and indeed us as teachers – to develop and extend these skills.

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