

EFA conference 2023: Classrooms of Sanctuary and Struggle



The theme for this year's English For Action conference brought together a group of 68 participants at King's College London, making it the biggest practitioners conference EFA has hosted so far. Entitled *Classrooms of Sanctuary and Struggle*, the conference explored two strands of practice: **trauma-informed** and **participatory** ESOL.

It was organised by teachers from around the UK who attend a monthly Community of Practice meet-up, reflecting the needs of today's ESOL classrooms where there are larger numbers of asylum seekers and refugees, and working as we do with migrant communities impacted by severe stress and adversity at the sharp end of the economic crisis, exacerbated by the hostile environment policy. There is a growing acknowledgement of the importance of trauma awareness in education and in community services, and a particular challenge for participatory educators who build learning communities directly around the lived realities of our students.



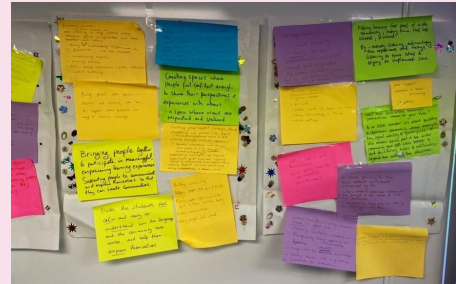
By far the most important aspect of this conference was the organising team. We're ordinary teachers - not psychology professionals or primarily researchers. The theme of trauma emerged in the discussions we were having in our monthly meet-ups over the last couple of years, and we wanted to stage these conversations with more of our colleagues and to source the expertise of some leading professionals.

The opening speech delivered by Tina Griffiths from Liverpool set this context before we divided into three groups for the rest of a long morning.

Each group reflected on the question "*What does facilitating connection mean to you in your role?*". In the learning arc used at EFA, we begin with a "making-meaning" stage: to see what people are bringing to a theme and to produce some basic collective knowledge. Our planning meetings had debated setting as the opening



discussion “What does *trauma* mean to you”, but we were guided by the suggestion from one our speakers Nicola Lester that a focus on *connection* would be more productive - [and that really seems the case](#). *Connection* is a keyword in both trauma-informed practice and participatory ESOL.



Nicola Lester is a mental health nurse. Her career working with groups of trauma survivors has translated into a mission to educate and empower a broad range of lay practitioners. In her session, **Trauma informed ESOL teaching: A space for reflection** she emphasised connection - and the work of *reconnection* - as being the contribution everyone can make in their practice. If trauma is characterised by isolation and despair, the sense of belonging, empathy and solidarity we can create in the participatory classroom can support reconnection. She fielded many questions about re-traumatisation, and on classroom topics and activities that could trigger people who've experienced trauma.

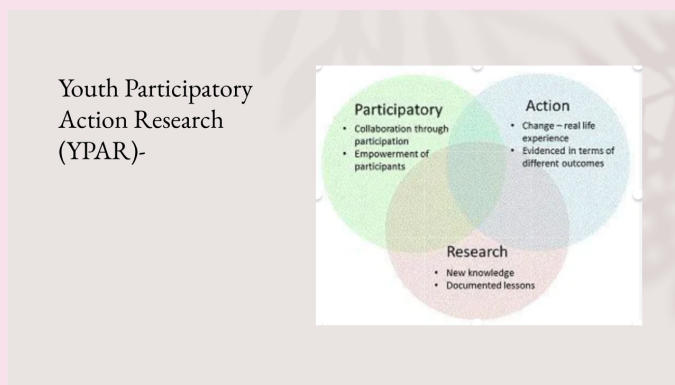
Perhaps surprisingly, she reassured people that what was important was *how we respond* to things coming up in our classroom, rather than trying to prevent them. The classroom is a microcosm of the wider world where we can experiment and explore, and as practitioners *we won't always get things right* but we have the ability to apologise, to learn from what people express about their experience and their needs, strengthening relationships through seeking to *repair*. We'd encourage people to access Nicola's free training programme - [The Gift of Reconnection](#) - commissioned by Thrive London.



The other two speakers in the morning (alongside Nicola), presenting to each group in carousel, were Dr Jaspar Khawaja and Adela Belecova.

Jaspar is an educational psychologist and his doctoral research involved a Youth Participatory Action Research project with high school students, alongside the youth mental health social enterprise States of Mind. It's a fascinating piece of work, captured in a documentary ['Breaking The Silence'](#) where students critiqued the Ofsted regime and produced their own evaluation framework that centred on student wellbeing.

Jaspar's session, **What does meaningful participation look like, and how can we facilitate it?**, touched upon important aspects of the process: how the students developed ownership over the research process and expertise on the subject; the notion of shared "constellation" leadership, recognising the varied roles students played at different points in the overall process; the shifting attitudes of students towards their teachers through becoming more aware of where the pressures on their teachers came from, concluding that more *teacher autonomy* would help; the importance of check-ins and evaluations.



Jaspar's talk has inspired quite a few teachers to try out elements of participatory action research with their students. Teachers often contend with not knowing what their students see as important and how to involve them in the process of finding out.

Research in the form of *listening campaigns* is an aspect of EFA's approach to collective problem

solving, with students deepening their understanding of the issues affecting them, providing credibility to the case they're making for change. In 'Breaking the Silence', the act of interviewing teachers and officials as part of their research brought a sense of agency, carried forward through speaking on their findings in places of power.



Adela, EFA's lead community organiser, provided a concise overview of participatory ESOL and the relationship between the classroom and social action in her session **Organising Our Communities: Pedagogies of the Oppressed**. For teachers new to our pedagogy it provided a clear overview, and for long-standing practitioners it was a useful summary of key principles.

Adela welcomed the opportunity to look at participatory ESOL through the lens of trauma-awareness, bringing to the fore certain aspects of our practice: presenting students with choice over the direction of learning, providing an experience of being heard, creating a sense of shared experience, empathy and solidarity.

Participatory ESOL

'it's a nice therapy, because it's important to speak with others about problems' Betty, EFA student

- ❖ Active listening
- ❖ Curriculum based around students' lives
- ❖ Making meaning phase (1)
- ❖ Card cluster
- ❖ Picture pack
- ❖ Drawing

'It is useful for two reasons, you learn English and you realise it's not only your problem' Maria Eissa, EFA student

Trauma is often thought of as something that *individuals* experience, and in that sense not a matter for collective action (and the focus on trauma even inimical to it). Yet leaders in the field see trauma operating at the level of organisations, communities and whole societies. Traumatic episodes experienced by individuals are often shaped by wider social norms or political violence. Our community organising work where students identify and act upon widely shared issues (or in solidarity with even just one of their peers) creates a sense of purpose and belonging. Strategising together and taking action to win moves us to a place of collective power. This conference itself is part of a *movement* towards trauma-informed education, services and social institutions - where health and care are not just principles of daily practice but of a measure of social and economic outcomes.



Over lunch people gathered in the peaceful garden of neighbouring St John's Church on a thankfully blissful late Spring day, before making it back to one of three afternoon workshops they could choose from. Picking up on themes from the morning, each one was led by an ESOL teacher, showcasing their applications of trauma-informed insights.

Sarah Halsey's session on **Embedding trauma-informed practices in the Classroom** was, as anticipated, really popular with teachers wanting some practical tools to take back and implement.

Starting with a grounding exercise with sounds and sights from the New Forest, the session was a chance for teachers to share practices they're using already and to explore part of [a toolkit produced by Sarah based on her work](#). She helps us think through what we can do before, during and after the class, with clear examples of how we can foster a culture of choice and control, safety and accessibility, inclusivity and collaboration.



What we will cover:

- Discussion of current practice
- Exploration of suggestions for applying trauma informed approaches to our work
- Feedback and ideas to take away



Sarah is developing a training programme for teachers and she would like to hear your suggestions for what that could include. Sarah's resources are really clear and thoughtful, and she brought those attributes to her consideration of the conference as a whole.

Participatory ESOL

- **Strengths based** – not a deficit model. Values the persons existing skills and knowledge of other languages.
- **Attempts to equalise power imbalance between tutor and learners.**
- **Problem posing / Research** - students practise critical thinking skills rather than just the receivers of the thoughts of others.
- **Relevant** - Language is taught, as need arises, from topics that are pertinent to the lives of the students.
- **Collaborative & democratic** – a place where friendships and supportive relationships can develop.

Laura Khelifaoui's workshop '**Conversations about Power**' was based on her work with people experiencing homelessness. Laura has done a lot of thinking to see how psychological frameworks and theories used in her sector can be applied in her teaching practice. In doing so, she came across participatory ESOL and has been a driving force in us both recognising the strengths of our pedagogy and where the challenges lie. Being clear on her questions, and serious in her attempts to find answers in her work and with colleagues, was what gave impetus to this conference.

She gave people an overview of the **Power Threat Meaning Framework** (not necessarily an easy thing to get to grips with) - firstly by helping us think about the different forms of power at work on individuals in society.

Promoted by the British Psychological Society, the PTMF shifts the focus away from symptoms and diagnosing disorders, and instead proposes questions that help people reframe their actions as meaningful responses to power and threat.



<p>'What has happened to you?' (How is Power operating in your life?)</p>	<p>Discussed in relation to the session topic. How is power operating on people in relation to the topic? Who has more power? Wider societal observations. 'Us'</p>
<p>'How did it affect you?' (What kind of Threats does this pose?)</p>	<p>How do these operations of power affect people? Linking beliefs and feelings to operations of power e.g. low motivation with interpersonal power of social networks.</p>
<p>'What sense did you make of it?' (What is the Meaning of these situations and experiences to you?)</p>	<p>What sense can we make of it? Sharing perspectives about the topic – listening and reflecting on the experiences of others. Developing a deeper collective understanding of the context to the topic.</p>
<p>'What did you have to do to survive?' (What kinds of Threat Response are you using?)</p>	<p>What do people have to do to survive? Reflecting on discussed behaviours and attitudes. Asking why?</p>
<p>'What are your strengths?' (What access to Power resources do you have?)</p>	<p>Problems posed, but focus is on discussing possible positive action. Sharing knowledge, pooling resources. Listening to alternative perspectives. Peer support.</p>
<p>'What is your story?' (To integrate all of the above PTMF questions)</p>	<p>Not addressed in an individual manner, to reframing of member problems or problematic scenarios as systemic issues rather than individual failings. A space for members to share their perspectives and speak about their own experiences.</p>

People who have experienced trauma and mental distress can face stigma and be burdened with blame / shame. It cannot be underestimated how important it is, as part of the process of people moving into their power, for them to have self esteem and a belief in their capacity for agency - and their right to it - something which cannot be taken for granted when people have been harmed by oppression.

Laura used the questions in the framework to directly scaffold her facilitation of a conversation group, enabling participants themselves to reframe narratives and to reflect collectively on the *contexts* surrounding what they'd experienced (and their reactions to it). The trajectory is geared towards assessing the strengths and resources people can draw upon, individual and collective, creating a more hopeful outlook on their future. To give members a sense of their potential to affect things, Laura's conversation group learnt about the process of *co-production of services* and participated in the internal processes at Crisis to create a more member-led culture of service design.



From the outset, Robin Sivapalan approached ESOL teaching as a community organising strategy, and the session **Broadening Circles of Solidarity** looked at how the ESOL class can support the wider aims of a campaigning organisation.

The class he's been teaching for the last five years at the Voice of

Domestic Workers was an obvious example to choose, though there are many examples at EFA of classes getting involved with community campaigns, notably through EFA's membership of London Citizens.

Migrant Domestic Workers are understood to be a category particularly vulnerable to super-exploitation and abuse. In the UK, their primary means of extending their legal right to remain is through the National Referral Mechanism for Victims of Modern Day Slavery and Trafficking, whereas the organisation campaigns for their basic rights as migrant workers to renew their VISAs.

Robin emphasised the importance of ethnography in the classroom. Over the years, the ESOL classroom has helped new members of the organisation better understand their situation: the remittance economy in a globally unequal world and its effects on their family life; the political context in the UK in which they're fighting for their rights as workers not victims. The ESOL class aims to develop members into expert theorists, policy-makers and spokespeople of their own struggle. The teacher is learning at the same time as the students learn to articulate about themselves.

I had a medical report from the Helen Bamber Foundation, as I went through their treatment. They wrote a report about the impact of my trauma. This report was important for the final result, I think. I feel so angry because my perpetrators are free, coming in and out of the country while there was already an investigation. And yet, they never paid for what they have done.

I have just recently received the positive CG decision which recognises me as a victim of human trafficking. This means I can now apply for a two years domestic worker visa. But even though the Home Office granted me with this, I am somehow still upset. I feel that there is still no justice – my abusive employers are free and me, as a worker, **I really don't want to be treated as a trafficked victim who needs to be supported by the government – what I want is to be recognised as worker, an independent worker, who is able to provide for my family.**

Participatory Planning for a Participatory Campaign Workshop

Meet the Voice of Domestic Workers

Find out about the situation for migrant domestic workers in the UK & support our campaign

12-2pm, Sunday 18th July

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87248698837>

Meeting ID: 872 4869 8837
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The Voice of Domestic Workers

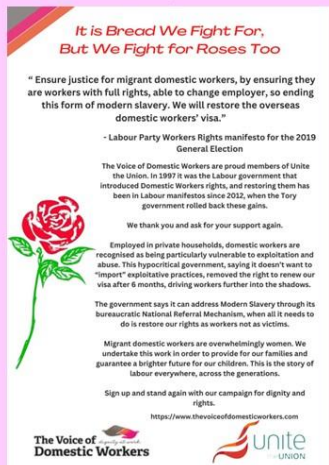
In practice, as *participatory* educators, we're generally driven by one or two working principles: *student choice* was one that participants in this workshop strongly identified with. This isn't a defining aspect of Robin's work with the Voice, whether it should be or not. Similarly, for him, participatory ESOL had initially consisted of a focus on *role plays* to empower members to stand up for themselves with employers. Over our careers, across our classes, there are many aspects of participatory pedagogy to explore, and Robin emphasised that *the teacher should also feel free to develop their interests*, with students as collaborators.

Reading about trauma during the process of organising this conference, he came across the idea that trauma impairs "symbolic functioning". Without really understanding this in a psychological sense, he identified the group's capacity to work with metaphor and figurative thinking as an area for development, bolstered by *his own interest* in literary arts and drama. Using tools like Dixit cards, word association games and haikus, he's evolved a habit of

symbolic analysis in the class. Moreover, drama brings people into the *present moment*, ready to act and respond, with a sense of objective detachment - a practice that trauma experts support.

One definition of trauma (from Gabor Mate) considers *what we've been deprived of*, not just what we've been subjected to. The ESOL class can support an all-rounded development, calling forth aspects of ourselves denied by a narrow education system and the constraints of the working week. Even the process of campaigning for your particular rights can be limiting. Solidarity - a two-way street - involves being able to relate to other people, their struggles, or simply their interests, their way of holding conversation, not just materialising to ask for support.

Symbolism – The Rose – Political History – Role play - Lobbying the Labour Party Conference



It more evidently fits the participatory ESOL bill that students designed a leaflet for the Labour Party Conference, with practice role plays giving them the strategies and confidence to stop busy delegates for their attention - but it's also significant that the process explored the symbolic slogan "Give us Bread and Give us Roses" handed down from women workers in struggle, aimed at deepening their sense of who they are within a wider tapestry.

Gathering for the final plenary after completing evaluation forms, the conference heard from Lora Agbaso, a refugee from Ukraine whose experience of trauma has shaped her practice as an ESOL teacher in Wales. Giving thanks to a longstanding teacher in the room who helped sustain her hope as she battled with bureaucracy to continue her professional development, Lora used the metaphor of the boat to convey what education can mean to someone in the depths of despair. In her person, as a trustee of EFA, Lora represents a significant aspect of what we're trying to do - sustain and empower our students at a juncture of crisis, with empathy.



From the feedback we've received from people who attended, it really was a fruitful day of collegiate discussions and networking, with rich input to reflect on, energising people to go away and integrate what they can into their practice - and, importantly, to contend with the institutional barriers to implementation. We know that there needs to be more space around such discussions - that was one of the major frustrations (alongside the need for more coffee, biscuits and breaks!). In the brief discussion from the floor, people were keen to know how to join the Community of Practice group which organised the conference; these monthly meet-ups will allow for that ongoing collaboration.

Our final conference photo reminds us of how much power we have collectively, and the reach we have in our communities, UK-wide, through a trauma-informed pedagogy of participation and solidarity.

Thanks to the 2023 Conference organising team:

Tina Griffiths, Liverpool Adult Learning Service
Gemma Grass-Orkin, Indo-American Refugee and Migrant Organisation
Jeni Prettyman, Cambridge Regional College
Laura Khelfaoui, Crisis
Sarah Halsey, The Reading, Writing and ESOL Project
Robin Sivapalan, English for Action
Kasia Blackman, English for Action
The EFA Staff team and Lily Peng, KCL volunteer

And our speakers:

Nicola Lester
Dr Jaspar Khawaja
Adela Belecova

And our hosts:

Mel Cooke, on behalf of the Hub for Education and Language Diversity, KCL