From individual survival to collective agency in a multilingual ESOL class

Laura Fino Leon
King's College London
MA in Language & Cultural Diversity
2026

Contents

1. Introduction 2
2. Theoretical Framework 3
2.1 Sociolinguistic Citizenship 3
2.2 Linguistic Repertoires 3
2.3 Participatory Spaces and Resemiotisation 3
2.4 (In)securitisation and Brokering 4
2.5 Gendered Agency and Active Citizenship 4
3. Methodology 4
3.1 Data Collection 4
3.2 Ethics 5
3.3 Reflexivity and Trustworthiness 5
4. Analysis: Trajectory from Individual Linguistic Survival to Collective Agency 5
4.1 Foundations of a Multilingual Safe Space 5
4.2 Decoding (In)securitisation 8
4.3 Scaling Up to the Public Sphere 9
4.4 The Teacher-Organizer as a Broker of Agency 12
5. Conclusion 13
References 14

1. Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of superdiverse London, the classroom for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) has moved far beyond its traditional role as a site for mere grammar instruction. As highlighted by Cooke and Peutrell (2019), ESOL in the UK now operates within a restrictive climate where language proficiency is increasingly used as a tool for immigration control and a 'commodity' to be measured for formal citizenship. The ensuing analysis is conducted within an intermediate ESOL class delivered by English for Action (EFA), an organization that uses a participatory approach with the aim of empowering migrant communities through language. The sessions are hosted by Latin American Women's Aid (LAWA), a specialist service for Latin American and other Black and Global Majority women that provides the physical classroom space and a holistic support environment for the participants. Led by Teacher-Organizer Anne McConnell, the class is specifically designed to support adult migrant women in developing English for employment, confidence, and progression. The group, comprising between 5 to 10 students from diverse multilingual backgrounds, including Spanish, Bengali, Urdu, and French, reflects the superdiversity of the city.

Operating through a Participatory Approach (Bryers, Winstanley & Cooke, 2013), this educational space serves as a "space in the middle" where linguistic education is inextricably linked to the exercise of Sociolinguistic Citizenship, understood as a lived practice of voice and agency (Cooke, Bryers & Winstanley, 2019). Despite challenges like shift work, caring responsibilities, and health issues, the group demonstrates high cohesion, with students even taking on leadership roles in local employability initiatives. The core argument of this assignment is that the pedagogical management observed between January and April 2026 demonstrates a strategic exploitation of the students' full communicative repertoires. By integrating generative themes such as wellbeing and dimensions of social justice, the classroom re-semiotizes personal struggles into a collective democratic voice.

To sustain this argument, the essay is structured into three main sections. First, it outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on concepts of Sociolinguistic Citizenship, Repertoires, Participatory Spaces, Resemiotization, (In)securitisation, and Gendered Agency. Second, it details the methodology, reflecting on the researcher's role as a volunteer within this community of practice. Finally, the analysis presents a longitudinal trajectory of the sessions, documenting the shift from individual linguistic survival to collective agency. Ultimately, this study argues that by validating multilingual practices and fostering a safe space for dialogue, such spaces provide the necessary scaffolding for migrant women to transition from being objects of state policy to becoming active, recognized participants in the public sphere.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on the intersection of multilingualism, migration, and the socio-political agency of marginalized voices. To understand the dynamics of the ESOL class, five core concepts are employed:

2.1 Sociolinguistic Citizenship

In the field of migration and ESOL, Sociolinguistic Citizenship (SC) emerges as a critical alternative to traditional, state-centric definitions of citizenship that are strictly tied to legal status or the mastery of a standardized language. According to Cooke, Bryers, and Winstanley (2019), this concept shifts the focus from the incorporation of migrants into a dominant national culture toward recognizing the political value of sociolinguistic understanding. Rather than treating citizenship as a commodity to be acquired through language proficiency tests, SC defines it as a lived practice of voice and agency. From this perspective, students are not passive recipients of linguistic rules, but active authors who use their communicative resources to negotiate their presence, belonging, and rights within the public sphere.

2.2 Linguistic Repertoires

This study rejects the traditional focus on named languages in favour of Linguistic Repertoires, which Rampton (2019) defines as a set of resources, including registers, dialects, and styles, that are biographically rooted in an individual's life history. These resources are functionally organized and mobilized by speakers according to specific social contexts, a process that is closely linked to Moore et al.'s (2013) concept of "taking up speech". In the ESOL classroom, "taking up speech" implies that learners are not merely acquiring grammatical structures, but are actively learning to perform new identities and reclaim their right to speak in diverse semiotic environments. Consequently, the development of a repertoire becomes an agentive process where students exploit their diverse resources to negotiate their voice and navigate the power dynamics of a superdiverse society.

2.3 Participatory Spaces and Resemiotisation

The transformation of the ESOL classroom into a site of empowerment relies on what Kerfoot (2018) describes as the creation of participatory spaces. These are safe spaces where marginalized voices can be heard, facilitating the process of resemiotisation, through which meanings are shifted across modes, such as from a spoken emotional update to a written board note, and across scales, moving from private struggles to public demands. This process is central to the Participatory ESOL approach, which focuses on generative themes drawn directly from the students' lived experiences to challenge traditional power asymmetries between teacher and learner. By analysing how Teacher Anne re-semiotizes students' anxieties about housing or health into collective pedagogical material, we observe citizenship agency in action. This pedagogical management allows students to reposition themselves from passive victims of bureaucratic systems to active subjects who can critically reflect on and act upon their social reality.

2.4 (In)securitisation and Brokering

The social context of migration is increasingly defined by a climate of uncertainty and what Rampton and Charalambous (2019) term “everyday (in)securitisation”. This concept refers to the ways in which macro-level security policies and institutional surveillance permeate the mundane, communicative lives of migrants, creating a sense of anxiety and precariousness. Within this environment, the teacher and more proficient peers often take on the role of language brokers. Following Cooke et al. (2019), brokering is defined as the process of interpreting or translating the culture of the host community to students, and vice versa, while also facilitating communication between students of different cultural backgrounds within the class. In the context of ESOL, a cultural broker uses their linguistic and social skills to mediate learning and communication in different contexts and with different people. By acting as brokers, the teacher and students collaboratively decode institutional demands, transforming a site of state control into a space for collective agency and social navigation.

2.5 Gendered Agency and Active Citizenship

The ESOL classroom serves as a critical site for active citizenship, which Macdonald (2019) describes as a process performed through the negotiation of gendered identities and social positioning. For many migrant women, the acquisition of English is not merely a functional or economic goal, but a transformative tool used to challenge social isolation and claim a legitimate presence within the local community. Macdonald emphasizes that citizenship in this context is inherently relational, built upon networks of mutual support, such as those fostered in the LAWA/EFA environment, that empower women to move from the restricted private domestic sphere toward meaningful public engagement. Consequently, the classroom becomes a space where women can re-position themselves, using their developing linguistic resources to navigate institutional barriers and enact a form of citizenship that is rooted in their specific lived experiences and gendered realities.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

Data collection took place between January 20th and April 28th, 2026, at an intermediate ESOL class hosted by Latin American Women’s Aid (LAWA). My role was that of a participant-observer; although I was introduced to some women as a volunteer, I acted primarily as a student within the group to minimize the power asymmetry often present in researcher-subject relationships. This dual positioning allowed me to witness the processual flow of the sessions from the informal "catching-up time" to the content-focused discussions.

The empirical data consists of two main sources: field notes, comprising detailed observation annotations registering the class contents, activities, and pedagogical reflections; and board

transcriptions, which are digital records of the co-constructed knowledge displayed during each session.

3.2 Ethics

Ethical considerations were fundamental throughout the study. The use and documentation of the board notes were conducted with the approval of the Teacher-Organizer. Furthermore, to maintain the classroom as a safe house, strict measures were taken regarding privacy: any material or interaction containing personal or sensitive information of the students was omitted or anonymised to ensure their protection. This approach ensured that the research did not disrupt the students' wellbeing or freedom, upholding the integrity of the collective space.

3.3 Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

As a researcher, I must acknowledge my reflexivity. My presence as a volunteer-researcher likely influenced the interaction order. However, the longitudinal nature of my participation, attending every Tuesday for three months, allowed for a degree of habituated presence, where students felt comfortable sharing sensitive stories about migration and mental health in my presence. The trustworthiness of this account is supported by the thick description of events, where I prioritized adjusting the terminology to fit the data rather than forcing the data into pre-existing categories.

4. Analysis: Trajectory from Individual Linguistic Survival to Collective Agency

4.1 Foundations of a Multilingual Safe Space

The pedagogical journey at LAWA began on January 20th with what appeared to be traditional language instruction, focusing on a pronunciation check of the /ɔː/ sound in words such as ‘stall’ and ‘fall’. However, through the "Participatory Approach" of EFA, this linguistic exercise quickly evolved into a "space in the middle" where vocabulary was re-semiotized into social action. The word stall, meaning a stand or booth used to present goods, services, or information, served as a bridge to discuss the Language Fairs (see Image 1). This enabled students to identify key actors like organisers and providers and formulate strategic questions to take advantage of participating in these spaces.



Image 1. Hackney's Language Fair poster.

Another defining characteristic of this initial phase is the strategic exploitation of multilingual resources. By February 10th, the teacher Anne, was co-constructing a "Wellbeing" mind map with the students. The transcription of the board (see Figure 1 below) reveals how the curriculum is built bottom-up: terms like "Tasbi" (Tasbih from Arabic: تَسْبِيح, the glorification of God in Islam), "Pray", and "Read Holy Quran" were included alongside "Healthy Food" and "Good Sleep"(see Image 2). This pedagogical choice validates the students' religious and cultural identities, transforming the classroom into an environment where their full linguistic repertoires are legitimate.

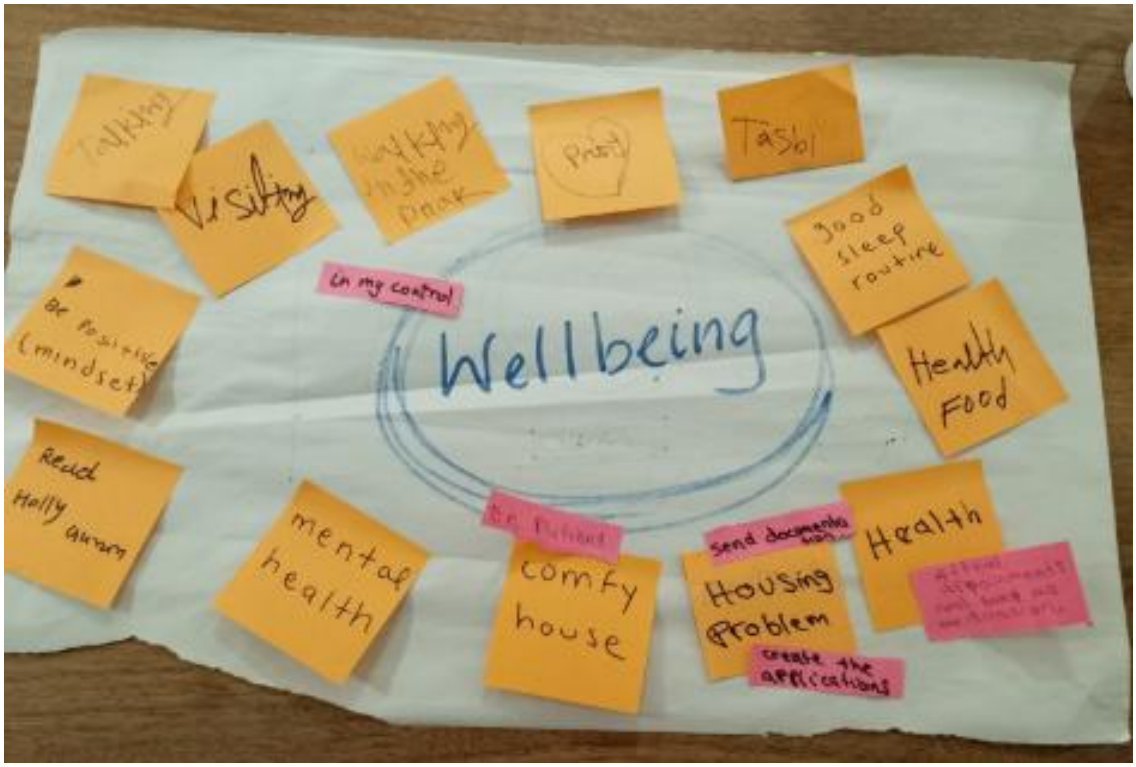


Image 2. 'What is important for our wellbeing'

The exploitation of these resources is not merely for comfort but for survival. The February 10th notes explicitly link wellbeing to what is "in my control", such as "send documentation" and "create the applications". Here, the teacher is not just teaching English; she is facilitating the Linguistic Citizenship required to navigate the UK's bureaucratic systems. The classroom acts as a contact zone where the students' private lives meet their public obligations, fostering a community of practice where the objective is to share updates of their lives, as housing, health, and work, rather than just practicing abstract grammar.

```
Central Concept: Wellbeing

General Wellbeing Ideas (Orange Post-its):

- Talking
- Visiting
- Walking in the park
- Pray (Enclosed by a heart shape drawing)
- Tasbi
- Good sleep routine
- Healthy Food
- Health
- Housing problem
- comfy house
- mental health
- Read Holly quran
- Be positive (mindset)

Factors in Personal Control (Pink Post-its):

Main Control Concept: in my control

Branching from "comfy house:
- Be Patient

Branching from "Housing problem":
- send documentation
- create the applications

Branching from "Health":
- Attend appointments and take my medication
```

Figure 1. Transcription of 'What is important for our wellbeing'

Furthermore, the "Saying No" board on March 3rd (see Image 3) demonstrates how the pedagogy moves into the realm of power struggles. Anne categorized student responses into "direct", "negotiating", and "survival strategy". By discussing how society conditions women to always say "yes," and including terms like "VAWG" (Violence Against Women and Girls), the teacher provided a democratic voice. The construction of the phrase "If I had said 'No' sooner, my condition... would be better" shows a collective use of advanced grammar to reflect on systemic abuse and personal agency (see transcription in Figure 2).

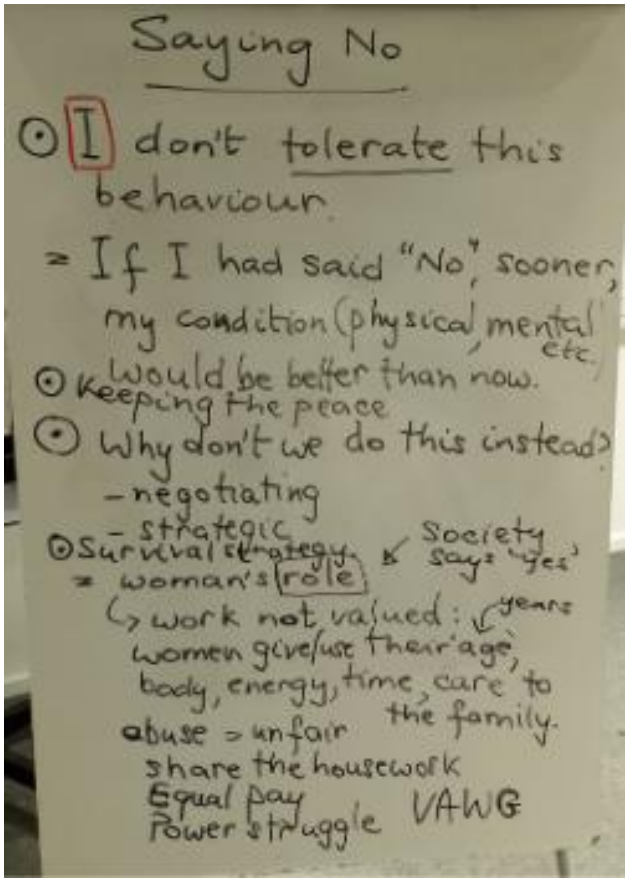


Image 3. 'Saying No'

Saying No

[I] don't tolerate this behaviour.
If I had said "No" sooner, my condition (physical, mental) etc. would be better than now.

* Keeping the peace.
* Why don't we do this instead?
- negotiating
- strategic
* survival strategy
= woman's [role] <- society - says "yes"
-> work not valued:
women give/use their age <- years, body, energy, time, care to the family.

abuse = unfair
share the housework
Equal Pay
Power struggle
VAWG (Violence Against Women and Girls)

Figure 2. Transcription of 'Saying No'

4.2 Decoding (In)securitisation

As the sessions progressed, the classroom evolved into a site for managing everyday (in)securitisation. The session on March 3rd focused on a Borough Council housing letter brought by a student, which triggered deep-seated anxieties regarding her temporary housing application. This moment initiated a complex reading and translating dynamic: while Teacher Anne helped the student comprehend the content, other students close to her acted as brokers, using Bengali to translate and clarify the high-stakes information. This strategic use of the L1 highlights that translation was not seen as a failure of immersion but as a

fundamental tool for meaning-making in a securitised context. Anne further leveraged these disruptors of stress to teach adjectives of uncertainty such as "uncertain", "undecided", and "unsure" (see Image 4). This is a prime example of re-semiotization: taking a raw, frightening institutional reality and giving it a linguistic form that can be collectively discussed and analysed, thereby shifting the focus from individual fear to shared pedagogical knowledge (see transcription in Figure 3).

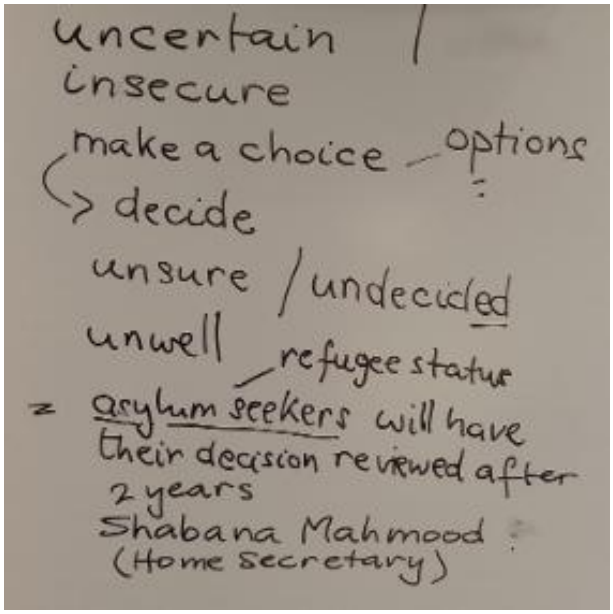


Image 4. 'Climate of uncertainty'

uncertain
Insecure
make a choice - options
→ decide
unsure / undecided
unwell

refugee status - * asylum seekers will have their decision reviewed after 2 years

Shabana Mahmood

(Home secretary)

Figure 3. Transcription of 'Climate of uncertainty'

4.3 Scaling Up to the Public Sphere

The final phase of the trajectory shows the students moving from survival towards active agency and public accountability. The "Job Centre Story" from March 23rd (see image 5) is a powerful piece of storytelling pedagogy (see Figure 4 for transcription). The students practiced the language needed to navigate appointments every two weeks, yet they also included resistance in their narratives: "I am not ready for work... I have a mental health issue." This demonstrates an advanced sociolinguistic understanding of their rights. The note "Please speak Bangla!" at the end of the board transcription serves as a strong bottom-up claim for linguistic rights in official spaces.



Image 5. 'The Job Centre Story'

Two years ago, I went to the job centre because of the Universal credit, personal allowance. I go every two weeks for appointment.

"(student A), you have a U.C. appointment at 10 o'clock, on Thursday 2nd April 2026 at Job Centre. Plus, for 15 mins."

(The Job Centre) -> They explain to me how to find a job.

I am not ready for work. My English level is not good.

I go to ESOL class and learn (XXX to) English.
I am sorry but… I have a mental health issue. (problem)

I am attending

ESOL for life and wellbeing intermediate class.

My favourite language is English. I love English. I want a job!

I am looking for a job - working with children - volunteering with children

When my English is good…

I prefer a job like school - dinner assistant (XXX and) or playground supervisor.

Please speak Bangla!

Figure 4. Transcription of 'The Job Centre Story'

The shift toward collective agency was further evidenced earlier that session, which started on practical support for job applications. When a student requested help to send essential documentation, the class transitioned into a collaborative workspace; using the teacher's laptop, the group navigated the digital and bureaucratic hurdles of the application process. During this interaction, the linguistic focus shifted from abstract grammar to functional corrections, such as mastering time and date formats (e.g., '2nd April', '10am'). The requirement of ten distinct personal documents for a single role was identified by the group as a form of surveillance. However, the classroom's response, shifting from the technicalities of the documents to celebrating the success of a peer, demonstrates that the classroom is not just a site for language acquisition, but a supportive community where bureaucratic success is shared and validated as a step toward active citizenship.

The participation in the Hackney Citizens Accountability Assembly weeks later, on April 21st (see Image 6) represents a significant scaling up of the students' agency. In this public arena, the students were no longer migrants in waiting but residents of Hackney representing the importance of ESOL funding. The socialization of the assembly's outcomes on April 28th demonstrated how the students' voices had gained a democratic dimension (Cooke et al., 2019). The teacher facilitated a recap where the students analysed who attended and why, connecting the distant authority of the administration to their own daily demands for better services.



Image 6. Hackney Citizens Accountability Assembly.

Finally, the students' demand for a writing exam in June is perhaps the most significant indicator of agency. Rather than being an external imposition, the exam was a request for legitimate language. The students recognized that a formal certificate is a tool to navigate the labour market. This longitudinal journey shows that the ESOL classroom is not just about teaching English, but about sustaining the capacity of migrant women to act as recognized citizens in a superdiverse society. The transition from "how are you?" as a warm-up to "how do we hold the council accountable?" marks the full realization of sociolinguistic citizenship in practice.

4.4 The Teacher-Organizer as a Broker of Agency

A fundamental element in the success of this pedagogical trajectory is the role of Anne McConnell as a Teacher-Organizer. In the Participatory ESOL framework, the teacher is not a neutral transmitter of a banking model of education (Freire, 1972 in Cooke et al., 2014), but a facilitator who organizes the classroom around the students' real-world needs. McConnell's dual role was crucial in bridging the gap between the classroom and the institutions. Her management of the sessions allowed for a problematizing pedagogy where everyday issues, such as the 10 documents required for a job application or the intricacies of the Job Centre, were not dismissed as distractions but were central to the curriculum.

This role aligns with the concept of the Language Broker (Cooke et al., 2019). McConnell acted as a broker of agency by providing the technical and linguistic scaffolding necessary for the women to navigate securitised state demands. An interesting observation is that three students subsequently engaged in leadership roles within community organising and local employability initiatives. It validates the claim that the LAWA/EFA class (see Image 7 and transcription in Figure 5) functions as a site for Active Citizenship (Macdonald, 2019), where migrant women are encouraged to move from the private domestic sphere to public engagement. By fostering this dialogic inquiry, McConnell ensured that the English learned was not just a linguistic code, but a language of possibility that enabled these women to challenge their isolation and make their voices heard.

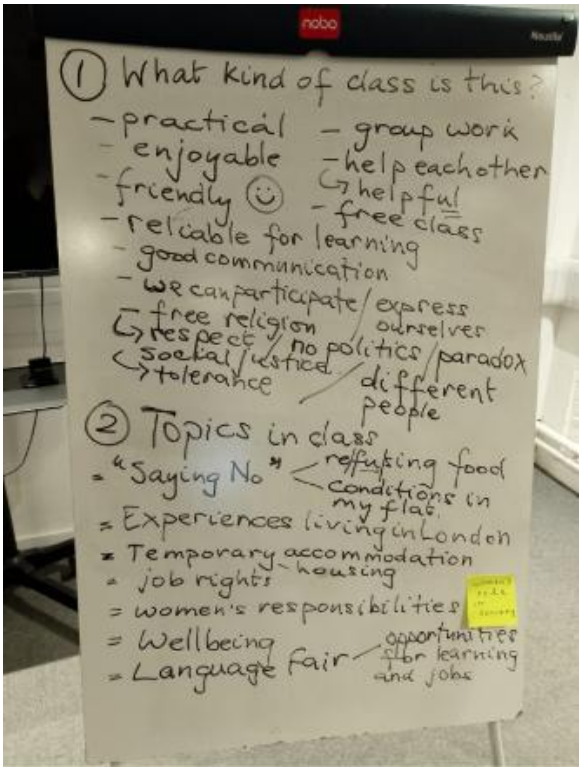


Image 7. 'What kind of class is this?' | Figure 5. Transcription of 'What kind of class is this?'

5. Conclusion

The ethnographic analysis of the EFA ESOL class at LAWA suggests that, in this context, pedagogical management extends beyond the organisation of learning and becomes a practice through which Sociolinguistic Citizenship is sustained. Through a longitudinal trajectory, this study has documented how a participatory approach allows migrant women to transition from the insecuritised margins of British society toward a position of informed agency. By validating more of their linguistic repertoires and re-semiotizing their daily struggles, the classroom functions as a transformative "space in the middle."

Drawing on the insights of Macdonald (2019), it is evident that for these women, becoming active citizens is a gendered process of reclaiming voice. The classroom provided more than linguistic tools; it fostered the collective solidarity necessary to navigate institutional surveillance and brokering demands. The shift from an initial focus on pronunciation to the sophisticated co-construction of political demands at the Hackney Citizens Assembly demonstrates that when the local is granted a voice (Awayed-Bishara, 2021), the ESOL classroom becomes a site of democratic empowerment.

In conclusion, the practices observed at LAWA illustrate that linguistic citizenship is not a destination marked by a test score, but a continuous performance of rights and identity. As these women demand formal certification and hold local authorities accountable, they challenge exclusionary ideologies and redefine what it means to belong in a superdiverse London. For educators and policymakers, this analysis highlights the vital importance of sustaining participatory spaces that recognize migrants not as subjects to be integrated, but as citizens who already possess the agency to shape their own futures.

References

Awayed-Bishara, M. (2021). 'Linguistic Citizenship in the EFL Classroom: Granting the Local a Voice Through English'. TESOL Quarterly, 55(1).

Cooke, M., Winstanley, B. & Bryers, D. (2013). Whose integration? A participatory ESOL project in the UK. in D Mallows (ed.), Language issues in migration and integration: perspective from teachers and learnings. The British Council, pp. 21-34.

Cooke, M., Bryers, D., & Winstanley, B. (2014). Participatory ESOL. In D. Mallows (Ed.), Language Issues in migration and integration: Perspectives from teachers and learners (pp. 9-19). The British Council.

Cooke, M., Bryers, D. and Winstanley, J. (2019). 'Our languages': Towards sociolinguistic citizenship in ESOL. En: Brokering Britain, Educating Citizens. Multilingual Matters.

Cooke, M. and Peutrell, R. (eds.) (2019). Brokering Britain, Educating Citizens: Exploring ESOL and Citizenship. Multilingual Matters.

Kerfoot, C. (2018). 'Making and shaping participatory spaces: Resemiotisation and citizenship agency in South Africa'. Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies, 243.

Macdonald, S. (2019). 'Migrant Women, Active Citizens'. En: Cooke, M. and Peutrell, R. (eds.) Brokering Britain, Educating Citizens. Multilingual Matters.

Moore, R. (2013). 'Taking up speech' in an endangered language: Bilingual discourse in a heritage language classroom. Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies, 112.

Rampton, B. (2019). 'What do we mean by "multilingual"? Linguistic repertoires. Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies, 251.

Rampton, B. and Charalambous, C. (2019). 'Language & Everyday (In)securitisation'. Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies, 262.