An Ethnographic Case Study of *Empower ESOL*: Sociolinguistic Citizenship in Practice

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Abstract

This essay presents an ethnographic case study of Empower ESOL, a charitable English language class for adult migrants from Latin America, based at King's College London. According to eleven sessions of participant observation as a volunteer facilitator, the study examines how the classroom created a space where students could participate fully despite their beginner-level English. The analysis uses concept of dialogic education, translanguaging theory, and the notion of sociolinguistic citizenship to argue that the classroom enacted a form of citizenship rooted in everyday communicative practice. In a policy context where English proficiency is often treated as a condition of belonging, this classroom made it possible to practise citizenship in the present.

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1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, English language education has become the principal means through which the British state seeks to foster the integration of adult migrants, while ESOL itself sits at the intersection of language teaching and immigration policy, shaped by political debates about citizenship and belonging as much as by the needs of teaching and learning (Cooke & Peutrell, 2019, p. 2; Simpson, 2019, p. 26). Within this policy climate, the multilingual resources that students bring to class are often ignored or seen as obstacles to learning English rather than as legitimate communicative tools (Cooke & Peutrell, 2019).

The *Empower ESOL* class, a project based at King's College London in partnership with English for Action, Empoderando Familias and Citizens UK, and presents a different picture. Over the course of eleven sessions, I attended as a volunteer and group facilitator. Its practices differ from the assessment-driven provision that dominates the policy literature. The physical layout, the role of students' first language, and the relationships between the organiser, facilitators, and learners all contributed to an atmosphere that felt closer to a community gathering than to a conventional classroom. These features are described in detail in Section 3; what matters here is that they suggested a form of ESOL practice in which citizenship was enacted through participation rather than taught as a curriculum topic.

This essay provides an ethnographic case study of this classroom, through the perspective of sociolinguistic citizenship (Rampton et al., 2018; Stroud, 2001) to analyse the practices observed. It argues that the *Empower ESOL* classroom, through its spatial organisation, relational dynamics and negotiation of multilingual resources, constitutes a space where sociolinguistic citizenship is practised. The analysis also draws on Freire's (2009) concept of dialogic education and translanguaging theory (García & Li Wei, 2014), which help make sense of the practices involved. The essay proceeds by outlining the methodology, describing the classroom and participants, discussing the findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks, and concluding with implications for ESOL practice.

2 Methodology

2.1 The Field Site and the Researcher's Role

The Empower ESOL project is a charitable language teaching programme funded by King's College London. It offers English classes to adult migrants, mostly from Latin America, with the aim of helping them navigate local systems and improve their understanding of British culture and policy. Classes take place weekly in a university classroom at King's College, with each session organised around a specific theme, such as shopping, festivals, or regional differences across British cities. The organiser, Shah, a highly experienced teacher who previously worked as a lawyer, selects the topics in advance. Students work in small circles led by volunteer facilitators, and Shah himself also leads a group, which tends to be slightly larger given his experience. Each circle typically includes three to six learners, all of whom

are beginners with limited English proficiency. Shah encourages interaction and dialogue rather than lecturing from the front.

I attended this class as a volunteer and group facilitator for eleven sessions between February and May 2026, as part of a placement required by the MA module Multilingualism, Migration and Diversity. My role was to guide a small circle of students through the activities prepared by the organiser, helping them build vocabulary and practise speaking in English. At times, this meant explaining a task or prompting a student to speak; at other times, conversations drifted into personal topics such as students' home countries, jobs, or reasons for moving to London. Both the organiser and the students were aware that I was attending as a volunteer and as a student researcher. Because I was an active participant rather than an outside observer, my understanding of the practices described in this essay is shaped by my involvement. This position gave me access to informal moments and conversations that a distant observer might have missed, while also requiring a critical awareness that complete escape from subjectivity is never possible in ethnographic research (Saville-Troike, 2003, p. 4).

2.2 Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

The data for this study were collected through participant observation during the eleven sessions I attended. Since the class was focused on oral interaction and many students were beginners, I did not make audio or video recordings. Instead, I wrote detailed field notes after each session, recording my observations of the classroom activities, the interactions among students and facilitators, and my own reflections. I also drew on informal conversations with students during lessons and breaks. These were not structured interviews but arose naturally, covering topics such as students' migration trajectories and their experiences of learning English. I did not record these conversations word for word, but I noted their content in my notes[1].

The decision not to record was both practical and ethical. Recording equipment could have made students more anxious and disrupted the informal atmosphere the organiser had cultivated. Relying on field notes introduced a degree of imprecision, but it allowed me to remain fully present and to build trust with participants.

All participants were informed of my role and the purpose of my placement. I explained that I was writing a case study for an academic assignment and that no names would be used. No participants objected to being included.

3 Description of the *Empower ESOL* Classroom

This section describes the key practices and participants that characterised the *Empower ESOL* classroom. It focuses on three aspects: the organisation of the classroom and its patterns of interaction, the ways in which students and facilitators make meaning, and the

[1] I did make brief jottings during the sessions when students were engaged in tasks that didn't require my direct involvement. These were mainly memory prompts, which I later expanded into full notes after class.

backgrounds of the learners themselves. These descriptions provide the empirical basis for the discussion that follows in part 4.

3.1 A Dialogic Space

The layout of the Empower ESOL classroom was one of its most noticeable features. Rather than arranging the tables and chairs in rows facing a whiteboard at the front, the organiser Shah asked students and facilitators to sit in circles (see Figure 1). How many circles were formed depended on the number of people who attended on a given day, with typically between two and five small groups scattered around the room. Each group was led by either Shah or one of the volunteer facilitators.

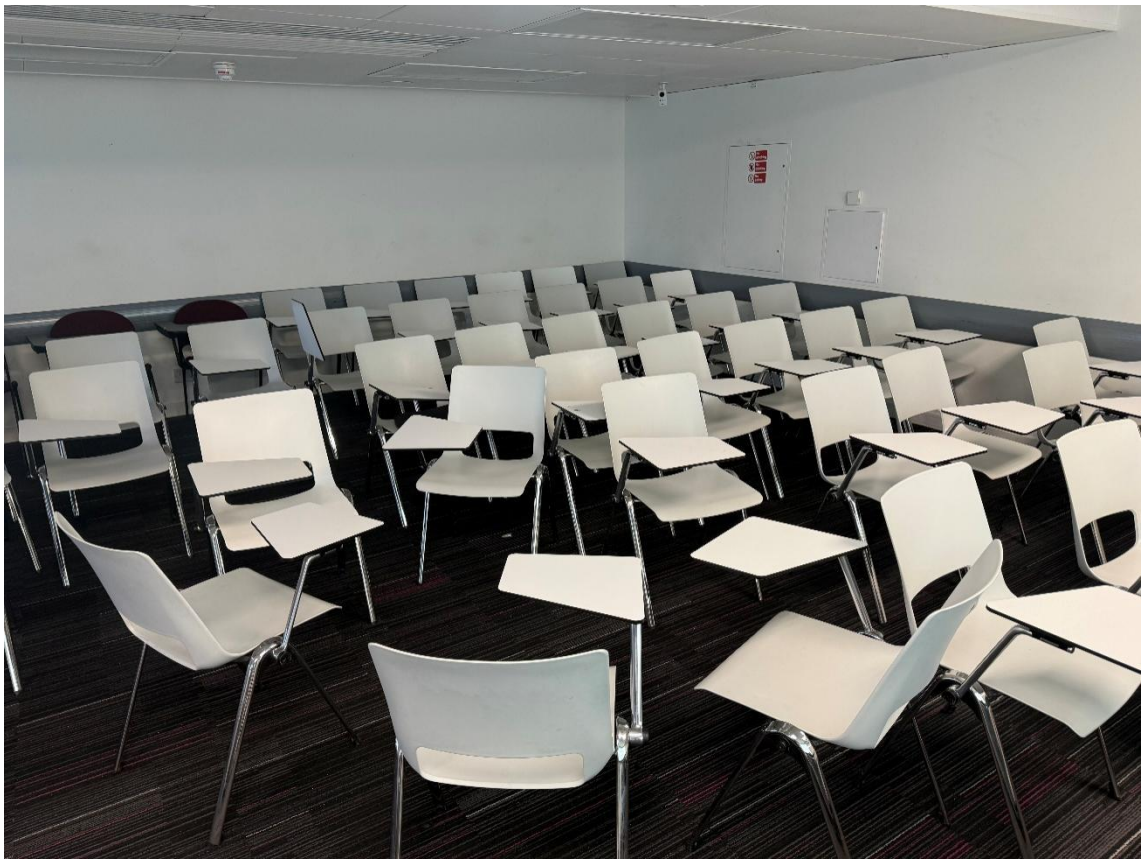


Figure 1 *Classroom Layout at Empower ESOL* (*Note.* Photograph taken by the author during a class session. The image shows a typical circular arrangement of tables and chairs used in the *Empower ESOL* classroom.)

First and foremost, this spatial arrangement was an expression of a particular pedagogical philosophy. Shah explained that real teaching required interaction with students rather than lecturing to them from behind a desk, a stance that resonates with Freire's (2009) critique of what he termed the "banking" model of education, in which the teacher simply deposits information into passive students. By seating everyone in circles, Shah embedded a commitment to dialogue into the physical structure of the classroom.

The dialogic principle shaped the way each session was put into practice. At the start of each class, Shah distributed handouts to the volunteer facilitators and briefly outlined the content and aims of the lesson, ensuring that each facilitator understood the activities before the students began working. Once the class was under way, the session typically

opened with a greeting and a short introduction to the topic. From that point onward, however, the pace and tone of each small group's conversation depended heavily on the facilitator and the students within it. Some groups worked closely through the handout tasks, while others drifted more freely into personal stories and informal exchanges. Shah moved between groups, sometimes joining a discussion and at other times observing, but he rarely imposed a rigid structure on how each circle functioned. As I noted in my field notes, the boundary between guided activity and informal conversation was often fluid, and it was usual for a lesson on shopping or festivals to lead into discussions about students' home countries, their children, or their working lives. This flexibility reflected an openness to students' own experiences as a legitimate part of the learning process, an orientation that contrasts with the tightly prescribed curricula that characterise much formal ESOL provision (Simpson, 2019).

The roles traditionally assigned to teachers and students in ESOL classrooms were thus reconfigured. Cooke and Peutrell (2019) have described ESOL teachers as "brokers" who mediate between government citizenship agendas and the lived experiences of adult migrants. At *Empower ESOL*, however, Shah positioned himself as a co-participant in a shared learning space for the students; for him, it was about learning to give them more agency in shaping each session. This practice reflects the value of sociolinguistic citizenship as outlined by Rampton et al. (2018), who understand citizenship in linguistically diverse settings as a practice rooted in everyday communicative interactions. The classroom became a place where citizenship was actively practised.

3.2 Multilingual Meaning-Making

Most of the students were native Spanish speakers at beginner level in English, and Spanish was constantly present in the classroom. Students used it to confer with one another when they did not understand an instruction, to help a peer find the right word, or to check their understanding before attempting an English sentence. They also used it socially, sharing comments during breaks.

The organiser, Shah, adopted a pragmatic middle ground towards Spanish. He occasionally reminded students to try to speak in English, particularly during structured activities, but he never punished anyone for using Spanish and accepted that beginners sometimes needed their first language to participate. This allowed Spanish to function as an informal pedagogical resource without being officially endorsed as part of the lesson. Students appeared to understand this unspoken rule. They made efforts with English during whole-class work, but among themselves they switched freely into Spanish when stuck on a word or structure. Shah sometimes stepped in to rephrase instructions in simpler English when a facilitator was struggling, and he also knew when to hold back. On one occasion, two students spent several minutes discussing a vocabulary in Spanish, clarifying it for one another before writing their English sentence. Shah paused near them, listened briefly, and moved on.

This negotiated space between permission and restraint reflected an orientation towards language that differed from the monolingual ideology historically shaping much ESOL

provision in the UK (Weber & Horner, 2012). Spanish served as a practical tool, even if it was not openly encouraged.

3.3 The Learners

Most of the students who attended the *Empower ESOL* class were adult migrants with Latin American backgrounds, coming mainly from Colombia, Peru, and Spain. They ranged in age from early twenties to late fifties, and their employment circumstances varied widely. Through classroom conversations, I learned that some worked as cleaners, shop owners, or taxi drivers, while others were full-time mothers caring for children, and some were students still in education. These details about students' lives emerged naturally during classroom activities rather than through formal interviews. In a session on shopping, one student mentioned that she had no income of her own and relied on her partner's wages, prompting others to describe their own situations. A session on wages similarly led several students to compare their pay in London with what they had earned in their home countries.

Most students lived with their families, and many were part of household where all members were migrants. In informal conversations, students mentioned that their partners, children, or other relatives also spoke limited English, although younger family members, particularly children attending school in the UK, often had a stronger command of English. One student described how her daughter regularly acted as an interpreter when dealing with official institutions. For many of these learners, improving their English was tied to a wish to participate more independently in family life and to rely less on children or partners in situations requiring English.

The group diversity exemplified what Vertovec (2007) has termed superdiversity, a condition where migration produces populations that differ not only in nationality and first language, but across other mutually conditioning variables, including immigration status, labour market position, and length of residence. Spanish provided common ground, but students' experiences of migration life were far from uniform. In the classroom, these varied experiences came up regularly in the discussions, as students use their shared language to explain, translate, and help one another make sense of what they were learning.

4 Discussion

The class was organised in circles, students' shared first language was present as an informal resource, and the roles of teacher and learner often overlapped. This section examines these features through three theoretical lenses, moving from the spatial and pedagogical, to the linguistic, and finally to the wider concept of citizenship.

4.1 Dialogic Education and the Refusal of the Banking Model

The physical organisation of the Empower ESOL classroom stood in clear contrast to the arrangement that Freire (2009) saw as central to the banking model of education, which the teacher stands at the front and deposits knowledge into students who are expected to receive it passively. For Freire (2009), this spatial hierarchy reinforces broader relations of

domination. By seating everyone in circles, the organiser created a different structure, which he sat among the students, and shared the role of teaching with volunteer facilitators distributed across the room. This layout made extended lecturing physically difficult and pushed interaction into the small circles where students had more opportunity to contribute.

The relationships that formed within this circles worked in the same way. Organiser Shah did not present himself as the main authority in the room. Freire (2009) argued that education aiming for critical dialogue must dissolve the hierarchical opposition between teacher and student and replace it with a relationship in which both parties contribute. Shah's stance shows this idea. Cooke and Peutrell (2019) have described ESOL teachers as brokers who mediate between government citizenship agendas and the lived experiences of adult migrants. The organiser's role at *Empower ESOL* suggests a different kind of brokerage, he acted less as a conduit for top-down policy than as a co-participant with students in a shared space of learning. This shift, from managing external expectations to building internal relationships, mattered not only for pedagogy. It also shaped the kind of citizenship that the classroom made possible.

4.2 Translanguaging and the Negotiation of "Allowed but Not Encouraged"

A similar negotiation between broader UK policy norms and local practice could be seen in the way students used Spanish. Shah did not ban Spanish, but neither did he formally encourage it. Students were reminded to try English, yet they could use Spanish to clarify instructions, help one another with vocabulary, and share social talk. This pragmatic accommodation reflects what García and Li Wei (2014) describe as translanguaging, the fluid deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for the socially constructed boundaries of named languages. From their perspective, bilingual speakers do not switch between two separate systems; they draw on a single integrated set of resources. The value of this repertoire to students was underscored for me when one student mentioned that she had previously lived in a small town in the United States where Spanish was sufficient for everyday life and she had never needed English. In London, that changed, and the classroom became one of the spaces where she could build the English that her new environment demanded.

This translanguaging operated within constraints, however. The students tried to use English when speaking to a facilitator or in whole-class moments, suggesting an awareness of the unspoken expectation to stay in the target language. Weber and Horner (2012) have noted how the ideology that equates one nation with one language shaped educational policy across Europe, and in the UK this has fed into the assumption that English-only instruction is the surest route to integration. Simpson (2019) documents the effects of this assumption on ESOL provision, where curricula are often tightly prescribed and the multilingual resources of students are sidelined. The Empower ESOL classroom does not fully escape this ideology, but it creates a space where it could be managed with flexibility. Spanish is accommodated. The tension between official monolingualism and practical multilingualism is held in balance, a compromise that recognised the students' linguistic reality without challenging the norms that surround ESOL provision.

4.3 Sociolinguistic Citizenship: From Status to Practice

Moreover, the negotiation of space, language, and relationships connects the everyday practices of the class to a broader understanding of citizenship. Rampton et al. (2018), building on Stroud (2001), propose the term sociolinguistic citizenship to capture an understanding of citizenship that is rooted in communicative practice. In this regard, citizenship is something people do through their everyday interactions, particularly when they find ways to participate and be heard in contexts where their linguistic resources might otherwise be marginalised. The *Empower ESOL* classroom provided conditions where such participation could happen. Students are not expected to reach a certain level of English before joining in. From the first session, they were encouraged to speak, even if this meant mixing Spanish with English or relying on a classmate to help translate.

The classroom does not resolve the structural inequalities, change their immigration statuses, or improve their wages. What it offered was a weekly space where the ability to speak perfect English was not the price of entry, and where the relationships between teachers and learners were organised around mutual participation. In Rampton et al.'s (2018) terms, this is what they mean by the practice of citizenship. It is not a formal status, but an activity that takes shape through everyday interaction, in the places where people live, work and learn. The *Empower ESOL* classroom thus offers an example of how the principles of sociolinguistic citizenship can take shape in the everyday life of a classroom.

5 Conclusion

This essay has examined the *Empower ESOL* classroom through the lens of sociolinguistic citizenship, arguing that its everyday practices constituted a form of citizenship enacted through participation. The layout, the dialogic approach, the accommodation of Spanish, and the blurring of roles between teachers and learners together created a space where students, despite their beginner-level English, could participate fully and be heard.

These findings are significant against the policy landscape outlined at the beginning of this essay. Mainstream ESOL provision in the UK has long been shaped by pressures that tie English proficiency to integration, security, and the right to belong (Cooke & Peutrell, 2019; Simpson, 2019). In this climate, ESOL classrooms can become places where migrants' linguistic resources are problematised, and where their commitment to integration is judged by their command of English. The *Empower ESOL* classroom, by contrast, showed that it is possible to organise teaching around different assumptions: that students bring valuable knowledge and experience, their first language can support their learning, and participation does not need to wait for proficiency.

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The class operated with volunteers and charitable funding, conditions that gave it freedoms unavailable in the formal further education sector. The students were mostly Spanish speakers, which allowed a shared first language to function as a resource but would be harder to achieve in a more linguistically diverse group. These features mean that this classroom cannot be treated as a model to be replicated. It can, however, be read as an instance of what becomes possible when ESOL is

approached as a space for practising participation, and it offers one answer to how sociolinguistic citizenship might be realised in the everyday life of a language classroom.

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