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Brokering Britain, educating citizens: Critical ESOL issues and principles

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Abstract

This paper is about the relationship between citizenship and ESOL for adult migrant students. When citizenship was inserted into the ESOL curriculum following the Nationality, Asylum & Immigration Act 2002, some teachers welcomed it, others were anxious, and some resisted it as ideological and intrusive. Over time, policy attention has moved on to other curriculum themes, such as the teaching of British Values and employability. Yet ESOL remains a crucial site for the citizenship education of migrant adults in the UK. But what does this mean? To answer this question, this paper draws on our recently-edited collection, *Brokering Britain, Educating Citizens*. Linking citizenship and socio-linguistic theory with three case studies of migrant language learning taken from our book, the paper distinguishes between citizenship as top-down, prescribed and state-centric (and concerned with promoting national identity, national language and national security) and citizenship as a participatory, dialogic and emergent practice. It shows the relevance of this second, bottom-up idea of citizenship to ESOL provision. In doing so, the paper draws attention to the pivotal role of ESOL teachers as 'brokers' of citizenship mediating between top-down, mandated ideas of citizenship and the ideas and experiences of ESOL students as they emerge in the classroom. It goes on to outline four key principles that we believe should inform ESOL provision and the practice of its teachers if ESOL is to be consistent with the democratic citizenship its practitioners mostly advocate.

Our recent book, *Brokering Britain, Educating Citizens* (Cooke and Peutrell 2019) explores the relationship between the teaching and learning of adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in the UK and the complex, contested notion of 'citizenship'. The book, an edited collection and collaboration between practitioners and researchers, raises questions about the nature of citizenship, integration, community and identity, and about language, multilingualism and the role of ESOL and ESOL teachers in the citizenship transitions of migrant English-language learners.

In addressing these questions, the book engages with the particularities of ESOL although there is much that ESOL shares with other provision in the adult education sector. ESOL classes in the UK are mostly highly diverse in terms of the ethnic, cultural, linguistic, class and educational backgrounds of the students. They take place across many different sites: FE colleges, local-council community provision, third-sector organisations, the charity sector and informal community settings. But questions affecting ESOL resonate in other areas of adult education. For instance: how does provision fit into the national policy picture? What is the relationship between policy and practice? And what are the opportunities and constraints of different kinds of provision?

In our book, ESOL is explored specifically as a site of citizenship education – not in the formal, top down, statist way implied by the Life in the UK citizenship test but in the sense of citizenship as a democratic, dialogic, participatory *process*. The book consists of eight case studies of ESOL projects which, in different ways, are concerned with fostering the development of active and activist, diasporic citizens who are developing their voice, agency and collectivism as well as their English language competence. Not all of the teachers who feature in our book necessarily use the term

'citizenship' but we wished to explore the concept as a useful heuristic for ESOL work, and perhaps even for adult education more broadly.

ESOL in citizenship policy

A central argument of the book is that ESOL is a highly politicised provision, and for many years has been implicated in policies concerning immigration, security and nationality (Cooke & Simpson 2008, Khan 2014, Rosenberg 2007). The most well-known of these was the introduction of citizenship and language testing in the 2002 *Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act*, which stated that everyone applying for British citizenship had to show 'a sufficient knowledge of English, Welsh or Scottish Gaelic and life in the United Kingdom'. This requirement was extended in 2007 to all those applying for indefinite leave to remain. Predictably, the citizenship knowledge required of the *Life in the UK* test is limited to somewhat arcane facts and figures about British culture and institutions and has been heavily lampooned throughout the years. However, for those applicants who were unable to take the test independently, classes of ESOL-and-citizenship were offered in its place, at least until this route was abolished in 2013. Since then, subsequent legislation such as the counter-terrorism programme, [*Prevent*](#), and the aggressive promotion of British Values has continued to situate ESOL, and other areas of adult education, as the main vehicle for top-down, government-mandated citizenship education, including for adult migrants. Politicians of all stripes have pointed to multilingualism as a threat to cohesion and integration – a stance that reveals clear tensions between the multilingual realities of the UK population and the monolingual, nation-state-oriented policies and attitudes emanating from government and public discourse.

Because of the ways in which ESOL teachers are positioned within ESOL and citizenship policy and discourse, we argue that gaining a perspective on the relationship between language and citizenship is crucial. Indeed, understanding the implications of this positioning for ESOL teachers as both language and citizenship educators was an important motivation for producing the book in the first place.

In the book, we argue that rather than simply implementing policy mandates, ESOL teachers act as *'brokers'* or mediators between top-down, prescribed ideas of citizenship and students' own experiences of citizenship as they emerge within the classroom. 'Brokering' is a complex process. It involves more than simply interpreting or explaining prescribed ideas of citizenship to students, or interpreting students' experiences of citizenship in light of these prescribed ideas. As we use the term, 'brokering' involves reflexively negotiating different expectations, practices, experiences and ideologies, including (importantly) teachers' own viewpoints and often-tacit beliefs. From this perspective, ESOL is more than a site for transmitting mandated ideas of citizenship, or what Luke described as a 'technology for domesticating the Other' into a prescribed idea of nation (2004: 28). Rather, ESOL can, *at least potentially,* be a space for formulating and practising new configurations of citizenship. These, in turn, might shed productive light on our understandings of citizenship more widely. But let's touch briefly on the broad issue of the relationship between language and citizenship.

Language and citizenship

There is a long historical association between language and citizenship. Classically, Aristotle (1962) argued that it was our capacity for speech that made political community possible: speech distinguished us from other animals and enabled us to make and share moral judgements. The ideal of citizens deliberating over the common or public good remains a compelling theme within citizenship theory, particularly within its republican and communitarian traditions. This is despite the

erosion of the very notion of a common good by neoliberalism, algorithmically-mediated consumerism, and the rest. Whilst the relationship between liberal traditions of citizenship and the idea of the common good are more ambivalent, the capacity for speech is also implicit in the liberal idea of individual citizens rationally transacting their interests with others.

This idealised relationship between language and citizenship, however, has to be set against the socio-linguistic insight that language is not just a deliberative or transactional resource. Rather, language is a constitutive part of the complex fabric of status and power relations within and between communities and societies. In brief, some forms of speech count for more than others; there are high- and low-status languages and varieties of particular languages, just as there are high- and low-status citizens, and some with no status at all, as feminist, multiculturalist and other critical theorists of citizenship have frequently reminded us (Balibar 2015; Lister 1997; Yuval-Davis 2007).

The role of language ideology in recreating unequal citizenship can be seen clearly in the exclusive relationship typically posited between national citizenship and a national language. This taken-for-granted correspondence between nation and language is despite the existence of multi-national states (such as Belgium), stateless nations (such as the Kurds), and the world's many multilingual polities. Whereas an estimated 4,500 languages are spoken in the world today, only a quarter of the world's 200 states recognise more than one official language (Edwards 2012). Although language policy and public discourse in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland reflects the contested linguistic histories of these nations, speaking English is widely-promoted in the UK as a marker of national belonging and migrant integration. It is therefore posited as a legitimate demand made of non-nationals seeking citizenship or long-term residency. In contrast, non-English languages and their speakers are frequently stigmatised as a threat to national citizenship, as noted earlier.

Yet, if citizenship is to mean more than a thinly-formed structure of tolerant co-existence and individual rights, the notion of 'common language' retains normative validity as an aspect of citizenship. Democratic participation, dialogue, deliberation – even disagreement – are communicative practices that require, following Aristotle, a capacity for speech. However, we question whether this necessarily implies *a* common language in the conventional sense of a shared grammatical, lexical and phonological system. ESOL participation rates and waiting lists attest to the practical benefits of learning English, the dominant language of the UK. But speaking English does not guarantee equal citizenship. Moreover, mandating competence in English as a precondition of formal, legal citizenship is discriminatory. Instead, we understand 'common language' in more pragmatic terms: what do we want to do with language? What sentiments and experiences do we want to express? What relationships are we trying to build (or not) with others? What contexts is language being used in? In this view, citizenship should not be predicated on *a* common language in the conventional sense, rather the 'common language' of citizenship emerges from a process – dialogic, deliberative, often agonistic (even antagonistic) – by which individuals and groups struggle to communicate their concerns about their shared world drawing on the full range of their linguistic – including multilingual – and other resources. It follows that as citizenship education, ESOL is about more than just teaching English.

Approaches to citizenship

Before we discuss examples of case studies from the book, we want to look briefly at how different ways of thinking about citizenship were useful in our collection. Here, we're not diminishing the scepticism that justifiably surrounds the notion of citizenship, including the view that neoliberalism has hollowed out democratic public life and that the consumer-citizens it cultivates are not citizens who actively participate in democratic life (see e.g. Brown 2015; Clarke 2005). Neither are we

discounting the concern that citizenship continues to be shaped by inequalities of status and power. And against a tendency to idealise citizenship, we agree that nation-states are reinvesting in the idea of citizenship, not to enhance democracy but as a form of bio-political governance. If citizenship is a productive heuristic for ESOL work, the concept is nonetheless fraught and contested.

Nonetheless, there were (at least) three approaches to citizenship that were useful to the argument developed through the book. First was the well-established distinction between citizenship as status and citizenship as practice. As status, citizenship is legally-based, state-dependent and exclusive by definition: some have it, some don't. But if citizenship is a practice, i.e. something we *do*, then people without legal citizenship status, including many ESOL students, can still *act as* – and therefore *be* – citizens, albeit *de facto* if not in law. This distinction opens up the possibility of non-state-centric, non-mandated forms of citizenship – citizenship as the democratic, dialogic, participatory process referred to above.

Second, the notion of *discitizenship* (Pothier and Devlin, 2006; Ramanathan 2013) draws attention to the ways in which our capacity for citizenship can be stripped away by non-recognition, stigmatization or discrimination, and so result in second-class citizenship or straightforward exclusion. Prevailing attitudes towards speakers of non-English languages in the UK are a case in point.

Third was the idea of *acts of citizenship* we took from Engin Isin (2008). By *acts of citizenship*, Isin refers to public acts through which individuals or groups contest their exclusion and claim new citizenship rights (for instance, sexual rights or linguistic rights – to cite two areas of rights discussed in the collection, or the right to recognition and voice, to cite another). The capacity for *acts of citizenship* requires that individuals and groups have a sense of their own identity, value and agency. Here, we could refer to the struggles of refugee and migrant groups and their allies in campaigns such as *Right to Remain* and *Migrants Organise* that challenge the right of states to exclude refugees or 'irregular' migrants from welfare or legal protections or, through deportation, from the country itself. Not all *acts of citizenship* succeed but ESOL has a clear role in assisting its students to develop the linguistic and other capacities these acts require and, in this way, to resist *discitizenship*.

The case studies in the collection explore what this approach can mean in practical terms. The three examples that follow show how ESOL can be not only a means for language learning in the conventional sense but also for developing the capacity for participating as citizens, contributing to the formation of a pragmatic 'common language', whilst resisting *discitizenship* and engaging in *acts of citizenship*, regardless of formal status.

Case study 1: English for Action - *'Our Languages'*

English for Action (EFA) is a London based organisation which offers free ESOL to anyone who needs it. The teaching approach, 'participatory ESOL', is based on Freirean ideas and those of educators such as Elsa Auerbach (1992) in the USA and programmes such as REFLECT (Archer and Cottingham 1996), a way of teaching and organising in grassroots development projects in the global south. The curriculum emerges from the concerns and interests of the students, rather than from a pre-written scheme of work, and employs techniques such as problem posing which encourage students to think deeply about the causes of social issues as well as their own attitudes and ideologies towards those issues, and what, if any, changes they would like to make. EFA is also involved in community organising around local issues such as ESOL funding, housing, employment rights and so on. EFA staff and students organise in several ways: by joining existing campaigns or larger groups such as London Citizens, by forming

special interest groups on a local level or through research projects which they carry out in conjunction with partners such as universities.

The chapter *Our Languages*, by Melanie Cooke, Dermot Bryers and Becky Winstanley (see also Cooke, Bryers and Winstanley 2018) discusses a classroom based project run by EFA and King's College, London, which explored sociolinguistic knowledge with multilingual adult learners of English – a group who are often the subjects of research but whose lived experiences and attitudes are often overlooked. During the project, students were engaged in discussions about recent understandings of bi- and multilingualism, heritage-language learning, family-language policies, and language discrimination – a theme which the authors did not anticipate but which emerged in the aftermath of the Brexit vote. To tackle the sometimes painful stories which emerged in this phase, techniques were employed from 'forum theatre' (see Winstanley 2016); students were encouraged to act out their stories and to imagine alternative ways of responding to their aggressors. In this way, the classroom provided a safe place to rehearse 'acts of citizenship', thus potentially helping to pave the way, albeit in a small way, for formal recognition of the use of multilingual repertoires in public spaces at some point in the future.

Case study 2: Digital Citizenship in the Syrian refugee community

Chapter 8, by Stefan Vollmer, is about a group of newly-arrived Syrian refugees in Leeds and how their use of smart phones and digital media is central to their sense of citizenship, both locally and internationally, despite not having full citizenship rights in the UK. Stefan shows how these digital citizens used the Facebook page of the Syrian Community of Leeds as a platform for informal learning in order to build their own community and integrate locally – assisting newly arrived refugees; building relationships with other migrant groups; and sharing information about job opportunities, ESOL classes and so on. Crucially, social media enables this diaspora to be highly effective local organisers whilst at the same time, maintaining contacts with home and with ongoing events in Syria. In particular, the chapter describes the work of the White Helmets of Leeds, a group formed after the death of the MP Jo Cox, and named after a group working in Syria itself. The White Helmets volunteer their services and skills in the community as builders, plumbers, electricians and so on, thus gaining valuable knowledge of the job market and local economy and contributing assistance to individuals and communities in Leeds and the surrounding area. Thus, a group of so-called 'non citizens' reconfigure established notions of local and transnational, online and offline citizenship.

Case study 3: Beyond The Page

Beyond The Page is a group working with women in coastal Thanet. Recognising that ESOL by itself does not necessarily result in meaningful integration and 'community cohesion', *Beyond The Page* is unique in offering a learning environment which invites *all* members of the community i.e. both migrants and UK born people – as well as key local institutions – to participate in identifying and overcoming their linguistic and cultural barriers. A further distinctive feature of Beyond The Page is their use of Natural Voice techniques along with ESOL. This has been highly successful in overcoming anxieties, engaging hesitant learners and bringing a range of people into learning. Recently, the group has started to become quite influential in Thanet, organising events in the area and bringing together various levels of the local community such as head teachers and civic leaders.

Key principles

The final chapter of the collection reflects back on the cases discussed in the earlier chapters. In it, we draw out four principles of ESOL as a form of citizenship education that emerge strongly from the case studies. These principles are not new but will be familiar to many educators across the wider adult education sector.

We end, then, with a brief outline of what the four principles are.

First, ESOL should be *ethnographically informed*. By this we mean that students' circumstances, trajectories, experiences, meanings, and the real-life linguistic and social demands they face should be at the centre of classroom practice and curriculum design.

Second, ESOL needs *a broad socio-linguistic understanding of language*. Again, language is more than a formal system or set of learnable conventions. We need to consider how ideology is implicated in language and how English language education can perpetuate or challenge inequality and exclusion.

Third, *ESOL is political*. ESOL practitioners and researchers should recognise that ESOL sits in a highly politicised space. Equally, ESOL students and, importantly, ESOL teachers are not only objects of policy but also agents with the capacity – like other citizens – to engage with policy and public discourse through their pedagogy and outside the classroom.

Finally, to reiterate the point: ESOL should be *participatory and dialogic*. Our practice should reflect the citizenship we aspire to. Giving students the chance to shape their own learning not only makes better pedagogy but is a basic principle of democratic adult education.

When citizenship was inserted into the ESOL curriculum as a result of the 2002 *Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act*, many ESOL teachers were anxious about its implications and in some cases resisted what they saw as an imposition on their professionalism. Our book, however, makes the case that citizenship understood as participatory, dialogic and emergent is a valuable concept for ESOL teachers. We'd suggest that the four principles of citizenship education drawn from the case study chapters provide a framework for developing ESOL pedagogy, evaluating ESOL provision, and for the initial and on-going professional development of ESOL teachers.

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