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Sectors and the workplace in language teaching: Differences, links and alliances?

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Sectors and the workplace in language teaching: Differences, links and alliances?

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How much do language educators working in schools, Further Education (FE), not-for-profit organisations and universities really have in common? Can we really talk about the professional identity of teachers and their freedom for manoeuvre without addressing the kinds of organisation they work for? Is it enough to talk of curriculum-pedagogy-&-assessment, or does this mask systematic institutional differences that have a more profound influence on learning and teaching? Following a sociolinguistic rationale for asking questions like these, this paper describes the response of c.40 teachers who met to discuss them. They generally agreed that the institutions and sectors where they worked often had a major impact on their capacity for thoughtful, responsive and effective practice, productively engaging their professional agency and judgement. Counter to this, excessive regulation, precarious funding and low visibility were experienced to different degrees across their sectors, but the cross-sectoral comparison stimulated pointed towards creative alternatives, added more clarity to the kind of development support needed, and underlined the potential value of practical strategies for active policy engagement.

How much do language educators working in schools, Further Education (FE), not-for-profit organisations and universities really have in common? How far are language teachers and their teaching shaped by the types of institution that they work in? Can we really talk about the professional identity of teachers and their freedom for manoeuvre without addressing the kinds of organisation they work for? Is it enough to talk of curriculum-pedagogy-&-assessment, or does this mask systematic institutional differences that have a more profound influence on learning and teaching? How can we optimise mutual learning and support between teachers in different areas of language education? These questions weren't all resolved by the c. 40 language educators who met to address them in London in May 2022, many bringing experience of working in more than one sector. But they generally agreed that these questions were well worth asking, and that the institutions and sectors where they worked often had a major impact on something that they all valued: thoughtful, responsive and effective practice, productively engaging their professional agency and judgement. Excessive regulation, precarious funding and low visibility were experienced to different degrees across their sectors, but the cross-sectoral comparison stimulated a sharper sense of creative alternatives, added more clarity to the kind of development support needed for people working in multilingual environments, and underlined the potential value of practical strategies for active policy engagement.

The first section of this document contains Ben Rampton's rationale for posing these questions, and it refers to both to sociolinguistics and to personal experience in an ESOL conversation club (§1). This is followed by a brief sketch of how the workshop was structured as a process of cumulative, collaborative enquiry (§2), leading into an account of the main points covered in (loosely) sectoral discussion groups, drawing on flip chart data and reports from Rob Peutrell (FE group 1), Tina

Griffiths (Adult & Community Learning; ACL), Katy Hight (third sector organisations; TS)¹, Mike Chick (teacher education in Higher Education; HE TE), Zoe Solomon (English for academic purposes (EAP) in HE) and Chris Richardson (English as an Additional Language (EAL) in schools, and modern languages (ML) in schools and HE). Some sectors were represented by more participants than others, and there are potentially very significant gaps in the absence of perspectives from the private sector and from community language teaching in supplementary schools community (as well indeed as from Welsh, Gaelic and other indigenous UK languages). Even so, there was enough diversity to start interrogating the divisions and links between teachers spread across different sectors of language education in the UK, and some of the contours of a vigorous cross-sectoral discourse community are outlined in the final section (§4). In sum, the document's contents are as follows:

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1. Sociolinguistics and the language teaching workplace - Ben Rampton

“To start the discussion at this workshop, I would like to:

- a) say what it was that prompted these questions;
- b) explain the rationale and justification for asking them; and
- c) try to answer them from my own language teaching experience.

Overall, I want to try to show why these are potentially very positive and invigorating questions, even though at first they might sound a bit negative, depressing or divisive.

1.1 What prompted these questions?

“This is the 7th HELD seminar that we've organised, and quite often in the seminar discussions, people say ‘that's really interesting, but there's no space for that where I work’, or ‘yes, but it doesn't happen like that in my sector’. These are important comments, but we haven't yet done much to build on them. Similarly, when we're planning these seminars, we try to be inclusive, saying

¹ Although the differences often get blurred (see §3.4 below), FE, ACL and TS organisations cover the provision of English for adult speakers of other languages (ESOL), an area that was especially well represented at this seminar. Further Education colleges tend to run courses tied to the formal certification frameworks developed in the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum, and these are audited and held accountable to their central government funders (Cooke & Simpson 2008:38-39; Cooke & Peutrell 2019:8; DFE 2019:38). There is also a good deal of ESOL provision in non-governmental, non-profit ‘third sector’ organisations, funded from a wide range of sources, including charities. Classes here tend to be non-accredited, more informal and more flexibly focused on people in the early stages of learning English, and the technological resources supporting them are generally more limited (DFE 2019:8,9,38). Third, there are classes provided by local authorities, and according to DFE 2019, these tend towards a mix of formal and informal, accredited and non-accredited, sometimes also using local community venues. See Rampton et al 2020 for more detail.

we ought to target practitioners in MFL, EAL, EAP or private language schools as well, but we're not really very systematic about this. And then elsewhere, we go to academic meetings where people are worrying about the similarities and differences between ELT, TESOL, SLA, applied linguistics etc, and this intensifies a sense of non-cohesive uncertainty.

'Steady on!', you may say, 'the different sectors are already very well organised with professional associations like NATECLA, NALDIC, BALEAP, IATEFL, the Association for Language Learning and so on. We don't need your fantasies of unification!' But that wouldn't be fair, because at this seminar, we're not try to erase institutional identities and sectoral differences – what we want to do is understand them better, and here are some reasons why we need to.

1.2 Rationale for the workshop

"Our seminar series is called *Sociolinguistics and Language Education*, and there are at least three sociolinguistic arguments for talking about the different types of institution where teaching takes place. The first takes a broad view of the city as a sociolinguistic space, the second zooms in on classroom practices, and the third focuses in on particular workplaces.

First, universities, FE colleges, schools and not-for-profit organisations aren't perched high above the multilingual environments where students live, implementing top-down policies that bring order and direction to the heteroglossia below. They're very much part of the local spaces that people move in and out of, and you don't have to go very far to find individuals who learn or teach in different types of class during the week, or families where everyday, people bring the experience of different kinds of instructional site to the evening meal. From the bird's eye vantage point that you need in policy-making, language teaching in a place like London may look fragmented and chaotic, but on the ground, lots of people are living the links, frictions and synergies between different forms of language provision as they thread their way through different sites during the week. If we're interested in the whole person of our students, or if we want to understand the development of linguistic repertoires, or if indeed we want to understand the active role that largely monolingual Anglos play in the *dynamics of urban multilingualism*, we need to look *across* the range of language institutions that people participate in, looking out for the connections, the identities and the coherence that people construct from the ground up.

Second, we've drawn quite a bit on the sociolinguistic idea of 'the *Total Linguistic Fact*' throughout the seminars we've been running (Rampton & Holmes 2019; Rampton 2020). This is the idea that linguistic forms, interactional activity and cultural ideology are all very closely tied together in communication, and even though you might be concentrating on a particular grammatical structure, or a particular classroom task, there's still lots of cultural and ideological messaging going on, influencing the way that participants understand and engage with what's happening. For sure, a good deal of this ideological messaging comes from outside education, from governments, media and the communities and personal networks that people inhabit. Even so, a substantial part of a person's sense of the significance and value of what they're doing is going to come from the particular sites where they're studying – not just the sense of paths into the future and connections to the wider world coming from the nature and status of the course that they're involved in, but also, for example, the roles and relationships permitted by the timetable and the facilities. Of course, nobody's a robot, neatly slotting into place in an educational machine, and as well as lots of other cultural influences coming into class, the *institutional* messaging is itself often mixed and contradictory. So there's lots of scope for improvisation. Even so, classrooms aren't islands or bubbles devoted only to language and learning tasks (despite what the literature sometimes suggests), and you usually only have to listen to two or three minutes of a recording of classroom interaction to form a pretty good idea of the kind of institution that it's located in.

Third, we've also been talking quite a lot about citizenship over the course of our seminars, not so much in the sense of getting British nationality or residence (though that's obviously really important), but more in terms of claiming a right to something that you haven't yet been formally granted, whether or not you've got citizenship status. These are the '*acts of citizenship*' that Cooke & Peutrell talk about (2019:13), and it links up with theories of '*linguistic citizenship*' which prioritise democratic participation through the development of an authentic voice, accepting that this may not conform to national language standards (Rampton et al 2021). Much of the time in a classroom where people are attentive to social and civic issues like this, they'll be talking about structures and processes outside their institution – housing, employment, health and so forth. But it's in the workplace where they're having their classes that teachers and students get to experience pressures and opportunities, rules and ideologies, in the closest and most immediate ways, and this 'home' institution is a prime site for developing and exercising the kind of active local citizenship that we've been talking about. I know I'm not saying anything terribly new here, and that programme reps, course evaluations, staff/student meetings etc are often a standard part of ordinary institutional life, along with inspections and mandatory curricula. But as teachers and students, how far do we just take all this for granted, leaving curriculum negotiations, funding targets, management structures hidden from view, maybe only starting to think of alternatives if and when we become union reps or managers? For sure, there may be very little we can actually change, but even so, in the ways that our experience is influenced by these very local institutional structures, there may be potentially important material for the development of linguistic citizenship.

So those are three sociolinguistic reasons for spotlighting the organisations in which language teaching and learning takes place, not just leaving them in the background: (a) they play an influential role in contemporary multilingualism, exposing people to a plurality of linguistic experiences, identities, and ideologies; (b) whether we like it or not, says the Total Linguistic Fact, loads of the activity in class is stamped with the imprint of the kind of institutions where it's occurring; and (c) these institutions provide a lot of close-up material for thinking about linguistic citizenship. But there's an important complication here.

We're not just talking sociolinguistic theory – we're also talking about working lives and places where we invest a lot of time and energy, places where there can be very tricky personal relationships, frustrations and disappointments as well as pleasures and rewards. So these conversations are potentially quite sensitive. What we're trying to do here, though, is to figure out whether there are common structures underpinning our experience as individuals, whether we can map out some general patterns that help to put personal experience in a broader perspective, helping us to share it more effectively. And that's why we want to say something about sectors of language education, not just individual workplaces – yes, starting with the particulars we're so familiar with but building up a more general picture.

Let me give you an example, situating my own ESOL experience in broader systems of language education, exploring the value of this kind of structural contextualisation.

1.3 *An EfA conversation club*

"I only work two days a week at King's. On Fridays I volunteer with English for Action in Dermot Bryers' online class, and on Tuesdays on Zoom, I convene an 90 minute EfA ([English for Action](#)) conversation club.² We started the club in May 2020, and there are now a couple of other

² The account that follows may be biased towards the positive by my position as a volunteer in at least two ways: (a) as a volunteer, I'm not drawn into the inner workings of the organisation that hosts the conversation club, and (b) if I didn't like it, I could just stop.

volunteers.³ We're DBS compliant, but at club level, there are no formal evaluation, monitoring or reporting requirements. Attendance ranges from about 5 to 18, mostly women and quite a lot of mothers and grandmothers at home. It's free, there's no external advertising and no formal enrolment process (other than me putting you into the club's WhatsApp group) – people come to the club from other EfA classes, or sometimes through a friend's recommendation. I don't keep formal records on people's backgrounds, though I know that they've migrated, often quite a long time ago, from countries like Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Ethiopia, Japan, Somalia, Syria and Venezuela.⁴ What happens when we meet? We don't have any performance targets or curriculum objectives, other than having an interesting and enjoyable time together talking mainly (but not exclusively) in English, providing participants with a chance to improve their confidence in the language. There are usually three main parts to the 90 minutes: introductory chat and/or warm-up; main topic; and a short 'what-about-next-week?' discussion at the end. During each session, we make quite full use of breakout rooms, the chat, screensharing and WhatsApp; sometimes we use jamboard but there's no grammar teaching and no use of the Zoom whiteboard. The thematic focus of our conversations is very much emergent, and for things to talk about next time, we have to spot possibilities in the ongoing conversation, on WhatsApp or in the news.⁵ We use my own Zoom account; on average, it takes me a couple of hours a week to prepare materials;⁶ after every session, I write a 200-300 word summary of what we've done for the WhatsApp group; and at the end of term, I make a pdf collage to pull it all together.

So as a starting point, that's an impression of activity in and around the conversation club I'm involved in. How is it influenced by the organisation it belongs to and other institutions on hand? [Learning Unlimited and the Learning & Work Institute](#) (LU/L&WI) say that it helps for conversation clubs to be connected to wider English language infrastructure in their local area (e.g. Gooch & Stevenson 2020:34),⁷ and that's certainly true for us. If people in the club have any formal English language progression needs (exams etc), or if there's a call for social support and casework, it's handled by the staff at English for Action. My own university teaching style certainly doesn't transfer into the club in any straightforward way, and I've learnt a huge amount from volunteering in Dermot's Friday class, as well as from some of EfA's own [training](#), from [Xenia](#) and from the [support materials](#) produced by LU/L&WI.⁸ Being part of the larger organisation also affects relationships at the club: a lot of the members attend other EfA classes and events, they see each other several times a week, and it feels a bit as if we're part of a community centre. Belonging to EfA also influences the cultural ethos in other ways. We don't really do much activism in the club, and there's often quite a bit of fairly celebrative samosas-saris-&-steelband multiculturalism in our conversations. But from our interactions elsewhere in EfA, most of us are fairly conscious of linguistic citizenship and the value of trying to speak out; we try to talk together as locals with diasporic links rather than as British nationals and newcomers; and I think that as volunteers, we shudder and try not to think of the club as enacting the Government's agenda for 'integration' and 'social cohesion'. Of course for me personally, universities are also very much part of the local organisational environment, and as well as setting up www.kcl.ac.uk/held and seminars like the one today, internships in not-for-profit (and other) organisations are now a part of the [MA](#) module on multilingualism that Mel Cooke and I run (with MA students joining our conversation club as well).

³ My partner, and one of Dermot's parents.

⁴ One or two have now returned to their countries of origin, and participate online from abroad.

⁵ We have talked about things like Covid, BLM, COP26, [Little Amal](#), the NHS, the *Life in the UK* material; dance, poetry, paintings and artefacts from around the world; job interviews, new technologies, education and learning; and we've practised Zoom, drunk herbal infusions, done seat yoga and gone on walks with Google streetview.

⁶ Some of which I never use because the talk goes in a different direction.

⁷ Learning Unlimited and the L&W Institute have also produced guidance material for organisations about running volunteer conversation clubs – see <https://learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/A-guide-for-organisations.pdf>

⁸ We have also fed into LU/L&WI's [materials](#) for online conversation clubs.

But so what? How is any of this relevant to anyone other than me and the people I happen to interact with?

Well, as Gooch & Stevenson say, “[v]olunteer support has been central to language learning by adult migrants, both in the UK and in comparable European countries, throughout the past 50 years” (2020:36). Furthermore, this kind of “[i]nformal English language provision can take a multitude of forms, including conversation clubs; activity-based clubs; volunteer-led English lessons; drop-in sessions; and at home ESOL support” (2020:5). So we’re talking about quite a significant cultural phenomenon, and there’s actually lots of scope for sociolinguistic research in the diversity of forms it takes. But sticking to today’s brief and focusing specifically on the organisational environment, what general issues arise from my description of our conversation club? I’ll briefly mention three, though I’m sure there may be more.

First, there’s *the relationship between non-profit language organisations and universities*.

Universities usually profess a strong commitment to public impact and community service and there is actually quite a lot of collaboration between these two sectors. But it’s not quite the win-win relationship you might imagine. The fact that I only started volunteering with EfA when I reached university retirement age points to part of the mismatch, and when we brought people together from 11 universities and 17 third-sector organisations to discuss their relationship, we concluded that productive partnerships tend to come from personal relationships and individuals ‘with a foot in both camps’ rather than from any structural convergence, which makes sustainability a challenge. Still, this relationship is obviously an issue for ongoing discussion and development, and Mel and I have written up the discussion from the meeting (together along with an executive summary for busy managers!) ([Rampton & Cooke 2021](#)).

Second, how do activities like conversation clubs *fit into national language education policy*? Are they part of the de-funding and de-professionalisation of ESOL, a really cheap, haphazard, do-it-yourself alternative, promoted by a neoliberal government uninterested in demand and unwilling to spend on provision? Or are they a manifestation of the low-key urban conviviality that Paul Gilroy sees as making an important but largely undetected contribution to British civic life, not signifying the absence of racism but making difference ordinary and liveable (Gilroy 2006:39-40). Crucially, what needs to be done to avoid the former and enhance the latter?

Third, where do conversation clubs feature in the discussions about ESOL and *participatory pedagogy*? In a lot of what I’ve seen, the discussion takes a teaching situation and tries to de-centre and spread the responsibility for what happens in class – it’s the word ‘participatory’ that really matters in this discussion. But in conversation clubs, participation is much more taken for granted, and it’s the word ‘pedagogy’ that looks strange and novel. So really, are conversation clubs beyond the remit of participatory pedagogy? Alternatively, is it towards ‘the condition of the conversation club’ that participatory pedagogy ultimately aspires? Or what?

1.4 *The discussions coming up*

“This workshop obviously isn’t just about conversation clubs, and maybe they are the humblest form of ESOL provision. But even so, they’re still significant in the economy of language education, and they need to feature in our maps of it.⁹ What, though, are the other locations that we need to map,

⁹ Ben went to a meeting recently run by university students who wanted closer links with domestic, non-academic staff, who wanted support with English. So they went off to look for textbooks and teaching materials, but discovered pretty soon that everyone lost interest when they tried to use them. There was obviously a big hole in their knowledge of possibilities, so he recommended to them the LU/L&WI conversation club materials. Whether they followed up on this, he

how are they connected, who travels where, and how does all this influence particular language teaching environments, limiting what we do or creating new possibilities? Of course, there are lots of idiosyncrasies in each of our workplaces, and lots of our time is taken up with very particular problems and personalities, but that doesn't mean that we're not part of bigger systems. Yes, okay, it may be very hard to find a decent official map of how practices and processes in language education hang together, but that doesn't mean that we're all working in chaotic isolation.¹⁰ And after all, a map is just an abstract representation of something much more complicated. In fact, it's practical knowledge of paths and places on the ground that really helps us get from A to B to C to D. There's a large stock of that local understanding assembled here today, so I think that questions like the ones at the start could be really productive. Our answers may not be terribly elegant, clear or complete, but even if it's only the questions that we refine, the hope – the expectation – is that we'll still end up orienting ourselves more effectively in the multilingual environments we inhabit.”

So how were these workshop discussions organised?

2. The workshop as a cumulative collaborative enquiry

The workshop was conceptualised as a process of cumulative and collaborative enquiry, and it was structured as follows.

2.1 *The workshop plan*

Starting at 10.00 and ending at 13.00, this was the plan for the workshop:

10.10-10.45 *Stage 1: Defining the issue*

An abbreviated version of Ben's text above.

10.45-11.10 *Stage 2: Personal groundings*

Discuss in mixed groups of 3 or 4: Where are you working now and how did you get there? Reflect on 3-4 key moments or turning points in your journey and discuss them (e.g. moves, job/role changes and reasons; pressures, barriers, openings, decisions; policy/sector/institutional/personal changes; have you changed or has your job changed around you?)

11.25-12.15 *Stage 3: Connecting, from the personal to the sectoral*

Does it make sense to think about the sector as being particularly significant to the experiences you've discussed in Stage 2? How far and in what ways? Maybe other things influence your experience of openings, barriers and pressures, but how far and in what ways does your sector give them a particular flavour? Or is there actually more in common between sectors than within them?

Make a group with people from your sector: FE, HE (EAP, MFL, teacher training), School, Private, ACL, 3rd Sector, and then take five minutes to reflect by yourself. Write down two or three issues that emerged from your discussions of personal trajectories. Start talking together after that. You have three pieces of flipchart paper. On the first write 'issues for us as language educators' and jot down the issues. Choose two/three to delve more deeply into (on separate sheets).

12.15-13.00 *Stage 4: Findings?*

Each group reports back on their Stage 3 findings, and there is a whole-group discussion.

doesn't know.

¹⁰ For an attempt at an overview of the situation in England, see Rampton, Leung & Cooke 2020.

It didn't all go entirely according to plan: the group conversations sometimes took different paths, Stage 3 took longer, and Stage 4 needed (but didn't get) at least another 30 minutes. But we took photos of what people had written on the flipcharts, and one person from (almost) every group sent us a short report on their discussions. Together, these materials provide data for some initial answers to the questions that motivated the workshop. But how should we read these answers – how trustworthy are they and what's their potential significance?

2.2 The status and significance of our findings

The findings in Section 3 obviously don't derive from a large representative sample of language teachers from different sectors: with just over 40 people attending, the discussion groups at Stage 3 were small and sometimes varied in composition,¹¹ and they lacked representation from at least two very important constituencies, private and supplementary language schools. Nor were the participants' attitudes elicited in as neutral/objective an environment as possible: both the workshop and the seminar series that it is part of have themselves been shaped within an explicit set of commitments to multilingualism, inclusive citizenship and teacher agency. In fact, rather than trying to move swiftly to generalities, Stage 2 of the workshop, 'Personal groundings', was designed to bring distinctive individual biographies to the fore, making lived experience as ready a reference point in subsequent discussion as, for example, policy mandates or the truths of learning theory, potentially also inhibiting premature consensus. So when shared views did emerge from the workshop, they weren't just tested against differences in professional vantage point – they were also often authenticated in the strongly felt particularities of personal experience. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence elsewhere that the perspectives emerging were far from unique – Rampton et al 2020 is cross-sectoral review that draws on official and academic texts, and Lytra et al (eds) 2022 provides a complementary perspective from community language teaching. So rather than being a comprehensive survey, the account that follows should be read instead as a contribution to the potential consolidation of an engaged language teaching discourse community, grounding vigour and coherence in an explicit recognition of inter-sectoral differences.

3.0 Findings

3.1 Excessive top-down regulation

Most teaching takes place in some kind of structured environment. Even in the Conversation Club described in §1.3, there were different roles (coordinator, member), a regular time-slot and location, a 'parent' organisation (EfA) and systematic links to other bodies (LU/L&WI), and these were 'enabling' – the Club couldn't have functioned without them.

But in FE, in EAP and teacher education in higher education, and in modern languages at school, the structuring was often felt to be counterproductive, restricting the scope for teachers to respond to the needs and interests of their students. In HE, the "restrictive curriculum" in initial teacher training positioned you as an "administrator of policy/ideology rather than facilitator of knowledge". In EAP, teachers had to focus on an IELTS-style exam that "doesn't test EAP skills", and "I have never done so much admin! Feedback on written work, submission marking, resubmissions, grade entry...it goes on. Teachers may not have sufficient tech training in admin skills and these tasks can be very time consuming as a result". In further education, "there was too much focus on exam results" and "targets, rather than soft skills, confidence-building, empowering learners"; "not enough admin

¹¹ There were two groups for FE; one group for ACL/Adult & Community Learning (with just 3 people); one for third sector organisations; one for teacher educators in HE; another for people teaching English for Academic Purposes in HE; and one group combined people from EAL (English as an Additional Language) and MFL (Modern Foreign Languages), schools and universities.

staff” meant that for teachers, there was “too much admin – not enough time for planning/teaching”; and there was “not enough sharing of resources” and a “lack of quality CPD” [continuous professional development] – the CPD was “box ticking” and “very policy focused... e.g. safeguarding, MSTeams, targets”. This FE environment “contributes to lack of motivation/feeling valued for skills”, and feels “anti-educational”, an “infantilisation of staff and students”. “In ACL as well as in FE”,

“there [is] a lack of meaningful subject specific staff development opportunities,... with a top-down approach being prevalent in both sectors. The influence of policy imperatives interacting with the tick box culture in both ACL (Adult & Community Learning) and FE mean[s] that nationwide, certain generic compliance ‘staff development’, usually online multiple-choice question-based courses, is prioritised (such as health and safety, ‘British Values’, safeguarding, fraud awareness etc) at the expense of engaging dialogue-based pedagogically focussed teacher education with the potential to develop curriculum and incorporate tutor and student input. This [is] also the case for other key staff development areas such as equality and diversity training which tends also to be online packages bought in and easily quantifiable, rather than dialogue-based sessions with the potential to shift culture.” (ACL)

3.2 Limited funding and low visibility

Nationally, funding for the teaching of English to adult migrants has declined by approximately 60% since 2010 (Foster & Bolton 2018) and this “lack of funding” was mentioned by both FE and ACL teachers. Within councils, ACL generally had “relatively low priority compared to schools for example”, and this affects the “funding allocation which then impacts the courses on offer, the number of students that councils are able to provide learning opportunities for, and the ability to recruit sufficient and appropriately qualified tutors” (ACL). With competitive funding bids and allocations, there was concern about “‘grant grubbers’ - groups that benefit from grants for running substandard classes” – “funding grabs and short-term projects with no follow-on, even when successful,” affected the “courses offered, the ability to plan effectively based on students’ needs,... staffing and the opportunities for staff progression”. There was some uncertainty about how pay and job security compared across FE and ACL, but low pay was mentioned in both sectors, as well as the “over-use of agency staff”. In the provision for adults, ESOL generally had a lower profile in ACL than FE: “Sitting within local authorities, ACL is often overlooked... which can present barriers to developing provision, whereas FE colleges’ sole purpose of existence is education” (ACL). In schools, “one of the biggest issues was lack of visibility of EAL and awareness of the needs of EAL learners (lack of policy)”, along with the absence of “training routes for those working with EAL” (EAL/MFL).

3.3 Sites with greater freedom

Within adult ESOL, there was, though, a sense that less visibility could also mean *less* regulation and *more* scope for teachers and students to act on their own sense of what was needed:

“Whilst existing in ACL settings, the emphasis on attendance data and target achievements, is currently less pervasive than in the FE sector, resulting perhaps in less unrealistic pressure on students to achieve qualification. Students [do] not have to enter for exams if they [are] not ready, rather than have the pressure to achieve, fail and then re-sit and re-sit. Colleges seem to epitomise the idea of exam factories more than ACL provision.... At ESOL pre-entry for example when there is no qualification attached or for other ACL courses designed to attract new people to adult learning, this can present opportunities for pedagogical freedom” (ACL).

Within the not-for-profit third sector, there also seemed to be more “flexibility and autonomy... compared with other sectors such as FE”. Teachers could “be reactive and adaptive in the classroom according to the needs of the students and circumstances but also in tandem with the individual teachers' personal strengths, trajectories, preferences and so on” (TS). This relative autonomy covered “curriculum design, pedagogy and assessment (or lack thereof), as well as.. hiring decisions (we noted how many in the third sector haven't usually followed 'traditional' teacher training paths, and enter the sector with a wide range of life and work experience, which we see as a good thing)” (TS; see also the conversation club discussion in §1.3 above). In certain respects, “working out of a university” could also confer “opportunities (funding, awareness of research, support of a large institution etc)” that were hard to find elsewhere (HE TE group).

3.4 The risks of overgeneralisation

There seemed to be quite a lot of agreement about this broad characterisation of different sectors, but it was tempered by clear awareness of the risks of overgeneralising:

“Is community provision always more responsive, less constrained by funders, accreditation boards and inspection?” (FE group 1);

“ACL provision seems to be more rooted in the locality and therefore more variable. In ACL setting there appears to be more scope for learning for learning's sake / learning for pleasure than in FE. But we agreed that the offer of such courses for pleasure rather than for a qualification seems to be in gradual decline” (ACL group);

“we were keen to not overstate the autonomy of the 3rd sector and note the limits: these organisations still require funding and often have to 'mirror' mainstream educational approaches in order to appear 'legitimate' and secure grants. We also noted that students themselves often come into class with similar expectations (e.g. examinations, teacher-centred teaching)” (TS group).

The working environment could be affected by very local factors – “management stance and openness to trying out new approaches and working within the system for the benefit of students and teachers, [is] key in both FE and ACL” (ACL) – and with external funding, there was also sometimes a choice of “compliance vs strategic duplicity” (TS).

In fact, this recognition of institutional variation and unpredictable local contingencies provided vital underpinning for the quest for more autonomy and influence:

“How much space for manoeuvre is there – is it measurable in some way, what are the factors that enable or limit space? Are the constraints teachers say they work within particular to the setting or broadly sectoral? Are these constraints the result of the peculiarities and preferences of departmental managers, or the expectations of institutional managements, or the sectoral requirements of funding bodies, Ofsted, accreditation bodies, what have you?...Are the constraints teachers say they work within really constraints put on them as opposed to being a result of the teacher's own lack of pedagogic imagination? Are there colleges that 'do it differently' - where participatory pedagogies, say, aren't only informal or under the radar? How come, if there are?” (FE1)

4.0 Starting to answer the questions

So what responses emerged to the questions with which the seminar began?:

- 1) How much do language educators working in schools, FE, not-for-profit organisations and universities really have in common?
- 2) How far are language teachers and teaching shaped by the types of institution that they work in?
- 3) Can we really talk about the professional identity of teachers and their freedom for manoeuvre without addressing the kinds of organisation they work for?
- 4) Is it enough to talk of curriculum-pedagogy-&-assessment, or does this mask systematic institutional differences that have a more profound influence on learning and teaching?
- 5) How can we optimise mutual learning and support between teachers in different areas of language education?

The phrase ‘freedom for manoeuvre’ featured in the third question, and throughout our discussions, scope for the agency¹² of teachers – and students – recurred as a central consideration (see §3.1 & §3.3 above). That, indeed, is one answer to Question 1: wherever they’re working, teachers value thoughtful, responsive and effective practice, productively engaging their own judgement. But at the same time, the space to pursue this is affected by their places of work, so the answer to Question 3 is obviously ‘no’. Indeed, if ‘linguistic citizenship’ involves a commitment to democratic participation, to voice and to the value of sociolinguistic understanding (§1.2; Rampton et al 2021), then there is a case for saying that in the formal sectors of language education, teachers are themselves often threatened with ‘dis-citizenizing’, reducing their capacity for responsible, intelligent action (cf Ramanathan 2013).

Although careful to avoid over-generalising (§3.4), the process of comparing different sectors was itself highly productive, validating the posing of these questions in the first place. It was recognised that the differences between sectors could be complementary (even if this wasn’t always welcomed),¹³ and more generally, whether talking about similarities and differences between organisations in the same sector, or about workplaces in another sector, comparison raises the possibility of alternatives, some of them potentially attainable. In this respect, the comparison between sectors dealing with migrant adult learners of English – FE, ACL and TS – seemed especially fruitful. Overall, third sector and adult & community education sounded more receptive to the development of agentive and participatory pedagogy: “while ESOL provision is not meeting the real-life needs of many that are in the formal system, there is hope and there are alternatives to be promoted” (Mike Chick) (also §3.3, §3.4). But this also carries implications for professional development work that seeks to “to make learning part of the process of social change itself” (Williams 1983:257), developing “dialogue based sessions with the potential to shift culture” (§3.1): work promoting critical and participatory pedagogies needs to engage explicitly with the constraints of FE.

¹² Giddens defines this succinctly as the ability to “act otherwise” (1984:14).

¹³ “3rd sector teaching often ends up doing a lot of ‘gap-filling’, or offering support to those who have fallen off the radar of mainstream education or who are either ineligible or unable (for whatever reason) to commit to formalised, credit-bearing courses” (TS group); “[In ACL classes,] some students often see FE colleges as where they are aiming to study. Although it may be the case that teachers in FE colleges also work in ACL provision, sometimes simultaneously employed by both (implying that it is not the quality of teaching which is the issue), students see other advantages of studying at FE colleges e.g. buildings may be more modern, facilities (gym, library) and other financial advantages (e.g. bus pass, canteen vouchers, hardship bursary). However, some students definitely prefer to study in their immediate neighbourhood and that is their priority. Additionally, we felt that students in ACL provision had more direct access to other local authority resources, opportunities, events, initiatives and information due to being embedded within the local authority.” (ACL group)

Raising both hope and challenges like this, the practical question of how to optimise mutual learning becomes salient (Question 5), and Chick also points to one part of the answer in asking “how to foster more collaboration/partnerships between the sectors? What might a comprehensive ESOL-specific teacher education look like?” To develop this kind of comprehensive teacher education, potentially extending it beyond ESOL to other areas of language education, universities have a significant role: “HE lecturers are in a position of responsibility to take advantage of the opportunities (funding, awareness of research, support of a large institution) that working out of a university confers” (HE Teacher Education group; §3.3). There are also clear indications about the format: there needs to be “dialogue-based, pedagogically focussed teacher education with the potential to develop curriculum and incorporate tutor and student input” (ACL; §3.1 above), ideally supplemented by “learners from participatory and formal provision to attend to allow us to hear/discuss their experiences, needs, expectations etc” (Chick). And perhaps the cross-sectoral value and appeal of this teacher education could be grounded in the sociolinguistic rationale for this seminar (§1.2), in (i) a unifying vision of multilingual landscapes dotted with different language institutions, multiply frequented by heteroglot populations; (ii) in the overarching theoretical coherence provided by the Total Linguistic Fact; and (iii) in linguistic citizenship as a common cause. Plainly, there is much to discuss, but maybe the contours of a new/ strengthened/ enlarged arena for the dialogical development of language teacher education are now starting to emerge.

This is, though, only part of the answer to the question about optimising cross-sectoral collaboration. When the seminar participants were asked to consider their own position in terrain that stretched well beyond the horizons of any given classroom, they were also being invited to reflect on policy, and this is captured in another of Chick’s questions: “how might we best lobby or advocate for improvement to the current systems?” The event certainly wasn’t organised as a policy consultation, or indeed as a blues-skies re-envisioning of language education (valuable though both of these can be, especially in a receptive political environment). But it invited policy deliberation from the ground up, orienting to local landscapes, practical complications and personal investments, opening up to experience-based policy reflection that could – and did – range across “departmental managers,... institutional managements,... sectoral requirements,... funding bodies, Ofsted, accreditation bodies” (FE group 1; §3.4). A strong academic warrant for this practical perspective is provided by research that investigates policies getting enacted, contested and/or neglected across a plurality of institutional sites and ‘levels’ over time (Ball et al 2012), and that sets “official [language] policy declarations and texts” within “larger sociocultural systems inferred from people’s language practices, ideologies and beliefs” (McCarty 2011:2). More immediately, this kind of grounded policy engagement is broadly compatible with something like the [#LoveESOL](#) campaign, “a coalition of ESOL students, teachers and allies from diverse organisations in London” that is currently seeking better access to free ESOL classes and an ESOL for London website from the Greater London Authority. And more generally, there is a well-tested methodology for moving from locally-rooted reflection to social action in the ‘community organising’ side of non-profit [English for Action](#)’s work, which is closely linked to [Citizens UK](#) and “builds the skills, confidence and networks of ordinary people to effect change”. There are, of course, a number of different paths to policy improvement, but these are examples of how an active engagement with adverse institutional constraints can be integrated within language teaching and learning, and as Katy Highet suggested, an exploration of its relevance beyond the third sector could be a useful next step.

In addressing the questions that initiated this seminar, there is of course much more to consider, potentially leading to new and sharper questions. Even so, both in the facts of contemporary multilingualism and the contortions of contemporary education policy, there is actually rather a lot of connect the language teaching and learning in different sectors and types of workplace, and we need to pursue the collective articulation of these connections.

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