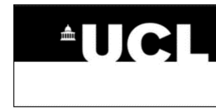

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Participatory ESOL: Taking Stock

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There is a series of podcasts that accompany this paper, and these can be found at: https://open.spotify.com/show/4W0GAhcmR54OjvFw17PKy2?si=33124ca68350462c

PARTICIPATORY ESOL: TAKING STOCK

PETS Project Team [1]

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1. The history of Participatory ESOL in the UK. (Release date: 2/10/23)
2. What happens in Participatory ESOL classrooms? (Release date: 9/10/23)
3. How do workplaces impact on Participatory ESOL? (Release date: 16/10/23)
4. Language Learning with Participatory ESOL. (Release date: 23/10/23)
5. Taking action with Participatory ESOL. (Release date: 30/10/23)

[1] The project team was: Adela Belecova, Kasia Blackman, Dermot Bryers, Melanie Cooke, Tina Griffiths, Fatime Jadallah, Amy Jowett, Sheeva Malakouti, Ben Rampton, Rae Whitehouse and Becky Winstanley. The final version of this report was drafted mainly by Ben and Mel, with Becky and Dermot providing crucial sections and very detailed input throughout, and other members of the team provided important feedback and commentary. We don't necessarily all agree on every point in the text, but it is still very much a collective product. Amy led on the production of the podcasts, which she devised collaboratively with Becky and Mel, and all of us contributed to the recordings.

Abstract

Building on sustained discussion among eleven people actively engaged in teaching English to adult speakers of other languages (ESOL), this paper asks what ‘participatory’ approaches to ESOL now look like in England. First it sketches a lineage – from Freire through Auerbach, Action Aid and Reflect ESOL to English for Action (EfA), the non-profit organisation that provides our main but not exclusive vantage point. Then it details four often interacting strands of activity in play in participatory ESOL (PE): language teaching, teacher training, community organising, and action research. PE emerges from these as an approach that listens to students and engages them in dialogue, that reaches beyond traditional student-teacher roles to include critique and action on social conditions, and that maintains an explicit focus on language throughout while also questioning the hegemony of English itself. But how does this work in practice? What about “difficulties, dilemmas, frustration, strangeness, disagreement and criticism” (Duboc & Ferraz 2018:243)? And what if participatory ESOL is harder to achieve in some places than others? Recognising variation in the manner and extent to which PE gets enacted, the paper isolates two fundamental features that can also be found in other sectors of language education – antipathy to the top-down, one-way teaching that Freire calls ‘banking education’, and an openness to cultural diversity and broader social change. It points to potential for cross-sectoral alliances, both to push for changes in national policy and to strengthen language teacher education more generally, and it also sketches a programme of Freirean ‘conscientization’ directed towards teachers in highly restrictive workplaces that could also be a worthwhile possibility for participatory ESOL. Rather like an end-of-project report, the paper is intended as a comprehensive account of key issues emerging in our collaboration, from which sharper arguments and ideas can be formulated later, and it is accompanied by a series of podcasts in which team members reflect on some of the issues emerging.

1. Introduction

‘Participatory ESOL’ (PE) has featured as a term in UK adult migrant language education for 15 years or more, and this paper offers some embedded reflections on its history, currency and prospects. Where does the term come from, what kinds of pedagogy is it associated with, and how is this connected to teacher training, research and community action? To what uncertainties does the practice of participatory ESOL give rise, and if there are ‘weaker’ versions of it, what do they look like? How does a participatory approach in adult ESOL compare with the thinking in other sectors of language education, and if there are compatibilities, where could this lead? And are there new areas for participatory ESOL to engage with?

Answers to these (and other) questions are explored in the text that follows, as well as in series of complementary podcasts. Our responses are ‘embedded’ in at least three ways:

a) all of us are actively involved in ‘chalk-face’/’front-line’ ESOL teaching.[2] We were all teaching ESOL over the period in which the discussions covered in this text developed (April 2022 to August 2023), and we are very interested in PE’s links to our own practice;

[2] Though this varies from full-time to one morning a week. ESOL teaching is the main employment for Adela, Amy Dermot, Fatime, Kasia, Rae and Sheeva. Becky and Tina are doing PhDs alongside ESOL teaching, and Mel and Ben are

b) our account centres on experiences of PE in and around one particular organisation – English for Action (www.efalondon.org). EfA has been very active promoting participatory ESOL over some time, but as one of us noted in a free-write,[3]

> "we don't often reflect collectively on what distinguishes our work from that of other ESOL providers – what actually makes our approach participatory. This is important because of the position of EFA within the ESOL sector as a leading proponent of participatory pedagogy. We run an annual conference, a monthly community of practice meet-up and training that brings together ESOL professionals to learn from each other and explore participatory teaching practices. If we are to credibly continue to advocate for a participatory approach to ESOL teaching, it seems necessary to develop a shared understanding of what we mean by this participatory approach, or alternatively acknowledge that participatory approaches are in fact plural" (Kasia)

Of course, there is a risk that on their own, these two kinds of embedding – first-hand experience and strategic value to a particular organisation – could limit this document's significance, but an ethnographic perspective [4] on embedding brings out the potential for wider relevance:

c) ethnography questions the value of abstract and decontextualised discussions of teaching methodology, and argues instead that accounts of pedagogy need to be embedded in a good understanding of the contexts in which it occurs. Seen like this, EfA provides a something of a 'case-study' base for considering pedagogy-in-context like this, while at the same time, the fact that several of us (four out of 11) [5] have no formal links with EfA and others have substantial experience elsewhere increases the scope for locating EfA itself in broader landscape, understanding something of its own particularity as a site for participatory ESOL.

Embedded reflections of the kind offered in this document are in fact probably the most practical way of taking stock of participatory ESOL – anything like a comprehensive state-of-the-art survey would be exceptionally difficult (and very costly) because adult migrant language provision in England and the UK is both very widespread *and* highly fragmented (Cooke et al 2023:§1; Gooch & Stevenson 2020). Nevertheless, given the kind of vantage point from which we are writing, there are substantial risks of both over-generalisation and omission, and we try to flag these up a different points in what follows.

With these important preliminaries in place, we can move to a sketch of the key influences on participatory ESOL's development.

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academics who volunteer in ESO with EfAL. For more details on the classes we were teaching during the project, see Appendix.

[3] For an explanation of 'free-writes', see §5 and footnote 15 below.

[4] See Green & Bloome 1997 and Rampton, Maybin & Roberts 2014.

[5] Dermot, Becky, Adela, Kasia, Fatima are employed by EfA, and Mel and Ben volunteer there. Amy, Rae, Sheeva and Tina work elsewhere (though Sheeva has worked for EfA).

2. Background influences

2.1 Freire

One of the foundational theoretical influences on participatory ESOL has been the work of the Brazilian Marxist literacy educator Paolo Freire, who was active from the 1950s onwards first in Brazil, then Chile and elsewhere (see e.g. Freire 1970, Freire 1992). Freire has been influential in adult literacy programmes and in popular, health, workplace and peace education throughout the world, and several of his ideas underpin the development of Participatory ESOL.

First, Freire challenged the notion that learning is a passive process, and that learners are empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge in classrooms which prepare students to uncritically accept the status quo. Instead, he proposed a model which would encourage learners to become active participants in understanding and resisting the forces which keep them marginalised. Second, there was a challenge to the traditional role of the teacher – in Freire's model, the teacher would be a problem-poser rather than a problem-solver or expert, and their role was to facilitate the students' discussions about the material realities of their lives. Third, classroom content should be based firmly on what emerges through dialogue within the group, and this dialogue is a driving force behind the curriculum as well as a catalyst for learning and, potentially, for social change. The direction of the instructional process would be "from the students to the curriculum rather than the curriculum to the students" (Auerbach 1992: 19).

Freire proposed a process by which these principles could be carried out, summarised by Elsa Auerbach (1992) as follows:

Overview of Freire's Curriculum Development Process (Auerbach 1992:17)

"**1. The listening phase**. During this time, the educator immerses him or herself in the community of the students, becoming intimately familiar with their daily reality. Through this investigation process, the educator identifies critical social issues from students' lives and selects a core group of shared issues that become the backbone of the literacy curriculum. Issues are selected on the basis of their evocative power – the extent to which they trigger strong emotional responses. The educator then distils these themes into codes or codifications – abstracted representations in graphic form of the issues, depicted so that they are depersonalized and objective but immediately recognizable. Problems are presented in a two-sided way so that no solution or predetermined interpretation is implied. For each theme, a generative (key) word is selected that both reflects the loaded issues and has a regular syllable structure.

2. The dialogue phase. Learners work together in dialogue circles, reflecting on the codes; the facilitator/teacher guides their dialogue through steps moving from literal interpretation of the code, to linking it to personal conditions and situations, to reflecting on its root causes and considering alternative ways of addressing the problem. Through this conscientization process, participants deepen their understanding of the conditions shaping their lives. The group nature of this process is critical: participants each contribute their interpretations and collectively arrive at an analysis of the situation; they share experiences and ideas in order to generate their own alternatives for action.

3. The decoding and recoding phase. Once students have "read the world" of a generative word, they move on to "reading the word" itself, grappling with syllable structure. The process moves from analysing the word in terms of its meaning in participants' lives, to analysing it linguistically, breaking it into syllables that are then recombined to make new words, and new meanings.

4. The action phase. The final phase entails doing something in the real world as a result of the reflection and dialogue. In Freire's case, the literacy campaign led peasants and slum-dwellers to become active participants in the political process. On a more limited scale, the point of the action phase is to return to the problem that inspired the literacy work and work to change the conditions that gave rise to it."

2.2 Auerbach

Since the 1980s, Auerbach and colleagues have played a major role developing Freirean ideas for adult ESOL in the USA (Auerbach & Wallerstein 1987/2005; see also Lopez 2005 for work in Canada and e.g. Kerfoot 1993 for work in South Africa, and indeed the practical ideas in publications such as *Making Meaning, Making Change* (Auerbach 1992) and *ESL for Action: Problem-Posing at Work* (Auerbach and Wallerstein 2005, 2nd ed) have arguably had more influence on the development of participatory ESOL in the UK than the reading and interpretation of Freire's work itself.

Auerbach (1992:14) pointed to three additional developments supporting the emergence of PE in the 1980s and 1990s: (a) adult learning theories which proposed that learning is more effective if content is relevant to learners' own needs and directed by learners themselves (e.g. Knowles 1975); (b) developments in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory and second language learning pedagogy which saw a move in the 1980s away from form-centred, grammar-based approaches towards more meaning-centred ones focusing on concepts such as communicative competence (e.g. Brumfit & Johnson 1979); and (c) theories of literacy which challenged the idea of literacy as the mastery of unitary and 'autonomous' cognitive skills unaffected by cultural differences. Instead, literacy was seen as a set of variable and context-dependent practices, which literacy learners could themselves investigate ethnographically in their own communities (e.g. Heath 1983; Street 1984, 1993). At the same time, Auerbach still regarded Freire as the most important influence on participatory English language teaching, and emphasised in particular his insistence on tying literacy to social change through '*conscientisation*', whereby participants in an educational or political process come to realise that they have power to understand, act and change their world.

The influence of figures like Freire and Auerbach connects participatory ESOL to a wide international network of adult educators, providing, among other things, the base for a number of cross-national projects that EfA has undertaken with partners in Europe.[6] But there are also local

[6] Volunteers in Language Learning (2017-2019) explored and improved methods for involving volunteers in adult migrant language education and brought together 3rd sector partners from the UK, Denmark, Germany, Austria and Belgium (https://volunteersinlanguagelearning.eu/). Migreat! (2019-2022) involved partners from the UK,

histories in which their ideas have been taken up and adapted, and in the UK, Action Aid and its Reflect programme have played an important developmental role.

2.3 Action Aid and its Reflect programme

Action Aid is an international development charity and in the early 1990s, it initiated 'Reflect', an approach to participatory decision-making and adult literacy learning that fused Freire's ideas with methodologies developed for Participatory Rural Appraisal or 'PRA' (see Archer and Cottingham 1996; Archer and Goreth 2004). According to the *Reflect Mother Manual* (Archer and Cottingham 1996), PRA emerged as a reaction against Western 'modernisation' approaches to development, which assumed that there is a 'one size fits all' solution for poverty and related problems and that this can be imposed on communities by external professionals. As the *Mother Manual* explained:

> PRA practitioners start from the recognition that poor communities have a wealth of local technical and social knowledge. They have survived often through centuries in difficult environments with limited resources. What is needed are techniques to enable non-literate people to articulate their knowledge – as building on this knowledge and the reality of the poor must be the starting point of any effective development programme… Underpinning the approach is a range of participatory tools and techniques. Prominent among these are visualisation tools (or graphics) such as calendars, maps, matrices, rivers, and trees which enable participants to communicate their knowledge, experience and feelings without being restricted by literacy and language barriers. (Archer and Cottingham 1996:12; see also e.g. https://engageplus.org/en/approche-reflect.asp) [7]

Both in PRA and the Reflect programme, these tools were intended for learning circles, enabling them to map various features in their local environment, village or neighbourhood at the start of sessions designed to identify current concerns and problems, as in Freire's listening phase (see above). At one point, this approach was being used by over 350 organisations in 60 different countries, mainly in the global south (Archer and Goreth 2004), leading to the claim that Reflect was "the most widely used participatory approach to adult learning in the world" (Archer 2005: 53).

2.4 Reflect ESOL

In the early 2000s, staff at Action Aid UK began to explore the potential for using Reflect approaches in the UK in fields like community work, urban regeneration, anti-racist education and ESOL. The Reflect ESOL project was faced with the task of drawing the most pertinent ideas together from Freire, PRA and Auerbach and colleagues and developing an identifiable approach

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France, Italy and Hungary and developed participatory methods for creating and sharing counter-narratives on migration (https://migreateducation.wordpress.com/). COFA started in 2022 and brings together organisations from the UK, Italy, Slovenia and Croatia to learn about community organising with migrant communities (https://www.facebook.com/people/Community-organising-for-all/100087402733287/).

[7] PRA emerged through grassroots development work and community activism in the global south but had become so mainstream by the early 1990s that the World Bank set up a 'participatory development learning group' (December 1990), and PRAs became the subject of several Bank reports. Many critics questioned whether the commitment of International Development institutions and NGOs to participatory development stretched beyond the rhetoric or at best (perhaps worse!), using participatory methods to engage local people in legitimising decisions taken in conference rooms and offices thousands of miles away.

which could be disseminated to ESOL teachers in London and further afield. In 2007 a Reflect ESOL resource pack was developed (Cardiff, Newman & Pearce, 2007), and there was funding to run a pilot project in three Further Education colleges in London and Bristol (see Moon & Sunderland 2008 for an evaluation). The project, managed by Tish Taylor with the collaboration of Becky Winstanley, subsequently ran for another four years, and the approach was disseminated in a series of training programmes and small-scale research projects. A number of contemporary PE practitioners (including several contributing to this document) took part in this training, later becoming trainers themselves, and at a very rough estimate, 400+ teachers overall experienced some of the training/dissemination. Freire's four phases were promoted in Reflect ESOL's literature and training, and the use of PRA-style visualisation tools became one of its hallmarks – a collection was created and constantly updated, quickly becoming a central part in training after the initial pilot (e.g. Cardiff et al 2007). ESOL practitioners learning these tools and techniques felt that they were useful for learners with low literacy, that they were good for collective thinking and collaborative decision-making, that they helped students and teachers to focus and analyse in particular ways, and – importantly in language classes – that they fostered a high level of interaction amongst participants.

Reflect ESOL's small-scale practitioner-led research projects explored ways of implementing the approach in existing ESOL provision, particularly in colleges of Further Education and local authority funded adult education where teachers are normally expected to produce schemes of work before they meet their students, detailing in advance the topics, linguistic structures and skills that will be taught throughout the course. The new pedagogy looked as if it could turn this on its head, and one of Reflect ESOL's projects looked at how a participatory course could be planned. The findings were published online as *Emerging Worlds: The Participatory ESOL Planning Project*, which developed the notion of 'emergence', looking in particular at emerging topics, emerging language and literacy and emerging action (see Winstanley & Cooke 2016, and for the project's five pamphlets, https://efalondon.org/research/).

Projects like this are a good example of the kind of work that took place at the early stages of PE's development and dissemination: teachers grappled with the basic practicalities of its implementation and trainers sought ways to open practitioners to its benefits and potential. One of a number of third sector organisations intersecting with Reflect ESOL was English for Action (EfA),[8] and when Reflect ESOL's funding ended in 2011, a significant role in the promotion of participatory ESOL fell to EfA, to which we now turn.

3. Participatory ESOL at English for Action (www.efalondon.org)

English for Action was set up in 2006 and its 2022 Impact Report describes its origins as follows:

> "EFA was first established in 2006 to support the Living Wage Campaign led by the grassroots organising group London Citizens. The campaign, which aimed to guarantee hourly pay rates for workers in London

[8] Others included x:talk, Learning Unlimited, Bristol Refugee Rights, The Voice of Domestic Workers.

that reflect the higher cost of living in the capital, led one of our teachers, Dermot Bryers, to meet and speak with a group of hotel workers from migrant backgrounds.

> In their conversations, the workers described how language barriers made it difficult for them to negotiate with their employers or to organise their colleagues to fight for fairer wages, leaving them at risk of exploitation and poor working conditions.
>
> Out of this experience, and in light of declining public funding for ESOL courses for migrants and refugees to the U.K., Dermot developed an ESOL course driven by the hotel workers' needs and designed to build the capacity of these workers to advocate for themselves and organise. Three years later, in 2009, EFA became a fully registered charity aimed at bringing this student-led, action-orientated model of ESOL provision to refugees and asylum seekers across London and the UK" (EfA 2022)

It was partly because of this organising experience that Dermot was brought into the Reflect ESOL team in 2010, and this has continued to be an important element in EfA's work, which, according to its current impact webpage, has now delivered 10,000+ ESOL classes to over 3,700 students since 2006, trained 1000+ people to teach ESOL in a "participatory and empowering way" (some of them based in community organisations, trades unions and migrant rights groups), participated in large-scale campaigns like the Living Wage Campaign, Patients not Passports, Promote the Migrant Vote, and #LifttheBan, and supported the organising work of ESOL students in campaigns on ESOL provision and funding (#LoveESOL), overcrowded housing, access to employment, better working conditions for cleaners and improving health outcomes.

English for Action, then, has developed as an enduring organisational base supporting the dynamic interaction of four strands of activity: language teaching, teacher training, 'community organising'[9]

[9] In community organising, there is an emphasis on developing the leadership skills of marginalised people to be able to connect with others in their communities, to develop a programme of change (what do we need to change and how are we going to do it?) and to take action on decision-makers in order to bring about tangible change on the issues that communities care about. There are many different models, from Black Panther-style social movement organising, to ACORN-style issues-based organising in a specific locality (in their case housing), to Citizens UK's broad-based community organising (institutional organising). Each aims to build power by bringing people together into groups outside of their workplaces, and each has their members' learning and development as absolutely central to their approaches. Campaigns come and go but community organising is permanent. In the figure below, the campaigns emerge in stage 3, and these depend on the listening phase (the stage 2), listening of course also being essential in Freire's work.

The Cycle of Organising ‘ 5 steps

and – as detailed below – practitioner-led research. All four of these elements are potentially connected in Freire's thought and EfA brings them together under 'participatory ESOL' as an umbrella term. But the character and strength of the links between these strands has inevitably varied across sites and over time, and this can be seen if we consider the relationship between, for example, ESOL pedagogy and community organising, itself a process of building groups or alliances with the power to effect sustainable change.

In EfA's early days, ESOL teaching and community organising were somewhat separate. Classes were run in a fairly traditional ESOL/ELT fashion, relying heavily on ELT textbooks and 'Skills for Life' materials, and people were drawn into organising through their participation in the classes and the relationships they built there. But the methods used in community organising – for example power analyses, problem-to-issue workshops, 1-1 relational meetings and action planning – didn't happen in the classroom, and they were't brought into class as a conscious part of the teaching and learning. Little by little, though, this changed, and they came closer together not only in EfA classes but also in some of the ESOL teaching provided by other non-profit organisations, such as Learning Unlimited, ELATT, CARAS and SAVTE. After all, in bringing people together for critical education and to build relationships and take action, community organising can be a way of realising Freire and Auerbach's stage 4 (action to change the world outside the classroom), and in both traditions, listening is crucial in the analysis of problems and the creation of programmes of learning (ESOL) and action (CO).

This kind of change over time in the relationship between different strands of activity in EfA's work could of course destabilise overarching conceptions of participatory ESOL, but a series of EfA practitioner-led research projects have sought to clarify and elaborate on it.

Two of the earliest of these projects were funded by the British Council's ESOL Nexus programme. The first, *Whose Integration?* (Cooke, Bryers and Winstanley 2013; 2014a; 2014b) took place over a series of five lessons in two classes and it explored migrant students' day-to-day experience and understanding of 'integration' in the UK, concluding with them that it is a complex and dynamic process ("a nonlinear process of fleeting interconnecting moments rather than a final goal" (Cooke et al 2013:26)). Given the word's overwhelmingly negative currency in widely circulating discourses about migration, this *critical thematic focus* itself realised Freire's commitment to supporting students' understanding and resistance to the forces which keep them marginalised, and there were also several features of classroom organisation that the project identified with participatory ESOL. *Curriculum flexibility* was one – in this case, five sessions on one topic, and elsewhere, either more or fewer, depending on students' interest. *Pedagogic tools* were another, elaborating and exploring the effectiveness of materials developed in Reflect ESOL and popular education more generally – picture packs, card clusters, problem-posing with a code, the 'iceberg' and the 'problem tree'. *Pedagogic procedures* were a third, with the project introducing three stages for the exploration of an issue. With some adaptation, these resemble Freire's curriculum development phases (2.1 above), and they were labelled (a) 'Making Meaning', an initial exploration of the topic during which themes emerged for consideration later; (b) 'Going Deeper', in which the emerging themes were looked at analytically, using techniques like codes and problem-posing; and (c) 'Broadening Out', in which – in this particular project – students were introduced to media and political texts with different discourses about integration, immigration, cohesion and so on. By the

end, the project had formulated a set of participatory ESOL procedures and 'toolboxes', and these have featured prominently in EfA's subsequent training.

The second of these projects – *The Power of Discussion* (Cooke, Bryers and Winstanley 2014c) – explored the logistics of dialogic learning, another crucial element in Freirean pedagogy. Among other things, it looked at how issues emerge in preliminary activities at the beginning of a topic cycle, at ways of ensuring equal participation, and at what linguistic forms students needed to learn to engage in successful discussion. The project couldn't provide systematic empirical answers to sceptical questions about PE's effectiveness for language learning because it didn't conduct formal input/output, before-&-after measurements. But both the students and researchers felt that discursive skills had substantially improved over the project's six week duration, and like other practitioner-led projects embedded in the nexus of teacher training and action-research that EfA took on from Reflect ESOL, it contributed to the development of a sense of active professional community around participatory ESOL, a sense of "professional community among language teachers [being] a pre-condition for [teacher] agency" (Duboc & Ferraz 2018:250).

A comprehensive account of the ways in which EfA's action research has (or hasn't) contributed to PE's definition and profile is difficult, because there have been quite a lot of them. They have been undertaken collaboratively with other organisations, and disseminated, adjusted and refined through EfA's annual conferences for practitionners and its regular online Community of Practice workshops. But at least two projects have sought to overcome the communicative restrictions that English imposes on students by partially de-centring it, temporarily taking the language out of the spotlight, inviting students to develop their experience and critical understanding of the relationship between English and other modes of expression.

The first was ACT ESOL, a collaboration between EfA and the Serpentine Galleries, Implicated Theatre and the Migrant Resource Centre.[10] This began with an eight week project with second language speakers that combined language development with theatre work inspired by Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal 1979), and it continued with three years of classroom research, bringing more ESOL teachers on board (Winstanley 2016; see ACT ESOL 2019 for the training and classroom material that this generated). Like Freire, Boal believed in exploratory dialogue as a means to understand, resist and overcome oppression, and he saw theatre and the role-shifting interaction between actors and audience (or 'Spect-actors') as a way of collectively developing political messages (rather than simply delivering them). In one element of this, 'Image Theatre', participants create scenes and images with their bodies without speech – as Jackson notes, "our over-reliance on words can confuse or obfuscate central issues, rather than clarifying them; [body] images can be closer to our true feelings, even our subconscious feelings, than words" (2002:xxii). In the 'Forum Theatre' component, students devise, rehearse and then perform a short play centring on an unresolved incident stemming from an oppressive power imbalance. The 'Protagonist's' initial reaction to the injustice is to be defeated, and this provokes the search for alternatives by the Spectactors, who can then step in and take the place of the Protagonist, changing the action each time in order to experiment with a range of different solutions, exploring

[10] Amy, Becky and Dermot were involved, and Kasia has been active taking it forward more recently.

how things could have been done differently, potentially changing oppressive realities. This activity is itself language rich, and the teacher-researchers created spaces to discuss and reflect on the language used in performance, alert to and building on the expressive power of the theatre process (indeed, these 'language breaks' (Bryers et al. 2014:47) often felt almost like light relief compared to the intensity of the theatre work (Winstanley 2016:18)).

In ACT ESOL, students were physically active, exploring the communicative potential of their bodies, but participants also often brought languages other than English into the workshops (Winstanley 2016:15). In the *Our Languages* project (Cooke, Bryers & Winstanley 2018, 2019), multilingualism itself became the central focus, this time drawing on the academic discipline of sociolinguistics, where there is also a longstanding (analytic) concern with inequality as well as a strong tradition of practical engagement (e.g. Hymes 1980; Heath 1983). In globalised mobile environments, multilingualism is an important form of human capital, and it can be central to individuals' ability to negotiate, organise and take advantage of opportunities as they arise in their transnational lives and locations of settlement. But in national policy, "language education for migrants… rarely embraces bilingualism or multilingualism" (Simpson & Cooke 2018:258), ESOL practice is "typically oriented to a monolingual norm", and classrooms are not spaces where the full range of students' multilingual repertoires are valued (Cooke et al 2018). *Our Languages* set out to challenge this, working with about 40 students in two sites over eight weeks to develop critical sociolinguistic reflection and understanding of, among other things, linguistic repertoires, cross-generational language transmission, language discrimination, and monolingualism in the ESOL classroom. In keeping with previous work, the project experimented with different tools and activities, and wherever possible, it adopted a 'translanguaging stance',[11] encouraging students to use more of their linguistic repertoires in practices like translation and the multilingual planning and drafting of written texts, as well as in theatre work. As in ACT ESOL, the project generated a set of online teaching materials (www.ourlanguages.co.uk), and it has been followed up with a series of training workshops.

4. Summary and definition?

Looking back at the foundational texts of Freire and Auerbach, at the work of Action Aid, Reflect ESOL and the succession of teacher-led research projects that we have discussed, the basic contours of participatory ESOL take quite a determinate shape, even though there has also been cumulative development over time. Freire and Auerbach emphasise the importance of engaging students in critique and action on the conditions that marginalise them, listening to them and facilitating dialogue that downplays traditional teacher-student roles and leads into an explicit focus on language as well as feeding collective action (2.1). There are theories of literacy and second language development to resonate with this (2.2); and in the UK, ActionAid and Reflect developed complementary visualisation tools (2.3), subsequently extending this to ESOL, also starting to probe at its applicability in Further Education colleges with notions of 'emergence' (2.4).

[11] This involves "respecting and valuing diverse and dynamic linguistic practices as key resources in knowledge construction" (Li Wei 2022:9)

With EfA (2.5), participatory ESOL has benefited from the encounter with community organising, and it has been elaborated pedagogically with, for example, a three step ‘making meaning’=>‘going deeper’=>‘broadening out’ procedure and the identification of language to facilitate dialogue. Challenging its hegemony, English itself has also been repositioned as just one (albeit important) element in students’ communicative repertoires through projects focusing on theatre and on multilingualism, and these have also strengthened participatory ESOL’s theoretical grounding with the work of Boal (a follower of Freire) and academic sociolinguistics (which Freire would call a ‘hinged theme’[12]).

Against this background, it looks as though participatory ESOL has a clear national and international pedigree, a well-articulated perspective on language learning as critique and social change, a set of tools and procedures to advance this, and in EfA as well as in other organisations aligning with Freirean principles, an institutional base to promote it. There is in fact also a large literature on critical applied linguistics that offers additional theoretical support for work like this (e.g. Pennycook 2001; Canagarajah 2005; Kumaradivelu 2006), and given the dearth of preparation and training for teachers of adult ESOL in the UK, there may be a good case for taking the formalisation of participatory ESOL a step further with certificated training (see §8.2 below).

At the same time, however, even though practising teachers have played a substantial role in the written formulations of participatory ESOL reviewed in this section, and even though they have also addressed the practicalities of classroom life, textual descriptions *inevitably* still simplify the complexities of what actually happens in any class. This inescapable process of simplification often introduces an element of the ideal to portraits of pedagogy, and as other critical English language educators have noted, this “can leave teachers feeling frustrated or inadequate when they find that their own good will and commitments to a democratic vision through critical pedagogical practice is curtailed or made impossible” (Windle & Rosa 2023:8-9). Indeed as Duboc & Ferraz note of critical literacy teacher education in Brazil, “little attention has been paid to ‘what goes wrong’ in our practices” (2018:243):

> “Along with ‘what goes wrong’, difficulties, dilemmas, frustration, strangeness, disagreement, and criticism are [seen as] some of the feelings to be avoided, for they compromise ‘the quality of education.’ Moreover, they would reveal lacks, gaps, and flaws in the educator’s praxis, which is another reason why ‘what goes wrong’ is out of the educational agenda” (*ibid*).

From there, they recommend

> “[o]pening up to the very contradictions within the field of Critical Literacies by acknowledging, ‘from the inside out’, what has worked so far and what needs to be revised” (2018:247)

Indeed, as Dermot noted,

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[12] In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire draws anthropology into his programme, referring to it as a ‘hinged theme’, and it plays a broadly similar role to sociolinguistics in *Our Languages.* “If educational programming is dialogical,” he says, “the teacher-students also have the right to participate by including themes not previously suggested. I call the latter type of theme ‘hinged themes’" (Freire 1970:120)

"deep, critical learning thrives on complexity, ambiguity, doubt and reflection"

So in very much the same spirit, working 'from the inside out', our stock-taking now moves to the *problematisations* of participatory ESOL offered by the teacher-researchers in the current project. Before doing so, however, some notes on the methods of collaborative reflection underpinning this report are in order.

5. Our methodology

Our team consisted of 11 people: four project leads [13] from EfA and the Hub for Education and Language Diversity (HELD) at King's College London, and seven teacher-researchers based in London, Liverpool, Newcastle and Cheltenham. The team members varied both in terms of our teaching contexts and in our experience of ESOL, community organising, participatory methods and research – full details of the participants and our classes during the life of the project are available in the Appendix.

The project took a reflective, ethnographic approach employing a relatively small-scale, in-depth focus on our own everyday practices and contexts. Reflexivity, a key principle of ethnography (Rampton 2022), was built into all stages, allowing a methodological responsiveness as the project evolved (Giampapa and Lamoureuex 2011) and as the material we used for our reflections emerged.

The project began with an initial descriptive stage in which we looked closely at what was happening in our classes, followed by critical examination of what emerged. Reflection and discussion were essential components of the project design, facilitated through the sharing of our material on a digital platform, regular whole team meetings, teacher to teacher meetings after our self-observations, and regular meetings with project mentors. Our material was therefore generated from a variety of sources throughout the life of the project:

- reflective notes from teacher-researchers' observations;
- recordings and notes from paired teacher-researcher meetings in which we reflected on our lessons;
- micro-data analysis of excerpts of two recorded lessons;[14]
- recordings and notes from whole group meetings in which we discussed emerging themes.

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[13] Becky, Dermot, Mel and Ben

[14] The micro data analysis sessions were an opportunity to take time to scrutinise the interactions in our lessons. For these two sessions, we used short excerpts from recordings of two of our classes along with their transcripts. We listened and re-listened collectively, focusing on the insights afforded while being cautious of under- or over-interpretation and quick generalisation (Rampton 2022). This detailed analysis gave us an opportunity to go beyond a more reductive summary of what happens in a lesson, to drill down to the detail, helping us to understand and appreciate the complex interactions and meaning making endeavours taking place in our classrooms on a daily basis.

- reflective writing e.g. ‘free writes’[15].

The gradual shared accumulation of project material allowed us to reflect and revisit our own and others’ experiences and contributions as we went along. An important added benefit of this design was that it allowed us to manage our other work and non-work commitments during the lifetime of the project and this was aided considerably by having enough funds on the project to offer a stipend payment for the work of the teacher-researchers. In what follows we offer a flavour of the reflective critical discussion generated in our interaction, and an overview of the main themes which emerged.

6. Problematising participatory ESOL

Uncertainties, problems and failures emerge and recur of course as a very normal part of everyday classroom life:

> “The dialogic process ought to involve more than a single participant and teacher, although in practice it may result in only one member of a group taking action beyond the classroom. Beginner learners – inevitably less participatory or simply require more creative participatory approaches (e.g. multilingualism, non-verbal communication, theatre, photography)? Where do student leaders fit? Citizens organising model,[16] help or hindrance?” (Kasia [EfA])

> “A forum theatre performance [should] lead ESOL student-spect-actors on a journey of recognition, anger, desire for change and action… [but w]e don’t always get it right and sometimes despite our best intentions it doesn’t seem to go anywhere. Often the cycle is broken… we’re pulled in different directions juggling different priorities… The group doesn’t bond, learners don’t seem to make progress, no one wants to take action, we take action and we fail, nothing changes. Or everything changes because we’ve learned from each other, a new friendship in the class has formed, we’ve learned from our failure and we’ll do things differently next time” (Kasia)

> “‘Is what I am doing contributing to *conscientizacao* (in Freire’s terms)?’ ‘Is what I am doing building class community?’ ‘Is what I am doing conducive to taking action?’ (and I would argue that these would be asked about our practice in general rather than any one activity in isolation…) rather than ‘Is the tool I am using participatory?’ ‘Am I following the participatory process correctly?’” (Adela [EfA]).

For a range of reasons, EfA colleagues may also find that some of the tools and procedures in §2 aren’t particularly helpful in their own practice, giving rise indeed to questions about the definitions of ‘participatory’:

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[15] Free-writing is a technique often used by writers to unlock ideas and to tackle writer's block. It involves writing continuously for 20 minutes on a given topic, without thinking too much about the content. Aided by the physical act of writing, and freed from the need to consider structure or form, ideas can flow freely. After 20 minutes the author can re-read and tidy up the sentences and paragraphs but should not change the content. The resulting piece corresponds to the writer’s ‘raw thinking’ (see Elbow 1973).

[16] See §3 and footnote 9 for elaboration.

> "I haven't been using participatory tools very much, partly because they're harder to set up on-line, and I don't follow the sequence making-meaning => going-deeper => broadening-out" (Adela)

> "I'm not sure whether PE can be defined in stages: 'making meaning', 'going deeper' and 'broadening out'. My classes are rarely 'linear'… I use tools less and less... I don't necessarily think that we should start from completely blank e.g. card cluster or picture pack…. Does not using tools (or not consistently) make our practice less participatory?" (Fatime)

Indeed, as Dermot notes of another strand in EfA's work,

> "Not all [EfA teachers] would identify as community organisers,.. or [are] even committed to community organising as opposed to other approaches to social change. Even teachers at EfA, where teachers are 'teacher-organisers' and have some institutional support (paid time and training) to organise in and around their classes, have a range of confidence, time and competence… There is some anxiety among [EfA teachers] and the wider community of participatory ESOL teachers around 'action' or 'activism'. We are aware it's a constituent part of the approach, but are not sure we're consistently doing it or even whether we have a solid enough collective understanding of what 'it' is. Can it be supporting an individual to take action alone or does it need to be collective? Can it be inside the classroom, perhaps change within a student or among the group, or does it need to be outside?"

Beyond these uncertainties, contingencies and individual differences, there are major questions about the kinds of institutional environment in which participatory ESOL can be practiced. Working outside EfA, Amy asks:

> "Do certain environments make PE absolutely impossible, and others make it inescapable? Can certain institutional cultures incline classrooms to PE, creating PE expectations among students? (e.g. the Hackney Learning Trust?; Beyond the Page?)"

Picking up on the supportive-to-PE part of Amy's questioning, Ben admits that being part of EfA itself affects the political ethos in the EfA conversation club that he coordinates:

> "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… 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'" (Rampton et al 2022:§1.3))

And EfA colleagues themselves sense the *particularity* of their PE-supportive workplace, which is something that students can also pick up on:

> "The majority of ESOL instruction takes place within settings determined by FE colleges and local authorities. Pressures exist within those institutions that constrain the activities that can take place within classes and overwork and underfunding often preclude the time and resources needed to support action" (Kasia)

> "I think it's vital to consider conditions in which one is working, as these can have an impact on what approach to teaching can be used and what goals one can be working towards" (Adela)

> "[students] have very fixated ideas on what a class should look like and 'unlearning' isn't that straightforward. I think it also depends on the individuals themselves, age, education level, open-mindedness, and a good understanding of what we're doing (and it is my job to make them understand what EfA is about) but this is a slow process and not everyone has the determination, patience, time and capacity to wrap their heads around the things we're doing and hence drops out" (Fatime).

Following on from this, one of the project participants based in Further and Adult Education noted the substantial professional challenge that PE presented:

> "I do think I have some unlearning to do in developing as a participatory practitioner and there is certainly an element of institutionalisation which I am consciously trying to shed, while still being an effective professional within my organisation!...
>
> I'm also grappling with how professional boundaries are maintained and challenged (e.g. we ask students to share their experiences, certain personal information etc and in my mind I think I should reciprocate…but how does this sit within my organisation's rules?)…
>
> Learning about the community organising side of EfA's work made me question whether I am a participatory practitioner after all as I don't engage in this kind of sustained campaigning activity with or through my classes" (Tina [non-EfA])

As Amy notes elsewhere, this kind of hesitation often leads teachers attending training courses to say that participatory ESOL is something they are 'very interested in' rather than something that they do themselves, and turning this questioning from professional identity to the approach itself, she asks

> "Does PE carry connotations of de-schooling (derived from critical pedagogy) that need to be toned down, or can PE be switched on and off in class as it shifts from e.g. discussion to tests?"

According to Rae (also non-EfA)

> "it depends on the facilitation and when to choose a 'teachable moment' - to be in control or to go with the flow of the conversation".

For Dermot, who has worked a lot on the formulation of PE both within EfA and beyond,

> "active listening, emerging themes, community building through creating meaningful relationships, political education and critical thinking belong squarely in both [participatory ESOL and community organising]".

But reflecting on these discussions, he also notes/wonders:

> "participatory ESOL for me is a mesh of influences, methods, disciplines and perspectives,… possibly unified ideologically by the idea of 'getting more powerful' – in our case working-class migrants getting

more powerful. … [But] holding all this together… can feel uncomfortable. Perhaps we don't need to strive for a coherent, unified definition."

Opening up, then, to "'what goes wrong', difficulties, dilemmas, frustration, strangeness, disagreement, and criticism" (Duboc & Ferraz above), there is equivocation about the action side of participatory ESOL, about the balance between individual and group participation, and about the importance of particular pedagogic tools and procedures. We can't generalise across the whole of the ESOL sector, but there is a concern that it may be easier to do participatory ESOL in a third-sector organisation like EfA than in state-funded further and adult education colleges, where, for example, student-teacher relationships are often regimented by institutional codes. This then leads into the question: is PE an all-embracing approach, warranting the description of particular teachers as 'participatory ESOL practitioners', or is it a way of teaching that can be turned on-&-off/up-&-down, featuring as just one element in a teacher's mixed repertoire?

If participatory ESOL is not necessarily all-encompassing, allowing us to speak of 'partial', 'minimal' or 'weak' versions of it, what are its most basic characteristics, its indispensable features? It is to this question that we should now turn.

7. The baseline

It looks as though there are two dimensions to what could be called a basic 'leaning towards' participatory ESOL – a stance, orientation or 'attitude' (Akbari 2008) that might be hard to express in every classroom activity but can be materialised in specific practices as and when circumstances allow.

7.1 The first is negative. Finding a sharp consensual definition of participatory ESOL might be difficult, but there was a high level of agreement among us on **what PE definitely *isn't***: non-stop teacher talk, competitive differentiation and lack of interest in classroom community, students and the social issues that potentially affect them.

> "I don't want lessons to be about abstract, unrelatable or intangible people, places or events" (Tina)
>
> "some educational models… can be detrimental to students… ESOL's potential to silence students by rigid monitoring of language input and outputs in the classroom… [by] choos[ing] topics of interest maybe to the teacher only or choos[ing] topics that positioned students in certain ways" (Becky)
>
> "I never really liked conventional ESOL courses…. it felt artificial and boring and the lessons had to do very little with my own life….just painful and a must to be able to get into university…I enjoyed grammar [but]… it didn't help me to speak. In fact, it did the opposite… I didn't want to open my mouth until I was sure what I was going to say was grammatically correct and if I made a mistake I felt really bad about it" (Fatime reflecting on her own experience as an ESOL student)
>
> "Simply receiving ideas or information, however critical the contents may be, reproduces the relationship of a traditional 'banking' model of education" (Kasia).

The ‘banking model of education’ brings Freire back into the account, with his critical characterisation of it as follows:

> “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence” (Freire 1970:45/72).

In fact in the UK as in many other countries, this approach to classroom teaching is set within a much wider system of audit, targets and performance, and this seems to be powerful in a lot of state-funded language teaching. In the words of Tina, one of the teacher-researchers experienced in (state-funded) FE and adult education,

> “there [is] a lack of meaningful subject-specific staff development opportunities,… The influence of policy imperatives… mean[s] that nationwide in mainstream provision, 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” (Tina; also in Rampton et al 2022:§3.1).

7.2 In contrast, even though she’s not sure whether she can really call herself a participatory ESOL teacher, Tina is clear that

> “the learners, their experiences, life situations, ‘funds of knowledge’ and aspirations are central to everything we do in the classroom. I’m always learning alongside my students … That has always been my teaching approach and *seems just common sense to me*” (emphasis added)

Turning from the negative definition in 7.1, a ‘common sense’ of this kind – **an attitude that’s wider, more deeply rooted and enduring than any named pedagogic tradition** – constitutes the ‘positive’ side of the broad orientation underpinning participatory ESOL, and it also shows up in the accounts of people more explicitly aligned with PE:

> “I teach with questions because I’m interested in what students think, and I formulate the questions quite quickly, often on-the-spot because I’ve been asking questions like this *for most of my life*” (Adela; emphasis added)

Sensing this and acknowledging the variations in confidence about taking action outside class, Dermot summarised our shared disposition:

> “everyone on the project had a political stance best characterised by a commitment to equality that they showed to their students and at least an aspiration to seek opportunities to engage students in action for social change”

7.3 In fact a summary like this reaches beyond participatory ESOL to what Raymond Williams identified as the “deepest impulse” of adult education more generally, “the desire to make learning

part of the process of social change itself" (1983/1993:257).[17] Indeed Freire also provides scope for recognising a cultural orientation like this – what Williams would call a widespread 'structure of feeling' (1977) – when he positions classrooms and learning circles in the larger context of

> "[a]n epoch… characterized by a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites, striving towards plenitude. The concrete representation of many of these ideas, values, concepts, and hopes, as well as the obstacles which impede the people's full humanization, constitute the themes of that epoch. These themes imply others which are opposing or even antithetical; they also indicate tasks to be carried out and fulfilled. Thus, historical themes are never isolated, independent, disconnected, or static; they are always interacting dialectically with their opposites" (Freire 1970:74/101)

This is certainly true of UK ESOL classrooms, which exist in a climate where monolingualism, nationalism, neoliberalism and top-down managerialism circulate as dominant ideologies in acute tension with ideas of equality, cultural and linguistic pluralism, local agency and democratic participation. A huge number of people are caught up in this, and beyond adult ESOL itself, the signs of widespread discontent with the dominant ideology actually show up in range of ways in language education much more generally. This challenge to the dominant ideology can be seen in, for example:

- the topics covered in NALDIC conferences for teachers of English as an additional language in state schools (EAL) – decolonisation, translanguaging, raciolinguistics;
- work on dialogue in state primary schools, opposing pedagogies in which "the teacher speaks most of the time, controls the topic and allocation of the floor, mediates all student-student communication, and primarily recognises those student ideas that advance the teacher's agenda" (Lefstein & Snell 2014:14);
- the interest in 'emergent language', 'teacher activism' and textbook-free pedagogies (like Dogme) evident in the private language teaching sector (International House and IATEFL);
- Trinity College assessment board's training materials to counter native speaker bias and its acceptance of translanguaging and bilingual assessment options; and
- the British Council's invitations to radical poets like Benjamin Zephaniah and Michael Rosen to give keynote talks at its ELT award ceremonies.

Developments like these – and it wouldn't be hard to find others – all look broadly compatible with participatory ESOL.

This certainly doesn't negate the distinctive particularities of the tradition sketched in Section 2 – its grounding in Freire, Auerbach and ActionAid, its attention and interventions around language-citizenship-&-migrant rights, the strength of its base in not-for-profit organisations like EfA, and the substantial community of adult ESOL teachers actively interested in participatory ESOL. Indeed, it looks as though these may be the features that distinguish PE from other traditions of language education. Even so, PE isn't unique in commitments to authentic dialogue (rather than teacher-talk), to emergent language, translanguaging and multilingualism in class (and no doubt theatre and drama as well), and to anti-racism, decolonisation and greater equality. This then invites the

[17] 1983, cited in McIlroy & Westwood 1993:257

question: are there ways in which participatory ESOL could productively make common cause with other branches of language education?

8. Common cause with other areas of language education?

Reflecting on critical literacy, Duboc & Ferraz advocate "[i]nfiltrating key institutional agencies and spaces (educational planning and policy making, the textbook industry, and Teacher Education programs) towards a strategic systemic change" (2018:248), and there are at least two ways in which an alliance with other kinds of language education might take this forward.

8.1 Campaigning for an end to England's top-down, targets-driven language education policies is the first. With a UK general election scheduled for 2024 and a change of government in prospect, proponents of participatory ESOL are more likely to get a hearing in coalition with experts, organisations and associations representing different types of language teaching (e.g. English, EAL and Modern Foreign languages in schools; community languages in supplementary schools; private language schools; English for academic purposes in higher education etc). A first step would be to enunciate a unifying and coherent set of principles that (i) could steer language policy in a new direction, away from the status quo, and to which (ii) a substantial number of sectors could sign up. Candidates for inclusion in this set could be, for example: the linguistic repertoire and voice of students should be key developmental objectives; dialogue is essential to pedagogy; space for the agency of teachers and students should be built into the curriculum; teacher training and curriculum development should recognise that while shared language is vital to social life, linguistic diversity is also central. In fact we've started to explore the potential for building a cross-sectoral coalition like this,[18] and the manner and extent to which PE's own values resonate more widely should become clearer in due course.

8.2 The inclusion of participatory ESOL within **mainstream university-based teacher education** (§4 above) is the second way in which it could collaborate with other traditions in language education. Beyond the work described in §2, there are literatures around critical pedagogy that are large enough to fill a Masters programme or a year's initial teacher training, but students are likely to need more broadly-based reflection and preparation, making a module or set of units on participatory methodologies more fitting than a whole programme. In a context of this kind, understanding and interaction with a range of approaches would provide students with a richer grasp of, for example, dialogue and its educational potentialities, setting the Freirean perspective alongside others, as in Table 1 below from Lefstein & Snell 2014:

[18] Dermot and Amy suggest that it would be better to unite behind a set of demands rather than principles, and time will tell whether they're right or not.

Dialogue as…	*Key questions*	*Dialogic values*	*Educational goals*	*Indicative thinker*
Interactional form	Who speaks, how often, about what, to whom, and for how long? What discourse norms are established?	Interactivity Participation Reciprocity	Ensuring equitable opportunity to participate	–
Interplay of voices	Which voices are heard and allowed? How are they interacting?	Voice	Developing and realizing voice	Mikhail Bakhtin
Critique	What stances toward knowledge are being taken? Which ideas are and are not subjected to critical examination?	Questioning Doubt Humility	Questioning commonly accepted doctrines Getting closer to the truth	Socrates
Thinking together	What is the quality of the thinking being articu-lated?	Reason Inquiry	Development of higher mental functions	Lev Vygotsky
Relationship	How are participants relating to one another? What identities and concerns do they make relevant?	Care Respect Inclusion Community	Realizing humanity Fostering an inclusive, caring community	Martin Buber
Empowerment	How are power relations realized? Is everyone free to say what they please? Who benefits? How are differences managed?	Autonomy Freedom Equality Democracy	Empowerment Emancipation	Paulo Freire

Table 1: Six approaches to dialogue (from Lefstein & Snell 2014:15)

Equally, belonging to a broadly based language teacher training programme could facilitate discussion on issues where PE practitioners may feel more uncertain:

> "In emergent language teaching, it's really hard to systematise the relevant points of language in ways that might optimise grammar learning, L2 processing and acquisition" (Adela)

> "I would like to find a way to make emerging language more systematic" (Becky)

Emergent grammar teaching is something that generates widespread interest among language teachers, and it is addressed in e.g. Chinn & Norrington-Davies (2023) as well as Winstanley & Cooke (2016). There could also be potentially invigorating discussions of links, similarities and differences in the use of the word 'participatory' in other fields. As Rae notes, 'participatory'

> "[t]ies in with growing movement of peer support / peer learning… Huge overlap with community development work and participatory action research - even the World Bank uses participatory tools!"[19]

[19] See footnote 7.

Collaborations between universities and ESOL organisations are in fact quite common (see e.g. Rampton & Cooke 2021), and participatory ESOL training forms a significant strand in the EfA/King's partnership at the Hub for Education & Language Diversity (HELD – www.kcl.ac.uk/held). This partnership is the immediate source of the sociolinguistics that informed the *Our Languages* project discussed earlier (§3), and it has provided a number of other sociolinguistic concepts that have proved resonant in the inservice training that EfA & King's have organised through HELD (e.g. 'the Total Linguistic Fact' (Rampton 2020) and 'Linguistic Citizenship' (Rampton et al 2022)). So closer links between participatory ESOL and university-based teacher education certainly deserve consideration.

8.3 Nevertheless, the association of participatory ESOL with programmes of professional certification raises the spectre of 'banking education', potentially domesticating and neutralising PE's radical aspirations, and a **tension here between consolidation and commodification** was sharply noticed in our team:

> "How far and in what ways can PE be codified and standardised? If it can't be codified, can it only be passed on through first-hand immersion (or legitimate peripheral participation in a community of PE practice)? Can it be formulated in ways that are neither reductive (e.g. 'learning the tools'?) nor incomprehensible (e.g. 'the TLF'?) to busy teachers? Or does this risk commodifying PE, turning it into something that people get certificates in, when actually, it should be a more general stance that gets spread and expressed in different ways, adapted to the constraints in different situations?" (Amy)
>
> "Are we seeking STANDARDS in Participatory ESOL, maybe identifying it with particular organisations that work as academies in the formation of skilled PE practitioners?" (Ben)
>
> "Do we commodify our methods when we package up training for other ESOL teachers? How to convey the political nature of our work in the training we deliver and how to support other practitioners to implement a similar approach while recognising the organisational constraints in which they work?" (Kasia)

There are two immediate responses to this line of interrogation. First, though they certainly don't offer schemes of certification, Freire's own publications are themselves programmatic codifications of participatory pedagogy (1970, 1972). Second, though there are some university qualifications that are heavily regimented by government (PGCEs),[20] there are (and have been) others that retain quite a high degree of creative flexibility (e.g. the Multilingual Manchester programme (Matras 2023) and the MA module in 'Multilingualism, Migration & Diversity' at King's, where students take placements in EfA and other ESOL organisations).

But if this offers cautious encouragement to the idea of mainstream teacher training in participatory ESOL, there is also another way in which PE training could be developed, not only *avoiding* the risk of standardisation and the potential dilution of Freirean principles that mainstream certification might bring but also *extending* the arenas in which strong forms of PE are disseminated. This would be a programme of participatory ESOL teacher education that tackled head-on the 'organisational constraints in different situations' that Kasia and Amy refer to, and it

[20] Indeed, there can be space for creativity even here, as attested by, for example, UCL's PGCE Further Education (ESOL & Literacy) where participatory pedagogy, multilingualism and language diversity have all been explored (see also the PGCE in Post Compulsory Education & Training at the University of Sunderland).

would take the excessive restriction of the agency of teachers operating in many workplaces as forms of oppression calling for a Freirean intervention that focuses on *teachers* themselves rather than ESOL students (the benefits for students would follow). It is worth taking the elaboration of this idea in two stages, the first staying close to Freire and the second reflecting more on what this might actually mean in practice.

9. A Freirean programme for ESOL teachers working in very restrictive conditions

9.1 In Freire's classic formulations of critical pedagogy, the well-being of teachers is rather taken for granted and it is the identities and needs of students that are prioritised. That may make sense in the conditions of acute inequality where Freire worked, but ESOL classes in the UK aren't strictly comparable. There certainly is acute and intensifying inequality in the UK, but ESOL students in superdiverse cities are also very heterogeneous in terms of aspiration, political outlook, income, educational background, occupation, residential status, migration history, communicative repertoire, age etc etc (as well as in attitudes to 'banking education'). In addition, ESOL provision occurs in a range of different settings – FE colleges, adult education classes, private and third sector organisations, universities, with and without set syllabi, textbooks and examinations, paid and unpaid teachers. So in this context, if Freire's emancipatory student-focused pedagogy is going to be followed in a fairly literal way – developing an ethnographic understanding through an analysis of ESOL students' social conditions ('limit situations'), an identification of generative themes and codes capable of speaking to all/most of the students, leading to collective action – it may well be limited to quite specific, relatively homogenous groups of learners in third sector organisations with a strong Freirean teacher training tradition (i.e. some (though not all) of the classes in a charity like EfA).

There are no signs that the call for this kind of language pedagogy are diminishing. But the strong, unadulterated version of participatory ESOL that it illustrates could be taken further if ESOL teachers struggling against extreme conditions of 'banking education' are brought to the fore. For a lot of ESOL teachers, the schemes and systems in which they have to teach have become Freirean 'limit situations', "situations which limit them" (1970:72/99), restricting, among other things, how they and their students listen and talk to each other. In oppressive circumstances like these, teachers can themselves be seen as a priority for Freirean intervention.

Recognising this isn't enough on its own, though, if we really want to follow Freire:

> "[i]t would… be idealistic to affirm that, by merely reflecting on oppressive reality and discovering their status as objects, persons have thereby already become Subjects [= confident critical actors]. But while this perception in and of itself does not mean that thinkers have become Subjects, it *does* mean…that they are 'Subjects *in expectancy*'" (*ibid*; p.103/131; emphasis added).

'Subjects in expectancy' sounds like an apt description of the teachers who say that they are not sure whether or not they 'do participatory pedagogy' but that they are 'interested in it' – they come to training sessions that talk about participatory pedagogies developed for students in organisations like EfA, but leave thinking that although these methods are really good, there's very little scope for using them with their own classes. If this is the case, if ESOL-teaching colleagues are themselves 'Subjects in expectancy', then Freire's practical ideas should be more than just a

methodology handed over to ESOL teachers to use with ESOL learners. Instead, expert proponents of participatory ESOL and the inservice training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) that they offer could consider helping teachers with action-oriented critical reflection on their own working lives (*conscientização*), focusing on '*classrooms*-&-*teaching-institutions*-as-limit-situations' in "problem-posing education, [in which] people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves" (Freire 1970:57/83).

With ESOL students, it is often quite difficult to develop an ethnographic grasp of lives outside the classroom because of their superdiversity and a lack of investigation using languages that they are most fluent in. But ESOL classrooms and teaching institutions – the 'classroom as *workplace'* – are much easier to understand (even though they're obviously still complex), and there is a clear Freirean warrant for attending to them:

> "[c]ritical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever the stage of their struggle for liberation. The content of that dialogue can and *should vary in accordance with historical conditions* and the level at which the oppressed perceive reality" [21] (1970:39/65; emphasis added).

ESOL teaching sites are a crucial part of the historical conditions in which teachers experience reality, and in a Freirean programme for teachers struggling with banking education, these should be the source of the concrete prompts and initial focus for 'critical and liberating dialogue', the sources of the 'codes' "represent[ing] situations familiar to the individuals whose thematics are being examined" (p.87/114).[22] And when these locales (rather than students' working or residential lives) are taken as sites to be opened out into more humanised teacher-student interaction, perhaps the concepts that our PE training has been working with – like 'repertoire', the 'total linguistic fact' and 'linguistic citizenship' – might themselves function as 'generative themes' that "contain the possibility of unfolding into again as many themes, which in their turn call for new tasks to be fulfilled" (p.75/102).

And none of this, it's worth emphasising, means forgetting about ESOL students. The commitment to students and the desire to engage with them in serious dialogue is central to the pedagogic 'structure of feeling' that opposes banking education (§7.2 & §7.3), and Freire himself erases the traditional line between teacher and students:

> "[t]hrough dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (1970:53/80; see also §2.1)

Focusing on teachers to the benefit of students is also consistent with the sociolinguistic fact that, whether or not growth takes place, classrooms involve students *and* teachers in a relationship

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[21] The text continues: "to substitute monologue, slogans, and communiques for dialogue is to attempt to liberate the oppressed with the instruments of domestication. Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated" (1970:39/65)

[22] This already happens quite often in EfA training. Another resource for this could be recordings and transcripts like the ones we have worked on in this project – see Section 5 & footnote 7.

between people in different positions, with different concerns, *not* just student beneficiaries of the curricula and pedagogies relayed by technocratic officials acting as instruments of education policy. In contemporary educational discourse, 'learner-centred' pedagogy and 'students come first' are often ideological slogans that education managers use to try to browbeat their teaching staff, but in contrast, a programme of intervention thematising teachers and their working conditions counteracts the *invisibilisation* of teacher identities to the benefit of both "teacher-student and students-teachers".

But what of the practicalities?

9.2 One of the first tasks in this kind of teacher training programme would be to figure out where it was needed and where and how it was workable. In our own reflections, we have sometimes drawn quite a sharp line between third-sector charities and state-funded FE and adult education, suggesting that the latter are much more restrictive. But there is always **a risk of overgeneralised stereotyping, since in reality, teaching sites differ from one another within and across sectors on a range of dimensions**, and it would be a mistake to assume *a priori* that there is a high level of predictable patterning in the way the structural possibilities cluster together. These dimensions include**:**

- teachers (their qualifications, job descriptions, career stage; payment, volunteering etc);
- management and organisational structures (hierarchic, teams-based, etc);
- types of student (institutional entry criteria, different institutional expectations);
- pedagogies (activities, roles, goals, sequences, settings);
- curricula (type; degrees of openness or prespecification);
- modes of local training (CPD, inset, mentoring);
- assessment (types; amount etc);
- pastoral systems (formal/informal; tutoring/mentoring; case-work; safeguarding);
- timetabling (duration, regularity, frequency etc);
- location (off-line; on-line; college, workplace, community centre);
- resources (space; materials; digital; multilingual etc);
- extra-curricular activity (amount, type etc);
- connectedness with other institutions (colleges, professional associations etc);
- positioning within national policy;
- reputation and local profile;
- funding and funding conditions.

At first glance, a list like this might look excessive, mentioning dimensions that are irrelevant to the idea of the 'classroom-as-a-place-of-learning' traditionally prioritised in teacher education. In reality, though, these elements can all play a role in 'limit situations' and they're all potentially relevant to a Freirean problem-posing that expands to the 'classroom-as-workplace'.

For training interventions in contexts broadened in this way, it might take quite a lot of attentive 'phase 1' listening to figure out the most productive 'codes' to sustain a move to 'phase 2' dialogues that travelled beyond ordinary 'grumbles' to reflection on changes and rearrangements capable of increasing the agency of 'teacher-student' and 'students-teachers'. On the other hand, some features – employment status or pastoral systems or examinations – might already be salient as dimensions of workplace experience calling for reflective action, and this could offer scope for

the development of more ‘off-the-shelf’, pre-planned training materials. Indeed, there may be clear openings in aspects of the systems of regulation themselves. As Amy notes,

> “[i]n the Common Inspection Framework used by Ofsted in FE, there’s quite a lot about ‘critical thinking’ and ‘student participation’, and inspectors like to see lots of notes and scribbles over schemes of work, showing adaptation and emergence. Does this undercut PE, and if not, why not and what lessons can we learn?”

But is Freire’s radical framework tempting us here into flights of fancy far beyond the bounds of practicality? It’s worth remembering that Auerbach and colleagues have probably been a bigger influence on participatory ESOL than Freire himself (§2.2), no doubt in part because they are more soberly rooted in classroom practicalities. Furthermore, the precarities of ESOL teacher employment might themselves deter discussion of this kind. Alternatively (and more hopefully), could the difficult conditions in which many ESOL teachers work get transformed by a new government in 2024 (itself influenced, perhaps, by campaigns like #LoveESOL, the ESOL Manifesto[23] and/or the coalition imagined in §8.1), thereby weakening the call for this kind of intervention? The idea of large-scale changes to provision is certainly on the agenda in Wales, and participatory ESOL features prominently in the recommendations of the recent *Review of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) policy for Wales*. There are sure to be a lot of other sources of uncertainty as well.

Even so, behind the people at training events who sit on the sidelines, liking the participatory values and tools they’re hearing while wistfully wishing they were in a position to use them themselves (or worked somewhere else!), there’s a potentially important constituency for PE. They’re experiencing institutional constraints that cry out for sustained dialogic exploration of the kind, perhaps, achieved in Becky and Sheeva’s reciprocal classroom observations, where for example, space is made for MakingMeaning =>GoingDeeper=>BroadeningOut procedures in an exam-focused, Level 1 Functional Skills FE class. The gritty institutional details of this sort of accommodation or change deserve extended collective reflection.

10. Conclusions?

There is probably no need for a summary of key points at this stage of the discussion – they’re flagged up in our table of contents, covered in the initial abstract, and collected together at different points throughout the text (e.g. §4 and the penultimate para of §6). This text is itself designed much more as an inclusive record of project discussions than an action plan, and for the identification of ‘what next’ issues for action research or training courses, it is probably best to look closely at particular sections, paragraphs or even quotations – the comments on emergent grammar in 8.2 are an example. But in closing, some overall reflections may be in order.

As with any other concept, some shifts and adjustments in the definition and meaning of ‘participatory ESOL’ are inescapable. In theoretical debates about language teaching, PE will be

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[23] The Action for ESOL Manifesto (2011) states for example: “The language classroom should be built on a participatory ethos. Students and teachers should collaborate in developing appropriate curricula. They should be encouraged to question and speak meaningfully, and to understand the issues that affect their lives and society in order to shape or change them”.

defined in relation to e.g. critical pedagogy, communicative language teaching, task-based learning, grammar-translation, Dogme etc. In an application for funding, 'participatory ESOL' will be tuned to donor priorities and requirements. In discussions of policy, it will be set against performance targets, English-for-citizenship, the hostile environment and so forth. And in any given lesson, the participatory features of an activity will be experienced and understood in the context of what normally happens in class, the levels and interest of students at the time, the constraints on the teacher and so forth.

But across all this, a vigorous form of participatory ESOL has developed that has a clearly identifiable pedigree, perspective and pedagogy, along with effective organisations committed to supporting it, and there could be scope for going further in an innovative and distinctly Freirean programme that extends PE to language teachers who themselves feel trapped in 'banking' models of education. At the same time, however, PE is also practiced in more hybrid and partial forms, leaning into equality, diversity and dialogue as fundamental values and aspirations that are actually shared with a number of other branches of language education. Recognition of these wider commonalities could strengthen the role that participatory ESOL practitioners play in effecting the broader changes in policy, provision and practice that language education so badly needs, and PE's positioning within this broader field deserves further reflection as well.

Bringing these lines of development together, participatory ESOL emerges as an energised and effective tradition that accepts the hybridisation that comes with growth, offering up practical illustrations of the pedagogic enactment of values that many teachers share without being able to realise as fully they'd like. Perhaps there's a risk of splits developing along the lines of 'strong vs weak', 'pure vs adulterated', 'radical vs liberal', 'doctrinaire vs *vendu'.* But in spending time together taking stock, in understanding more of the different constraints and openings that we're variously faced with, and in opening our observations to the ESOL community of practice more widely, the hope – and perhaps indeed the likelihood – is that there's powerful reassurance in the knowledge that we're looking in the same direction, with some shared orientation points to guide us.

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APPENDIX
The teachers and their classes

This table shows details of the adult ESOL classes where the teacher-researchers were working for the duration of the project.

Teacher	Organisation/sector	Classes in focus for this project (level, type of class etc)	Notes
Adela Belecova	EFA	Online classes for people living in Southwark	
Amy Jowett	Morley College (adult education)	Weekly class in a children's centre, Brixton, south London, Level E1-E3	Cover class
Becky Winstanley	EFA	Weekly class situated in a primary school in East London. Entry level E1-E2, some new readers and writers. Mostly women from Bangladesh who are parents of children at the school or who live nearby. In UK 2-20+ years	The class is supported by Mel Cooke and two bilingual volunteers, Farhana Azad (who also organises a weekly ESOL walking group) and Farheen Khan.
Ben Rampton	EFA	Weekly online conversation club, 8-15 attending. Mixed level, various nationalities, some professional backgrounds, in UK 2-20 years.	Amelia Rampton and Sharon Bryers collaborate with Ben in this group
Dermot Bryers	EFA	Weekly online class, 15-20 attending. Mixed level, various nationalities, differing lengths of time resident in UK	The class is supported by volunteers Sharon Goulds and Ben Rampton
Kasia Blackman	EFA	1.Saturday morning class, south London, in person. Entry 1 level, mainly women from Latin America employed in sectors such as cleaning 2. Weekly class with creche, south London. Level Entry 2/3,	

		stronger speaking skills than literacy, mostly mothers from a range of countries.	
Rae Whitehouse	Refugee welcome charity	Refugee welcome charity. In person evening class, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Mixed level	
Sheeva Malakouti	Lewisham College (Further Education)	Level 1 exam class, south London	
Tina Griffiths	Liverpool City Council Adult Learning Service	RARPA beginner literacy and speaking class for adults.	
Fatime Jadallah	EFA	Online class for people living in Brent. Level entry 3	