

LANGUAGE ISSUES

VOLUME 34.2 | WINTER 2024



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Language Issues is published by NATECLA
National Association for Teaching English and other
Community Languages to Adults
www.natecla.org.uk
Fatima Bibi
NATECLA National Centre
South and City College Birmingham
Hall Green Campus
Cole Bank Road
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ISSN 0263-5833
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Design and production
Waysgoose, Southampton
waysgoose.com

Advertising
Full page £500
Half page £350
Contact Fatima Bibi at
info@natecla.org.uk

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Geoff Jordan and Mike Long, 2022

Reviewed by Linda Ulrich

Editorial

Dear Reader,

Let me commence by wishing you all a Happy New Year! This edition of *Language Issues* is divided into three sections: a peer-reviewed article, informative/reflective articles and NATECLA Conference 2023 showcase reports. These ten articles encapsulate the far-reaching impact of ESOL provision, and practitioners must recognise that their efforts extend far beyond the confines of the classroom. It is imperative for practitioners to share their experiences and insights beyond the traditional classroom setting, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of ESOL provision, and *Language Issues* provides a crucial platform for this to continue. Firstly, articles/reports by Mafalda Giudice/Viorica Lucuta, Carol Samlal, and Ann Cowie highlight that ESOL provision profoundly impacts the environment. Language learning is inherently linked to cultural awareness, and practitioners play a pivotal role in fostering cross-cultural understanding. ESOL education contributes to a more harmonious and interconnected global society by incorporating diverse perspectives and fostering an inclusive learning environment. Gender engagement is another area where the impact of ESOL provision is felt keenly. Language learning is often intertwined with societal norms and expectations. ESOL practitioners have the power to challenge stereotypes, empower learners, and promote gender equality through inclusive and diverse teaching practices, and this is made evident by four articles by Juana Simpson, Jenny Stacey, Amna Smith and Holly Dono.

Articles by Angela Palmer and Sam Shepherd examine how effective a relevant curriculum and transformative ESOL progression routes are in fostering a sense of purpose, enthusiasm, and learner autonomy. Furthermore, ESOL provision intersects with educational policy, as the effectiveness of language programmes influences broader educational strategies. Steve Brown and Mark Sheridan's article advocates that practitioners actively engage with policymakers, share insights and advocate for policies supporting inclusive, effective language education. Finally, Linda Ulrich, reviews *English Language Teaching: Now and how it could be* by Geoff Jordan and Mike Long.

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Declan Flanagan
Editor

‘It’s like we’ve gone backwards’: perceptions of Scottish ESOL policy

Steven Brown and Mark Sheridan

In 2007, Scotland was the first UK nation to launch its own national English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) strategy. While the vision and objectives of this widely praised strategy implied a transformative, emancipatory agenda, critical analysis of ESOL provision from 2007–2020 suggests that various factors undermined the potential for the ESOL Strategy’s objectives to be fully met. In 2021, the Scottish government announced plans to discontinue the ESOL Strategy and incorporate ESOL within a wider Adult Learning Strategy. In this article, we present an empirical study that canvassed the perceptions of ESOL professionals in Scotland, with the aim of building a practitioner-led view of Scottish ESOL policy at this critical juncture. Analysis of the data collected in the study reveals major concerns over the Scottish government’s decision not to renew a standalone ESOL strategy. These concerns relate to a perceived lack of commitment to ESOL from the Scottish Government, poor consultation processes, and a pessimistic outlook on the future of ESOL. The study’s findings imply a need for ESOL practitioners and learners to be more actively involved in ESOL policy decisions. The article recommends further, more critical review of the Scottish Government’s ESOL policymaking processes, with a view to re-introducing a bespoke ESOL strategy.

Key words

ESOL, language policy, ESOL Strategy, Scotland, adult learning, lifelong learning

Introduction

The launch of the Adult ESOL Strategy for Scotland (Scottish Executive 2007) set Scotland apart from the rest of the UK by laying out plans for a nationwide, coordinated approach to address the English learning needs of migrants who live in Scotland. This strategy was guided by a vision statement recognising that English is necessary:

to participate in Scottish life: in the workplace, through further study, within the family, the local community, Scottish society and the economy, and that ‘these language skills are central to giving people a democratic voice and supporting them to contribute to the society in which they live (Scottish Government 2015: 6).

The focus on democratic voice and active participation in society was enhanced further when the Strategy was revised in 2015 through the addition of objectives that included providing ESOL learners with opportunities to ‘co-design their learning experience...’, transform their lives and communities’, and ‘effectively influence strategy and policy at local

and national levels' (Scottish Government 2015: 21). The 2015 Strategy, therefore, implies an agenda that seeks to use ESOL as a means of lifting people out of disadvantaged or marginalised positions by giving them the capacities to be active participants in societal development (Brown 2021: 875–876).

However, the implementation of the ESOL Strategy and the achievement of its objectives has not been a straightforward process, with other educational priorities and funding issues undermining the more community-focused needs of adult ESOL learners. Most of the key initiatives implemented as a result of the 2007 Strategy – a national ESOL curriculum, a 'best practice' framework, a National ESOL Panel 'to monitor the quantity and quality of ESOL provision in Scotland' (Scottish Executive 2007: 9), and a website to facilitate strategic policy implementation and networking between practitioners – have fallen out of use as other, competing priorities have come to the fore. In 2021, the Scottish Government made the decision not to renew the ESOL Strategy but instead to incorporate it into a wider Adult Learning Strategy (ALS) (Scottish Government 2021, 2022).

The aim of this article is to offer a practitioner-led view of ESOL in Scotland as we enter what looks like a critical juncture for the profession. We start by providing some background and context to the ESOL Strategy and its implementation until it expired in 2020. We then present findings from a study that explored how ESOL professionals in Scotland regard the success of the Strategy and how they view the incorporation of ESOL into the ALS. The article then offers some further discussion, conclusions and recommendations.

Background and context

Scottish ESOL policy discourse ostensibly advocates what could be described as an emancipatory agenda. The application of Brown's (2021) analytical framework illustrates how the Strategy's vision and objectives not only aim for individual *empowerment* by developing skills to succeed within existing social structures but also seek to build capacities to 'engage in the ongoing project of social *emancipation*...by allowing social structures to be altered through the actions of ESOL learners' (Brown 2021: 876 – italics added). However, for all its emancipatory discourse, the ESOL Strategy's implementation has faced challenges, and the achievement of its objectives has been limited. Focusing on the further education (FE) sector, which has traditionally been a key provider of ESOL in Scotland, Brown (2017) criticised the industry-led nature of FE policy (see, for example, Scottish Government 2014) for fetishising employability and the development of the young workforce at the expense of other adult learning objectives. Brown (2017) identifies this shift in focus as having a detrimental impact on ESOL provision. It prioritises full-time accredited programmes that prepare learners to work in specific areas of industry and 'fails to acknowledge that many ESOL learners are already in employment, or have previous work experience, or, in some cases, wish to learn English for completely different but no less important reasons' (Brown 2017: 53).

The move to a more standardised curriculum in the college sector necessarily limited capacities to address the very diverse needs of ESOL learners and increased the challenge to meet the Strategy's objective of allowing learners to 'co-design their learning experience' (Scottish

Government 2015: 21). The prioritisation of full-time programmes disproportionately affected ESOL learners in colleges, 84% of whom had been studying part-time in 2012–13 (Education Scotland 2014: 6). Learners who were unable to commit to full-time study were pushed out of FE and into other forms of ESOL provision; by 2017, only 21% of ESOL learners were studying in colleges (Education Scotland, 2018a: 5), with 74% of ESOL being taught in community contexts (ibid). Community-based ESOL is primarily delivered by local authority-funded Community Learning and Development (CLD) providers and by the voluntary sector, which relies on funding from a range of sources. These sectors traditionally offer scope for ESOL to be more learner-centred, with the educational approach – particularly in CLD – primarily following the Social Practice Model (Community Learning and Development Managers Scotland 2014). This model allows learning to be more personalised and geared towards learners' individual goals by building on their existing knowledge and skills rather than requiring learners to work towards externally imposed outcomes.

The inevitable pressures caused by increased demand on the CLD and 3rd sectors have been compounded by funding issues. While £5m of ring-fenced funding was distributed to ESOL providers across Scotland in 2007–08, the annual ESOL allocation had dwindled to £1.5m by 2016–17 (Education Scotland 2018a: 4). From 2018 onwards, ESOL was funded through providers' baseline funding allocations, rather through than any bespoke ESOL funding (Scottish Funding Council 2017). The decision to allocate ESOL funding through core college budgets, with colleges disbursing funding via Community Planning Partnerships to other providers as deemed appropriate (ibid), requires all providers to comply with a model of delivery that meets Scottish Funding Council requirements.

The vision and objectives of the ESOL Strategy have been widely praised (see, for example, Mishan 2019, NATECLA 2016), and case studies in the 2015–2020 Strategy itself (Scottish Government 2015) illustrate a number of successful ESOL projects. However, the above analysis suggests that other factors have undermined the Strategy's effective implementation. As the 2015–20 Strategy expired, the Scottish Government announced its intention to incorporate ESOL into a new ALS (Scottish Government 2021). This decision placed ESOL in Scotland in a rather uncertain position, with no clear future direction.

The study

The recency of the 2015–20 Strategy's lapse and the subsequent change of policy direction means that little research has been done to explore the implications of the decision. This article contributes to the literature in this area, specifically the processes undertaken in adopting a new policy approach. The study presented below evaluates how practitioners viewed the aims, objectives and implementation of the 2015–20 Strategy, offering new insight in this area. The aim of the study was to conduct an analysis of the effectiveness of the Scottish Government's ESOL Strategy (2015–2020) and to explore possible learnings and challenges for the future of ESOL provision in Scotland. Additionally, the study sought to identify future challenges in ESOL policy by exploring practitioners' perceptions of the consultation process prior to the policy change, the implementation of the new policy, and the future of Scottish ESOL provision.

A mixed methods research approach was adopted, with a bias towards qualitative research. A questionnaire with Likert-scale responses and free text boxes was distributed to collate practitioner opinions. Twenty-five responses were received, which, although a small percentage of ESOL practitioners in Scotland, generated sufficient data to perform an informed, qualitative analysis. Follow-up, semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine salient issues. For these interviews, four questionnaire participants were selected to incorporate viewpoints from differing sectors and job functions – often described as ‘purposive sampling’ (Leedy and Ormrod 2015: 206). Responses were analysed using Yin’s (2016) process of disassembling, interpreting and re-assembling data. This process allowed themes to emerge from the data.

Findings

Participant responses from both the interviews and questionnaires were collated, analysed and colour-coded to identify eight significant themes in the data corpus. Responses to the Likert scale questions in the questionnaire were quantified and included within the thematic analysis, adding a quantitative element to the research. For this article, the eight original themes have been re-categorised into four broader themes, summarised briefly below.

ESOL ‘voice’ and successes of the strategy

When asked about their knowledge of the 2015–20 ESOL strategy, 68% of respondents said they were either very aware or somewhat aware of the strategy impacting their job role, with only 24% responding negatively, a nominally positive reflection of the strategy’s value and impact in ESOL provision. Additional comments from respondents show that ESOL programme administrators seemed particularly engaged, with one manager commenting:

‘The ESOL strategy is referred to in our year-end portfolio reviews. While we have college targets to meet, we should also make sure that our courses are addressing the ESOL strategy’.

The questionnaire asked about satisfaction levels regarding the strategy supporting working practices. The data again reflects well on the strategy’s success, with 46% either very or somewhat satisfied and only 21% somewhat or very dissatisfied (33% responded neutrally). Most negative comments related to the upcoming change in policy rather than the strategy itself, reflecting positively on the 2015–20 Strategy. One practitioner summed up the situation thus:

‘I think the ESOL Strategy was an excellent piece of work and led to really good practice with clear guidelines, theory and reasons for how and why to teach ESOL in Scotland’.

The questionnaire asked participants to consider the success of the 2015–20 Strategy in achieving its own objectives. The strategy’s vision stated that ‘all Scottish residents for whom English is not a first language have the opportunity to access high-quality English language provision’ (Scottish Government 2015: 6). 76% of questionnaire respondents answered positively that learners were able to find a place on an ESOL course, while 24% replied negatively. Based on these responses, it seems the strategy

has broadly met its objective of having a place for every learner. However, interview respondents contradicted this viewpoint, with one participant stating, *'well, we know that didn't happen'*, and another commenting, *'the waiting list in Glasgow blows my mind'*.

One objective of the Strategy is the building of local partnerships between institutions. Overall responses on partnerships were generally positive, with 57% saying their organisation cooperated effectively in ESOL delivery. However, 20% reported no real partnerships at all – a cause for concern given the strategy's dependence on inter-agency working. Flexibility of ESOL provision was also set as a strategic objective, guiding providers to offer 'more flexible approaches to provision' (Scottish Government 2015: 20). When asked if they would describe their ESOL program as *'flexible to your learners' needs'*, 52% of questionnaire respondents said yes, 36% said it could be better, and 12% reported no flexibility. When asked about the strategic objective that mandated ESOL practitioners to 'engage in career-long professional learning' (ibid: 22), 64% of questionnaire participants said they were able to access ongoing continuing professional development.

The 2015–20 Strategy then received mostly positive feedback from participants, with most respondents (64%) agreeing that the strategy supported learners. Notable exceptions exist, however, particularly with regard to accessibility and flexibility of provision. It should also be noted that positive responses were far from overwhelming, with 57% of respondents indicating that effective partnership working, for example, is by no means a ringing endorsement. The Strategy's overall success is qualified in the fact that only 16% of respondents agreed that it met its objectives, with 40% partially agreeing and 12% stating that it did not. Most positive comments about the Strategy related less to the achievement of its objectives and more to the role it played in giving ESOL a voice in wider contexts.

The Scottish government's role in ESOL provision

Given the mostly positive response regarding the achievement of individual objectives, it is perhaps surprising that when asked if the Scottish Government had done a good job holistically in managing ESOL since 2015, a large proportion of respondents answered negatively: 40% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that a 'good job' had been done, with only 24% agreeing or strongly agreeing. The comments further reveal a dissatisfaction with overall strategy management and a sense that the strategy had lost overall focus. There was also a sense that it was practitioners who were leading and enacting the strategy without much in the way of government coordination or direction. This is reflected in the comments below:

'No resourcing was put directly into overseeing the strategy, and its implementation group relied on practitioners and managers finding time within their busy roles to come together'.

'People who work in the sector have done this. SG [Scottish Government] has not really done much'.

Concerns about funding were a recurring issue throughout the data corpus. In response to the question, 'have you had the necessary funding, tools and support to work effectively?', only 36% agreed that they had, while 52% disagreed. In comments, this lack of funding was highlighted as having

various impacts, for example, a lack of classes, materials and training opportunities for volunteers and staff. There was a sense that the strategy would have been more effective if better funded.

An interview participant, whose job involves managing ESOL funding as part of an overall FE budget, was also critical of the way in which ESOL is funded, saying *'unless the funding sector model changes, I can't do what I want to do, because it's not a flexible funding model'*. The same participant noted that changes to the funding mechanism had led to a drop in provision, saying, *'We stopped delivering as much ESOL when ESOL funding became part of our core funding – we then didn't do it [ESOL]'*. Thus, a move away from bespoke ESOL funding had an immediate and detrimental impact on learner provision in this institution. While many comments related to a wider funding crisis across adult education, concerns over ESOL funding were apparent throughout the data and reflect negatively on the government's financial commitment to the success of the ESOL Strategy.

Policy 'drift', lack of consultation and policy loss

A strong perception came through from interviews and questionnaires of a gradual shift – or drift – of the SNP government's focus away from ESOL. This drift traces back to 2007 and the initial strategy, considered by some respondents to be the high point of ESOL policy, with later iterations viewed less positively. Another participant highlights this policy drift, saying: *'Was the 2015 strategy less effective than 2007? Yes. There were some good aims in there [2015–20 strategy], but there was no funding to back it up.'*

One interviewee summed up the general concern about policy drift and the move away from a bespoke ESOL strategy:

'I actually feel that we've gone back to the time before 2007 [with the new ALS] ... I have colleagues who ... worked and campaigned and lobbied for the 2007 strategy, and they echo my fears, saying it's like we've gone backwards. We're not recognised individually. We're just part of something else'.

The lack of policy direction and management is highlighted by the consultation process on this policy, an area which brought strong reactions. When asked if they felt *'the views of the ESOL community were fully considered before this change was made'*, 0 (zero) participants answered *'yes'* – the only unanimous response in the survey. 72% responded *'no'*, and 28% were unsure. Additional comments evidenced respondents' views that the consultation process itself was wholly inadequate:

'There seemed to be very little consultation with ESOL practitioners. It seemed to be presented as a good idea rather than an idea ... for discussion. Most discussions, therefore, seemed to involve policymakers presenting the case for the new approach rather than using practitioners' concerns to actually inform their decision'.

'Nobody was asked'.

'I work in a large LA [local authority] and was not consulted'.

Responses from interview candidates express even more negative views. One described the management of the consultation process as *'abhorrent'* and *'highly unprofessional'*. They go on to say, *'the pandemic was a gift to the Scottish Government to push the policy through'*, citing a mainly online

consultation process. Another participant describes the consultation as ‘*appalling*’. They had submitted a detailed written response to the draft document on behalf of a significant ESOL organisation but said no response was ever given to the points raised. Another interview participant makes the point that:

previously...learners were consulted, volunteers were consulted... [but this time]...these genuine and viable concerns that we had about our learners’ futures...were not taken into consideration.

Although the government embarked upon a consultation process, the clear view of respondents in this survey is that it was either badly managed or a cynical performative exercise with no real intention of acting on practitioners’ views. This has caused significant ill feeling. 70% of questionnaire respondents considered it a bad or very bad idea to move away from a stand-alone ESOL policy, and 68% judged it either a bad or very bad idea to subsume ESOL into the ALS. Comments further illustrate the strong negative reaction to the policy change, with the majority expressing concerns that the new ALS will implicitly or explicitly treat the needs of ESOL learners as synonymous with the needs of other adult learners. This view was expressed across FE, CLD and third-sector respondents. One comment sums up much of the narrative, saying

‘Fundamentally, Adult Learners and ESOL Learners are NOT the same thing – so subsume [sic] them into one policy undermines the needs of each set of learners and does them a disservice.’

Another response read, ‘*it seems like ESOL is going on the back burner. It will be lost in an adult strategy*’. One interview participant described the decision as ‘*catastrophic*’, saying ‘*just because our learners are adults, it doesn’t mean that they are adult learners under the definition that the Scottish Government like to put out*’.

There was a clear view, then, that the absence of a standalone strategy diminishes the status of ESOL in adult education. This was also raised in interviews, with three participants all noting a significant reduction in the presence and influence of ESOL in policy formation. All participants referenced the part played by a key person being removed from the strategic role of ESOL Development Officer within Education Scotland. This led to ESOL losing its ‘voice’ – its influence and presence in policy circles. One participant described the person’s role as ‘*like the liaison between practice managers and practitioners and the policymakers*’. The role has since been filled by a non-ESOL specialist.

Concerns over the future of ESOL

Only one questionnaire respondent (4%) felt positive about the incorporation of ESOL into the ALS. Eight (32%) were negative, and 64% said they needed more time to make a judgement. In text responses, the dominant themes were concern and pessimism for the future, with very little positivity. This pessimism derives from the notion of ESOL’s status diminishing after subsummation.

However, some very cautious optimism was also expressed by one interviewee, who identified possible scope for a return to a standalone ESOL Strategy:

'At least there is a strategy, at least there's something, and in the document, it does state that having a standalone ESOL strategy might be something for the future. So they haven't closed that off permanently. It's a tiny optimistic element'.

The positivity lies in the hope that a return to a bespoke ESOL Strategy may be possible rather than any positive feelings about ESOL's incorporation into the ALS. Another commenter echoed this view: *'I don't believe being part of the adult learning strategy will benefit us because I don't believe it's a document that reflects our profession'.*

Discussion

The findings suggest that ESOL practitioners in Scotland feel that the most successful aspect of the Strategy was that it raised the profile of ESOL and gave practitioners a sense of direction, purpose and worth. It seems to have legitimised ESOL provision, allowing practitioners to work towards objectives that aligned with the needs of their learners. However, there is also a clear perception among participants that the government's commitment to the Strategy waned over time, gradually eroding the 'ESOL voice' and affecting both the extent and the nature of provision, evidenced through long waiting lists to join courses and a need to address other priorities. This finding is congruent with a study by Stella and Kay (2023), which identifies loss of funding and changes in funding mechanisms as leading to 'significant unmet ESOL needs and demands' (Stella and Kay 2023: 5). The same study also found that the requirement for ESOL to be funded through core college credits raised:

questions about whether a credit model...can be reconciled to the social practice model that has traditionally underpinned community provision and whether all ESOL learners necessarily seek or would benefit from accreditation (Stella and Kay 2023: 5–6).

It could perhaps be argued that ESOL has also been funded via other sources, such as the funding provided to support Syrian refugees (UK Home Office 2017) or the £500,000 of targeted ESOL funding for 'ESOL and Employability' (Scottish Government 2023). However, the resettlement programme for Syrian refugees was funded by Westminster, not the Scottish government, and was filtered through local authorities, meaning ESOL providers had little or no say in how much they would receive. Furthermore, targeting funding specifically at developing employability, once again, neglects to address the social needs of ESOL learners, as well as reducing the scope for learners to 'co-design their learning experience' (Scottish Government 2015: 21).

The loss of government commitment to ESOL from 2007 to 2022 is not only evident in terms of funding. The revised (2015) Strategy introduced new strategic objectives, but unlike the original (2007) Strategy, it did not provide any clear and concrete action that should be taken to achieve those objectives. Instead, an ESOL Strategy Implementation Group, consisting of ESOL professionals from across the sectors, was established. However, membership of this group was voluntary rather than funded (Education Scotland, 2018: 2) and, as mentioned in the Findings section, members struggled to find time to attend – much less develop coherent policy implementation strategies. Moreover, Education Scotland's decision to

replace its ESOL development officer with a non-ESOL specialist implies a lack of respect for ESOL as a profession.

While some value can be attached to the 2015 Strategy's existence as a piece of discourse that set out useful and relevant objectives, any successes in its implementation can be largely attributed to the practitioners themselves, who were largely responsible for achieving its objectives. Perceived weaknesses in the Strategy's implementation seem to lie primarily with the government's failure to commit sufficient resources and funding to support practitioners and ensure the vision and objectives could be met.

It is understandable that feelings about a lack of consultation over the decision to subsume ESOL into the ALS should prompt negative comments from participants. Responses convey a real concern that the needs of ESOL learners will be disregarded as a result. The belief expressed by many respondents that adult ESOL learners and learning are different from other forms of adult education is relevant here and is supported by the literature. Creese (2003) notes that, unlike learners whose first language is English, ESOL learners require lesson content to be carefully scaffolded through the use of questioning, examples and other techniques to facilitate comprehension. Lifelong Learning UK (2009: 5) highlight other variances between the disciplines, such as the need to clarify meaning or drill pronunciation to ESOL learners, along with the very basic premise that using language to communicate is, in and of itself, a valid learning aim in ESOL. This may not be the case with other learners whose oral proficiency in English is already high. It should also be noted that much useful learning content for ESOL learners – information about local environment and cultural norms, for example – is already known to other adult learners.

It could, of course, be argued that, in the spirit of inclusive education, bringing ESOL into the wider fold of Adult Learning reduces the risks of institutionalised marginalisation or othering of ESOL learners; the incorporation of ESOL implies that ESOL learners will be more readily included into all forms of adult learning. Collins et al.'s (2019) social model of inclusive education advocates 'both the need to restructure educational environments ... to enable all students to flourish (rather than focusing upon individual impairments) and teaching practices to facilitate all students' learning' (Collins et al 2019: 1477). However, such an inclusive approach would imply that *all* adult learning programmes would need to be accessible to ESOL learners. This would require major adjustments to teaching practice, both in terms of the use of methodologies and content, to ensure ESOL learners could be included and engaged. Such adjustments would, however, be inappropriate for other adult learners who already have the oral communication skills and content knowledge that ESOL learners lack.

Given that ESOL learners form a small minority of adult learners in Scotland, it seems unlikely that the incorporation of ESOL into the ALS will bring about such wholesale changes to adult learning provision in Scotland. In all its 39 pages, the new Adult Learning Strategy for Scotland mentions ESOL a total of five times, none of which give any indication of how ESOL will be represented within the Strategy. Furthermore, when the ALS was launched in 2022 by Jamie Hepburn, then minister for higher and further education, youth employment and training, his 25-minute speech did not contain a single mention of ESOL. It is, therefore, understandable that ESOL practitioners fear the Scottish Government is embarking on a policy change that could very easily disregard ESOL altogether.

Conclusion and recommendations

It is difficult to understand why the Scottish Government, which was widely praised for having an ESOL strategy when other nations of the UK did not, has now decided that it is preferable *not* to have a bespoke policy for ESOL. Meanwhile, national ESOL strategies are being developed elsewhere: the Welsh Government has already launched its own ESOL policy (Welsh Government 2019), and recent research has added weight to the case for an ESOL strategy in Northern Ireland (NI) (Kernaghan 2023). In addition, the NI-DfE (2022) established an ESOL strategy steering committee and a development process by surveying practitioners and learners on ESOL provisions to facilitate the drafting of a forthcoming ESOL strategy (Flanagan 2023). In England, the social injustices created by the lack of an ESOL strategy have led to the development of ESOL as a form of activism, in which learners 'resist their exclusion by affirming new citizen identities that can demand new citizenship rights' (Peutrell 2019: 57).

It appears that the Scottish Government's commitment to – and interest in – ESOL has diminished to the point that it barely features in the latest policy that ostensibly supports it. This has left ESOL professionals feeling demoralised, disenfranchised, and disenfranchised, with grave concerns that the value of ESOL to individuals and to society as a whole is no longer being recognised. The latest shift in policy implies that the Scottish government is either unaware of the nature of ESOL and the needs of ESOL learners or is not particularly concerned about meeting the language needs of migrants in Scotland – or both. This apparent disregard for ESOL provision poses an existential threat to the profession in Scotland. While it once led the way in the UK for highly-quality, strategic ESOL planning and provision, Scotland now appears to be on a trajectory that could see ESOL, as a subject in its own right, disappear altogether.

Our main recommendation is that the Scottish Government fulfils its promise to 'undertake a review, with learners and practitioners, on the impact of...Scotland's ESOL Strategy 2015-2020' (Scottish Government 2022: 17). Unlike the previous 'consultation' on the incorporation of ESOL into the ALS, this review should use comments from practitioners and learners to critically analyse the less successful elements of policy implementation. Such analysis may well conclude that a return to a bespoke ESOL Strategy is the best course of action – but this time with clearer guidelines and oversight of its implementation. Meanwhile, it would perhaps be prudent for ESOL practitioners in Scotland to be less acquiescent – and more resistant – to the government's current approach to ESOL.

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Agency, barriers, and equality: women's access to ESOL

Holly Dono

This study explores how female asylum seekers and refugees experience accessing ESOL classes in England. It aims to better understand what factors influence women's access to education and how agency can be increased to widen access to ESOL. Qualitative methodology was employed utilising a mixed methods design. The first stage of data collection was an online questionnaire with 106 respondents followed by four focus groups with 15 female asylum seeker and refugee participants. Collected data was coded and thematically analysed. The findings of this study highlight three areas that impact women's access: agency, barriers to learning, and equality. Results demonstrate that women who have increased agency have quicker access to education, improving their experiences. Barriers to accessing ESOL are found to include class timetables and childcare which can be positively influenced by greater flexibility, choice, and access to information. Whilst the study suggests that ESOL learners believe there is equality in English society, it highlights the impact that cultural norms can have on women's experiences of accessing ESOL courses. Overall, this study emphasises the importance of ESOL classes that positively impact women's lives, demonstrating the need to promote equal access to education in England.

Introduction

Barriers to accessing learning experienced by ESOL learners are well cited in literature. The most common factors that create difficulties for learners are long waiting lists (Department for Education, 2019); travel costs (Refugee Action, 2019); access to the internet and technology for remote classes (Learning and Work Institute, 2021); and religious or personal preferences (Collinson and Collinson, 2007). However, the most cited barrier is childcare (Department for Education, 2019; National Centre for Social Research, 2005; Tshabangu-Soko and Caron, 2011) which the Refugee Council and the University of Birmingham finds mainly impacts female learners.

The disproportionate impact of childcare on female learners is in addition to documentation in some literature that female ESOL learners are more likely to have low level English and be impacted by barriers to accessing learning than their male counterparts (Department for Education, 2019; Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2016). However, there is limited information on women's experiences in the wider literature and moreover a paucity of literature that exclusively explores the experiences of asylum seeker and refugee women. Due to their differing experiences of navigating UK life, asylum seeker and refugee women may have different factors that influence their access to learning in comparison to other ESOL learners.

Therefore, this study aims to identify not only the practical challenges of accessing ESOL classes for this group of learners. It also aims to recognise

the impact of the dynamics of being an asylum seeker or refugee such as often arriving in the UK alone, without connections to local people, organisations, or cultural expectations regarding education, familial responsibilities, and social values. These elements will be explored through asylum seekers and refugees' agency. Agency refers to people's ability to act or make decisions about what action to take (Renkens, Rommes, van den Muijsenbergh, 2022; Hunt, 2008; Baynham, 2006) and therefore speaks to their autonomy and control over their circumstances or actions. Lack of control is an important theme throughout this article, as it can lead to feelings of helplessness, frustration, or resignation. A better understanding of the experiences of asylum seeker and refugee women can inform greater equality in ESOL provision. This article comments on a recently completed study investigating how female asylum seekers and refugees experience accessing ESOL classes in England. It aims to identify what barriers asylum seeker and refugee women experience and how their agency influences their experiences. Therefore, it attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. How do female asylum seekers and refugees experience accessing ESOL provision in England?
2. What are women's perspectives on equal access to ESOL in England?
3. How can women's experiences of accessing ESOL be improved?

By answering these questions, this article hopes to contribute to the lack of literature that focuses exclusively on female asylum seekers and refugees' experiences. Moreover, it hopes to identify ways to increase equal access to ESOL, which in turn impacts women's confidence, feeling of self-improvement and future aspirations while improving the language skills of both women and their families (Dono, 2023). This project was commissioned by Seetec, a provider of AEB funded ESOL classes, to better understand how they can support asylum seeker and refugee women in their local communities.

Study design

The project utilised qualitative methodology and a mixed-methods design. An anonymous online questionnaire was completed by 106 respondents, including 73 women and 33 men who had experience of ESOL in England. The questionnaire included questions on finding an ESOL class, waiting times, barriers to accessing learning and equality in English society. Four focus groups were then conducted face-to-face with 15 women who were refugees or asylum seekers in Northwest England, lasting an average of 51 minutes. Participants were recruited via email and recruitment posters in local ESOL classrooms. The focus groups followed a semi-structured topic guide where women were asked about their motivations for studying English, their experiences of finding and accessing suitable classes, whether there is equality in English society and how gender norms impact their experiences. All data was thematically analysed.

Findings

Personal agency

Personal agency greatly influenced the methods women use to find a suitable class to attend. Many participants cited advice from family and friends as the most common method of looking for ESOL classes. This, however, required connections to local people. Other women who had received support from the Job Centre or Local Authorities highlighted the benefit of their experience:

P6: Before joining the ESOL classes, I watched videos for English learning. Online learning and some apps. So, basically, I'm living in hostels. So, my support worker said to me that this [training provider] source of learning English, classes start on 1st December. So, I said, "Yes, I'm happy to join this." So, she filled in a form, and I take it.

While P6 had a clear desire to learn English, she had not accessed any classes until her support worker was able to assist her. This delay may have been due to a lack of information, or because of other factors such as low confidence, as demonstrated by P9's experience:

P9: When I came here, I think I was lucky because I knew [M]. [M] is the manager in a foundation... [M] told me that they have an English class, ESOL class... They gave me not only a school, they gave me sometimes... The problem is you miss the family or whatever... They come and help, no worries, everything will be right. That is good for us, you feel that somebody is with you, I think it is very nice.

P9 comments on the importance of information and wellbeing support offered by local services which improved her confidence and overall experience, noteworthy was the phrase 'you feel that somebody is with you' reducing feelings of isolation. Both P6 and P9's experiences demonstrated an initial lack of agency but through the well-rounded support from local organisations their agency grew, reducing frustrations and empowering them to access appropriate classes.

Social structures

The interplay between social structure and agency play an important role in women's experiences of accessing education. Social structures can include local or national governments, family circumstances, and interactions with local services. These structures can all limit or enable women to make informed decisions about their education and therefore impact their agency. The following section will explore asylum seeker and refugee women's experiences with each structure.

Governmental structures

Some structural and legal barriers implemented by the UK government, such as no access to public funds, limit asylum seekers' ability to engage in education. However, in cases where new arrivals had instant recourse to public funds, such as the recent resettlement schemes for Afghan and Ukrainian refugees, the UK government's support greatly improved

women's experiences. A woman who arrived in the UK under the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy cited her positive experience:

P15: For me, it is easy because when I came to hotels and the council introduced this course for us, all of the people, to start this course for us. Easy.

However, the initial support was not maintained over time:

P14: The worker [job centre advisor] should tell us the system of education and what you should do, but here no one will tell us, like we search a lot. At some points we waste some of our time as well... I think this is the best thing for every refugee, asylum seeker whoever come to UK there should be a main system, what do you want, for everything.

P14's experience suggested frustration and a feeling that she still could not access information, contributing to a lack of control and consequently limited agency. These feelings were echoed by women who did not arrive via government schemes. The UK government has also recently delivered the Homes for Ukraine scheme where eligible people in the UK act as a sponsor for a Ukrainian refugee(s). Women on this scheme described the process of looking for a class:

P8: I got support from [X] city council, and they sent me information with a big list of courses.

P1: When I arrived in the UK, I had an ESOL class in [X] location. My sponsor found this class for me.

Their experiences demonstrated the benefits of having increased information from Local Authorities or a UK sponsor who provided the advice and guidance needed to navigate UK life. Under this scheme, Ukrainian women had increased agency due to improved connections and the removal of some structural barriers, creating more positive experiences.

Familial structures

Parental responsibilities and the need for childcare was cited as a significant barrier to accessing learning for women, particularly as it had been cited in literature that even when women live with their spouses, 'there does not seem to be much burden sharing' (Refugee Council and University of Birmingham, 2007, p.17). Women describe their experiences of being mothers and learning:

P7: Yes, every year, I'm trying to go, but sometimes the reason – The place is too far. I do not get a place. It's just, I'm seeing the waiting list. Sometimes my kids stay at home, or I've got a little child. But this year, all my kids... in the school, and I get a place in [provider] and I'm really, really happy.

P1: But, in the UK, [school] holiday very often. Every month and two weeks, holiday, and when my child has holiday, I can't go to ESOL class.

P7's experience of delaying her ESOL classes demonstrated the importance of providing childcare to refugee and asylum seeker women while P1 highlighted the importance of maintaining childcare for school-aged children. Where childcare was provided, it was in high demand:

P8: In my college there is a nursery where you can leave your child, but it is full all time. My children, thank God, are adult and go to school so I don't have this problem.

This demand aligned with questionnaire responses where just 17% of parents stated that they preferred for children to stay at home until they started attending nursery. Women's ability to access appropriate childcare services was impacted not only by capacity, as P8 described, but also by their access to information, with 58% of parents stating that they did not know how to find childcare. These findings were aligned with many studies that demonstrated that ethnically and linguistically isolated groups had limited access to information about childcare and that access to childcare was not systematic but random (Refugee Council and University of Birmingham, 2007; NatCen, 2005; Stahl, Schober and Spiess, 2017). Women's familial responsibilities, especially childcare duties, limited their agency when attempting to find an appropriate ESOL class by reducing the options available to them. Moreover, the lack of information provided was another contributing factor to their lack of agency.

Equality and cultural perceptions

This study aimed to examine equality of access to ESOL classes in England. Although 83% of questionnaire respondents believed that there is equality for men and women wishing to attend ESOL courses, women's experiences demonstrate that there are some cultural differences concerning perspectives on gender-norms that impact on women's learning. Some women described their experiences of equality and cultural norms:

P14: I think that I didn't see any different things for the women and the men, like those classes which were for the men were also for the women as well. I think everything is equal here. For the understanding of the English [people], for men what they say is that women have the house responsibility, according to us, like every nation is different. According to us, we have most of the house responsibilities, children, cleaning, everything, that is why we focus for everything, our 20% focus is only for the learning. For men there is only focusing on jobs and learning... I think this is the problem. Some nations say that women are weak, that is not the point that we are weak, that is the point that we focus on other things.

P13: I also didn't see any difference in society, it is not about the society... It is about the measure in our country, like here they have every opportunity for women, but they didn't study, like in our hotel I think there is more than 200 people. So, half of them are women but most of them didn't go for the study for the course for English language, they are just in the hotel, and they take care of their children. They also think or their men think too, you don't need to go for study just to stay at home and take care of the children and cook and clean.

P13 appeared incredulous that women were not exploiting their increased opportunities in the UK, but she then explained that cultural views on women's responsibilities influence their agency and decision making. P14 also highlighted women's traditional duties in her culture which in

turn divert women's attention from their studies. P14 suggested that these difficulties could be mitigated through government policy:

P14: I think there should be a rule because the UK is a multicultural and multinational people, like every people from different [background], there should be a rule for the man when they come to the UK that if you want to work you should make time for your woman to learn as well. I think that is a good commitment.

However, P13 recognised that this will not be a straightforward solution:

P13: I don't think that women who just grow in countries that they are always the man's thought on their head, I don't think so, they can say, "I want to learn," they can say, as [P15] said. I don't think the women have that ability... Every woman is supposed to tell the man, "If you don't let me [learn], I will talk with the government that you don't want." In this point there are relations that affect the children, because of this effect, the woman just makes silent herself. Women are so kind, as we are a woman, we know because of their emotional feelings they can't raise their voice, I don't think so.

P13's statement was powerful; it demonstrated the complexities behind engaging women in learning and the dynamics that impacted women's agency and their choices. This statement also highlighted the importance of finding multiple solutions for women to access education, ensuring equal opportunities to learn. When asked for ways to encourage equal opportunities, some women cited online learning as an appropriate solution:

P7: Online courses. I think that will give much help for the people who can't attend the classes... Yes, if she has a baby and she can't come, or it's far away, or she can't, it's online. If we came here [to the classroom], it's much better. But some people who can't attend, it's online courses that will help for them.

P14: I think nowadays, as we know, the technology every day improves, like as I study my employability through a webinar... If the government made such a thing of the ESOL course, made such a thing, like gave them laptops, the stationery and everything, just for one hour. I think for one hour they can do because men are at work from the morning up until the evening, like they make an evening time as well, the man should be with the children for one hour.

Noteworthy was P14's recommendation for equipment to be provided to learners to mitigate further barriers, aligning with findings by Learning and Work Institute (2017) that remote courses could be challenging due to internet access. Moreover, it was noticeable that women-only classes were not raised by these participants as an opportunity to increase opportunities for women.

Additional barriers

This study found that 78% of questionnaire respondents waited up to six months to find a suitable ESOL course once they began searching, which in some cases was in addition to the amount of time participants had waited

to have recourse to public funds as determined by governmental structures. Those waiting longer than 6 months were generally experiencing additional barriers, for example, growing waiting lists (Foster and Bolton, 2017) or a lack of provision (Department for Education, 2019). However, one of the greatest barriers that women raised in this study was the class timetable. For example, P13 described her experience of attending a course with a limited number of lessons:

P13: Other classes was just one day in a week, like now we go... just for one and a half hours in a week, so it is nothing, when you count it for one month you go for just five hours. So, it is not useful, even after one week of you going you forget what you studied last week. So, the best thing was the timing that I did like and also the hours so you can learn every day... it was very useful.

Frequent classes were preferred by participants due to regular language exposure that positively impacted language acquisition. Other participants highlighted the impact of frequency on the duration of their course:

P12: I thought the duration of level was very long, maybe abbreviation. When I was with [provider] Level 1 [it was] in four months almost, in college it is one year, one year is very long. Maybe I can study Level 1 and Level 2 in one year.

P14: In college in a week, you only have one day, or one half-hour. If they make it two days a week so it becomes six months, if it brings three days a week it becomes three months. The duration is a waste of time.

Both P12 and P14 felt as though they could have achieved their qualifications faster. Lengthy courses delay progression by preventing women from accessing further education or employment, an increase in class hours would also need to be balanced with increased funding for ESOL providers. Although increased class hours would benefit learners, this must also be balanced with independent learning and practical use of the language to effectively acquire the language, study skills which learners may require guidance to develop. Many women also linked the impact of their familial responsibilities to their class timetable preferences or needs. P3 highlighted the importance of choice:

P7: That's great, because they have two different times... for the people who can't come in the evening, come in the morning and the opposite. That's good.

P3: Yes, just we need choice of the time. Yes, to be free if you want morning or afternoon, so it'll be better. Yes, I think the same.

P4: But morning is school. So, you have to be luckier to get the morning hours.

Having a range of class times empowered women by increasing their options, consequently having a positive impact on the aforementioned difficulties arising from familial structures which often limited women's agency.

Summary

This study has uncovered the strong link between agency and women's experiences of accessing ESOL. To address the first research question, this article has identified that asylum seeker and refugee women's experiences of accessing ESOL courses are determined by the barriers that they encounter and consequently the length of time they spend waiting to access a course. The main access barriers cited in this study are limited personal agency, governmental restrictions, childcare, and cultural perspectives on gender norms. Concerning cultural perspectives and equal access to ESOL, whilst women's beliefs that there is equality in English society concerning education are encouraging, there is evidence that some women had encountered cultural perspectives on gender norms that limited women's agency to access ESOL classes. The complexities of cultural perspectives are detailed by women who explain that potential solutions will be complicated.

Finally, with regards to the third research question, agency is an important factor in improving women's experiences of accessing ESOL. Increased agency creates greater control and empowers women to make informed choices for themselves and their families which reduces barriers. This study has demonstrated that women's agency can be increased by providing relevant information to asylum seeker and refugee women including through local services offering advice, guidance, and wider wellbeing support whilst ensuring that social structures support women's access to education. This study has gone a long way in contributing to the literature on how asylum seeker and refugee women experience ESOL in England and the important role that agency has played. However, further research could explore ways to reduce barriers for this group of women, particularly potential interventions that increase access to ESOL classes whilst considering cultural differences.

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Disclaimer: This article comments on findings from the report 'Female Asylum Seekers and Refugees' Experiences of ESOL' commissioned by Seetec. It focuses on Chapter two which explores women's experiences of accessing suitable ESOL classes.

Towards a greener ESOL: modelling sustainability in teaching and learning

Mafalda Giudice and Viorica Lucuta

The term sustainability has been a buzzword for over a decade, but it appears more frequently today than ever before, and for good reasons, after the Conference of the Parties (COP) 26 in 2021, the climate crisis and questions of sustainability are on everyone's minds. It is no longer a concern of environmental activists, of governments, or of non-profit organisations. Business, governments, and citizens are all accountable (Person, 2021). What can teachers do about it? How can we, as educators, make a difference and be more sustainable?

Both Viorica and I were concerned about the number of papers lying around in staff rooms, classrooms, recycling bins and started picturing the number of cartridges in the landfill. We asked ourselves 'Is it possible to be greener in a sea of worksheets?' 'Is it really a teacher's life to be surrounded by paper in 2023?' We set ourselves a challenge, and as part of the Teaching and Learning Lab at New City College London, we worked on a project with the ESOL department at one of the college's campuses. The desire to limit our impact on the environment is one of the strongest arguments for cutting back on paper and photocopying. This helps reduce deforestation and promotes environmental sustainability overall. Paper waste is reduced when less paper is used. By doing this, less paper will wind up in landfills and the energy and resources needed for disposal and recycling will be saved. Utilising less ink and toner also reduces the energy and environmental impact of printing. This project encouraged practitioners to take a responsible attitude towards protecting the environment and turn challenges into opportunities by offering support in the development of e-learning skills.

How did the project work?

We worked with 13 teachers over three months and ran five sessions in total. The teachers involved in the research received training, planned and delivered sessions using the recommended alternatives to printing, reflected on their practice via a reflective log, took part in surveys, and shared their adopted techniques and resources during show and tell sessions. We started with some data (See Figure 1).

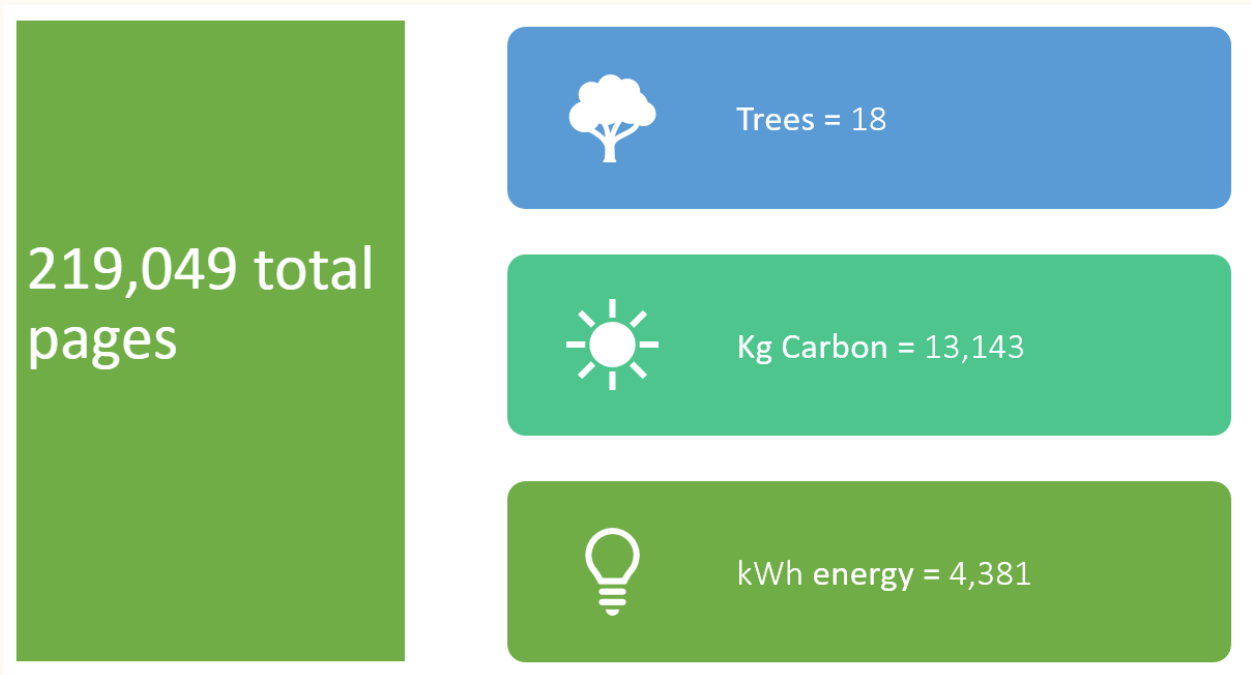


Figure 1. Data

We discovered that in the first term, 219,049 pages were printed or photocopied. This equates to the same carbon as cutting down 18 trees; 13 return trips from London to New York City per passenger and in Kilowatt hours (KWh) energy it equates to the same amount of gas and electricity used by a 1-bedroom house (1–2 people) in half a year. We then conducted a survey to establish what greener practices were already in place. Most teachers tend to display worksheets on the board or send a link to the students via email; students copy from the board or take a picture of the board and then work individually, share handouts or borrow class books. To the question *What prevents you from using paperless resources?* Teachers mentioned the following:

- preparation time
- not being very technically adept
- lack of digital skills (teachers and students)
- not being in an IT room and no data on students' mobiles
- slow wi-fi and internet connection
- no IT support for induction or evening classes
- low level students
- printouts are important because it is part of our job and students demand worksheets.

Most were sceptical at the beginning of the project as they thought we would encourage them to go paperless. Let's face it, worksheets are a teacher's safety blanket – GUILTY! If we are running late, need to cover a class at the last-minute, or we are not prepared, worksheets are there to save the day! We feel like we are teaching, and students are learning. Yes, surely some students demand worksheets, but what do they do with them after lesson? So, we decided to conduct a survey amongst students, (See Table 1 below).

What do you do with your paper/printed resources	Responses % (122)
I take them and keep them at home	36
I put them in the rubbish bin	3
I leave them on the desks	2
I keep them in my folder	57
Other	1

Table 1. What do they do with Paper?

Responses indicate that a high proportion of learners retain their papers, though it remains unclear what they do with them and if they refer to them throughout the academic year. Perhaps, this is something that needs more investigation. We also asked learners what type of resources they would like to see more in their lessons, and based on the table below, a balance between digital and paper resources is their preferred choice (See Table 2 below).

Lesson resources: what do you prefer?	Responses % (201)
Paper/printed handouts	38
Online/internet resources	19
websites	6
Videos	13
Online quizzes	13
Course books	1

Table 2. Lesson resources

Going paperless is definitely not an option, but that was never the aim of this project. Furthermore, when presented with the initial data, some teachers felt that the project was part of a management strategy to save money. While not the primary aim of this initiative, such measures can certainly save schools money. Printing, photocopying, and purchasing paper can be expensive, and digital resources often have lower long-term costs. In addition, key to UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) roadmap for 2030 (UNESCO, 2020) is an emphasis on the transformative role that education can play in creating the wider societal changes needed to reduce global warming. The Department for Education (DfE) is aware that greater assistance is required for both teaching about climate change and for accessing the vast array of information available. Its target is to give teachers at all levels greater assistance in developing both their capacity and confidence. It aims to 'develop an occupational standard for further education teaching which explicitly requires all new teachers to integrate sustainability into their teaching, through modelling sustainable practices and promoting sustainable development principles in relation to their subject specialism' (DfE, 2022).

Greener alternatives to paper

Over the three months we experimented with greener alternatives to paper, teachers completed their reflective log whenever possible and shared their practice with the group. We discovered a plethora of strategies to reduce paper in the classroom, some of which are common sense. For instance, printing in black and white instead of colour, double sided rather than single, on A3 paper for students to share or in booklet format. We got into the habit of recycling unused papers, using mini whiteboards or class books. We utilised digital resources which incorporate multimedia elements, interactive quizzes, videos, and simulations that can enhance the learning experience and make lessons more engaging and effective. Teachers used digital platforms (Smartboard/ Lumio, Wordwall, Kahoot, Live worksheets) to provide real-time feedback to students, allowing for immediate assessment and adjustment of their learning strategies. Digital resources can be easily shared among teachers, schools, and students (Office 365 Teams and Online Word, the VLE) promoting collaboration and resource sharing within the educational community.

What impact did the project have on teachers, students and the environment?

We ran a second report at the end of term 2 and 30% less paper was printed or photocopied. Teachers were equipped with new IT and Digital skills and felt more confident in creating paperless resources. Most importantly, it provided students with valuable digital literacy skills that are increasingly essential in the modern world. By reducing paper and photocopying, teachers were able to set an example and educate students about the value of using resources responsibly.

Examples of feedback received from teachers involved in the project include the following:

- I definitely feel more confident using paperless resources in the IT classroom. I am more aware of how many photocopies I make and continue to copy in black and white and double sided. I do think twice about whether students can share material or if I can condense copying. I have enjoyed learning how to use alternative resources and have tried these successfully in the IT class.
- I am much more aware of alternatives to paper-based teaching and have become more confident in using digital resources in the classroom.
- having worked for NCC for a very long time, I have always been aware of how much photocopying we were doing but we didn't have the resources to cut down on photocopying worksheets etc. Now, with so much online and with the Sustainability training we have received we have the knowledge of how we can cut back on photocopies and where to look for interesting resources already prepared.
- more flexible and varied. Whilst students still like some paper-based activities, they enjoy online learning.

The project was over by the end term 2. We achieved amazing results and teachers embraced greener practices by acquiring new skills. However, in August 2023, we were wondering if teachers managed to sustain such improvements through to the end of the academic year. There was only one

way to find out. We ran a final data report and we saw an overall reduction in paper of 64%, success beyond our wildest expectations.

Moving forward

The NCC Teaching and Learning Lab's aim is to develop a case study that is replicable, demonstrating its value for moving towards sustainable practices in colleges and sharing good practice widely.

The plan is to do the following:

- deliver CPD sessions focused on environmental sustainability to all support staff resulting in team-based action plans
- engage in green conversations with all curriculum directors to identify existing good practice and review the existing green curriculum offer as outlined in qualification specifications.

In summary, using greener alternatives to paper in the classroom benefits the environment, reduces costs, enhances accessibility, and provides numerous opportunities for more engaging and effective teaching and learning experiences. Transitioning to digital or eco-friendly materials should be considered as part of a broader effort to create more sustainable and effective educational environments.

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The author

Mafalda Giudice is a trailblazer in sustainable pedagogy and has over 16 years' experience of working as an ESOL teacher. In recent years she has also taken on the role of Teaching and Learning Coordinator at New City College. An active contributor in New City Colleges Teaching & Learning Lab, Mafalda always makes time to research and assess innovative teaching, learning and assessment practices to inform her own practice and that of colleagues. She has been championing the introduction of greater sustainability practices into ESOL teaching, learning and administrative practices and she is now taking a step further by promoting and embedding education for sustainable development (ESD) across learning and working practices at New City College.

An emergent curriculum for ESOL: concepts, tools and challenges

Sam Shepherd

An emergent, responsive curriculum is one based not on pre-planned and teacher-defined outcomes but is instead a curriculum where the syllabus is derived from the activities and interactions in the classroom. This article lays out the theoretical and philosophical foundations of such a curriculum, trialled as part of a PhD study in 2021–2022, drawing together elements of the *dogme* ELT movement, critical participatory pedagogy and on visual metaphors suggested in the *Reflect for ESOL* publication. The article then suggests a range of strategies and tools which can be used to create the conditions for emergent language and to build community and shared experiences of learning and development, as well as identify the challenges faced by teachers using such an approach.

Throwing stones?

In *Language Issues* Winter 2022, I offered up a criticism of Skills for Life (SfL) and the audit focussed “learning journey” (DfES, 2003) that dictates the model of ESOL curriculum design used widely in England, and which has been deeply influential in practice across the whole of the UK. I argued that the model is not only dated, but also duplicitous, claiming, as it does, to have the “learner at the heart of the process” (ibid.) when in reality the learner themselves is simply an object whose main purpose is to be measured, a producer of achievement data to be lauded or condemned according to political or organisational expedience. It’s often very easy to criticise, but much harder to come up with a workable alternative. I have, as the focus of a PhD research project, been working on developing a more evolutionary curriculum – rather than being focussed on outcomes and targets, the curriculum responds spontaneously to the changing needs of the students and how they interact with the world around them. This is an approach which might, from an outside perspective, appear to be merely making things up as you go along, casually chatting with students, and teaching unplanned and unfocused lessons. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth, and instead the process is built on a theoretical framework as valid as that of the traditional curriculum. So how does such a curriculum compare to the more traditional outcomes-driven model, and what *is* the reasoning behind it? Most importantly of all, for the working teacher, how does it look in practice? and how does it fit with the requirements of our organisations and funding bodies?

From product to process

The first stop on *our* learning journey is to summarise briefly what the current tradition based ESOL curriculum process looks like. The student usually has some form of initial assessment to establish a level, followed by a diagnostic assessment during the induction stages of the course. From the induction and the diagnostic, individualised areas for improvement are established and collected in the form of individual targets, recorded on an ILP. The resulting course content stems, apparently, from these individualised targets. I have explored the issues with these elsewhere in earlier editions of *Language Issues* (Shepherd, 2017; 2022). It is enough to say that such an approach is deeply reductive and often impractical. In practice, content is usually decided by the teacher, targets are given to the students which are rarely understood, let alone “owned” (e.g. Schellekens, 2007). Very often, in practice, the course follows a scheme of work which the teacher used in the previous year, or borrowed from someone else, with only small amounts of tweaking or adaptation. Some organisations may even have a broadly defined scheme of work template for each level which is used to ensure that the curriculum content is covered at each level. The justification for such an approach is that it avoids teachers “reinventing the wheel.” The course is delivered, the students assessed, “evidence of progress” is gathered for internal audit and external evaluation, exams are passed, funding drawn down, and everyone is happy. Thus, the hamster wheel of ESOL rumbles on much as it has done for the last 20 years or so. As a result, the process is less about the learners, and instead focuses on generating observable outcomes.

Whatever the origin and decision-making process, the course is focused on *product*. The teacher, the exam boards and the state define the parameters of the syllabus, and the teacher enacts this upon the students. Most curriculum guidance is based on this model, and indeed, most work on syllabus and curriculum development in ESOL assumes this as the *de facto* approach to curriculum. This emphasis on measurable product leads Stenhouse (1975) and others (e.g. Nunan, 1988; Nation & Macalister, 2010) to refer to it as a *product-based* curriculum. Stenhouse (1975) suggests an alternative. He argues for a *process* curriculum, which centres not on what the students will *learn*, but on what the students will *do*. While later writers, such as Nunan (1988) and Nation & Mcalister (2010) gloss the theme briefly, it is rarely discussed as a potentially mainstream approach, despite having a similar age and vintage to the traditional product curriculum. A well-known example of this in English Language Teaching (ELT) generally is task-based language teaching (TBLT) (Long, 2015). In TBLT, tasks are set, and students complete those tasks, during which time specific language structures are covered. Tasks are developed and selected sometimes with language in mind, or with a conscious awareness of what language students will need in order to complete the task. This approach, while making more space for student language to develop more spontaneously, still implies a great deal of control over what *could* arise through the selection of specific tasks which might require a specific set of language items, based on a needs analysis.

From process to emergence

It is possible, however, to take this a step further into a more responsive and adaptable curriculum. This model, and the model which I explored and developed in my thesis, is founded on principles from both participatory ESOL (Bryers, 2015) and dogme ELT (Thornbury, 1999). Participatory pedagogy takes a Freirean, critical approach to language education, with the intention that not only should language enable students but rather empower them, redressing the power imbalances experienced by language learners. It draws on the work of Freire (1970), of course, and the projects and publications of Elsa Auerbach (1992). This can involve the use of visual tools to create metaphors within which students can explore concepts, or stem from images, texts or conversation brought in by the students. The participatory ESOL approach developed over many years by EFA London involves three broad stages:

- **making meaning** – in which a topic is initially explored, and from which key themes arise for consideration later
- **going deeper** – where themes are analysed using visual tools and metaphors
- **broadening out** – where external texts, speakers, lessons and activities are brought in to engage with the world outside. (Cooke, et al. 2023)

In terms of language, however, the content and the focus develop from the ideas and experiences brought into the classroom by the students, rather than being dictated by the teacher. This sense of *emergent* language, that is language which arises from a live need of the students, is fundamental to the *dogme* ELT approach first laid out by Scott Thornbury in 1999, but later codified and clarified in a book written by Thornbury in collaboration with Luke Meddings. They propose a clear sequence of activities, not unlike the three-step approach suggested in participatory ESOL but coming at the language less from a social perspective, emphasising the emergence and working with that emergence. More recently, Richard Chinn and Danny Norrington-Davies (2023) have linked *dogme* ELT methods and participatory ESOL and made practical suggestions for teachers and teacher trainers following this approach.

This move to a focus on emergent language requires a shift of focus for the teachers, so that instead of thinking about intended learning outcomes, we simply think about creating learning *opportunities* – affordances for language to arise, for a gap to occur in communicative effectiveness, or for exciting examples of language use to arise, and to be shared and developed communally. Exactly what those language items might be depend entirely on the students, based on both what they already know and are able to do, and any shortcomings with this made up for by the teacher, or by other students in the room. Leo Van Lier (1996) argues that the language classroom is an interactive community wherein the interactions are also themselves the curriculum. Bring the outside in, for sure, but also remember who is already in the room, and the richness of human experience they represent.

In summary then, the curriculum I have been exploring can be compared to the traditional curriculum as follows:

An emergent curriculum	Traditional ESOL curriculum
based on learning opportunities	based on learning outcomes
creates affordances	is delivered
uncovers language	covers language
embraces the unpredictable	attempts to predict the unpredictable
maximises reflection	maximises measurement
responsive	is imposed

This version of a process curriculum creates an environment in which language need arises and is met daily. However, rather than being identified in advance and delivered, these needs are identified as the course progresses, within and between lessons, defined by the student need to interact, and met through interaction with the teacher and other students. Each lesson creates its outcomes retrospectively: what students take from the lesson is developed and negotiated through the interactions in the lesson.

Principles for an emergent curriculum

At the beginning of the PhD research project, I was relatively vague in my intentions and plans – the model followed an action-research approach which emphasises reflection and experimentation, constantly reviewing and altering that which is being researched, with the intention of leading to change. Over time, however, drawing on the ideas outlined above I drew up three core principles: **participation**, **emergence**, and **interaction**.

Participation – students are equal partners in the development of the curriculum through negotiation practices (e.g. Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, Meddings & Thornbury, 2009), such as selecting themes and topics of relevance, and through more critical participatory approaches (Auerbach, 1992, Bryers, 2015), for example analysing a problem based on visual prompts. Things could be critical in the sense of activist, or simply be empowering for students in less grand, and much “smaller” ways. This is in some ways a “gentler” form of participation, more literal and less explicitly activist in intent, but with those themes in the background for when the time is right with the students.

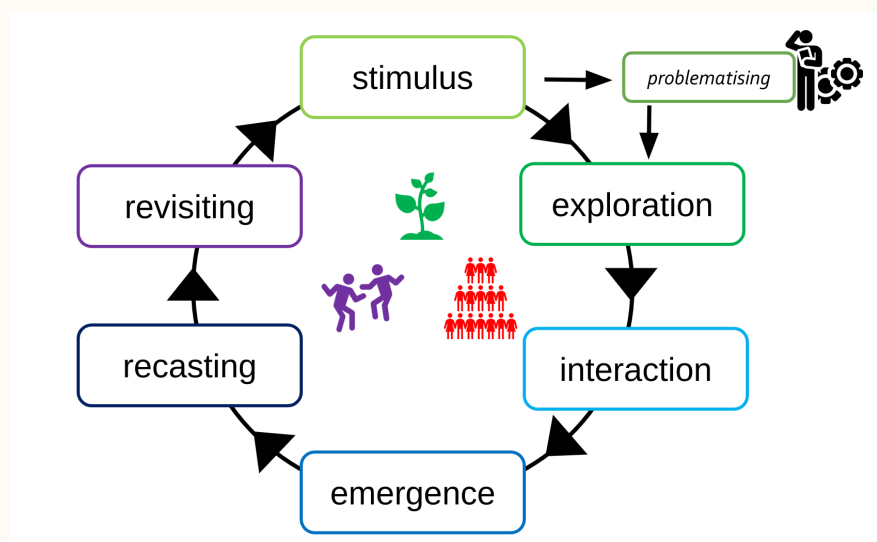
Emergence – the language “taught” on the course arises from those conversations, with the teacher moving to a more curatorial role, positioned as a lead learner, perhaps, rather than either the “sage on the stage” or even the “guide on the side”. (Both these views of the teacher role assume that the teacher is the holder and maintainer of knowledge, and both fail to address these imbalances.) The purpose of the teacher is not necessarily to present new language, but to create the conditions for emergence before clarifying and negotiating the language needed by the students in the moment.

Interaction – This is a crucial element of the language learning process (e.g. Long, 2015, Nation & Macalister, 2010). Without it, learning a language remains a purely academic task, much like learning Latin or ancient Greek, rather than a practical task. This “academic” focus is not something most learners of English, particularly in a migrant language education context, wish to achieve. They may recognise conscious knowledge as a necessary

element of the learning process, and even believe that this is sufficient. Ultimately, however, the goal for most students in an ESOL class is the ability to communicate clearly and with focus in particular contexts, not the recitation of rules of grammar, or for mental exercise. Interaction, therefore, is at the heart of what the learner wants and needs, as well as creating the communicative gaps from which language can emerge.

In order to enable the interplay between these principles, I turned to Luke Meddings and Scott Thornbury (2009), who offered a framework for developing and responding to language emerging on the course. The majority of the book focuses on methods and ideas, but in the introduction, they set out a structure for developing language from conversation (see also Thornbury & Slade, 2003), which I adapt here into a structure which can take into account more than just conversation. The process begins with some form of **stimulus**. This could take the form of a picture, a text, a letter, or simply a conversation. It could include a reaction to something happening in the news, a personal anecdote, or a local or national event. This then leads to some form of **exploration** of the stimulus, for example how does the person feel, what do you think about it, where do you think it will go. This could include thinking about the potential challenges and issues faced by someone in that situation – what is often referred to in participatory pedagogy as **problematizing** the situation – questioning the status quo represented in the stimulus and identifying the challenges in that.

Interaction follows, or is a part of, this process. Interaction here has a very broad definition. It encompasses interaction between the students, between students and teacher, between students and text and even between students and the wider social contexts in which they live. These last two are crucial because they allow the teacher and the students to introduce language and experiences from outside the classroom into the classroom ecology, enriching that ecology and creating further opportunities for learning. It is through interaction that language gaps occur, and this is where the teacher’s job is to help fill those gaps – essentially error correction, using explicit **recasting**, “The way you need to say it is...”. The explicitness is important, because this enables students to notice (Batstone, 1996) the new language or the issues and to take conscious action to adjust it. It is therefore necessary to take this one step further and to take steps to capture, record and **revisit** the language which has emerged, or the skills which have been practised.



Teachers can easily find and develop resources and activities to practise language, for example using “decontextualised” grammar books such as Murphy (2019) or vocabulary practice ideas available online (e.g. British Council, n.d.), but what tools can we use to help us develop the conditions and contexts for those principles to be enacted?

Making it work

Working with places

The most obvious, and striking stimulus linked to places is photographs. These are easy to obtain through simply walking your local community and taking photos of key places. You can pose questions to the group which start simply and become more complex:

- what are the places?
- who works there?
- what can you do there?
- when/How often do you go there? Why?
- when was the last time you went there? Why?
- what problems could happen there?
- what problems have you had there?
- what did/could you do about it?

This last could lead to a small project, for example writing to the local council or MP about problems, preparing a dialogue or bank of useful phrases, and so on. While the sequencing of the questions naturally suggests a progression through the levels, the initial questions could easily stimulate extensive discussion and emergent language opportunities for even a higher level (intermediate+) group. A similar structure of questions could be used, although with wider potential for different angles, by getting students to draw maps of their own local areas. I always demonstrate with my own less than perfect drawing, but the focus on *location* in the map also opens a wider range of language opportunities (prepositions and directions come to mind, although there’s no reason to insist on this). A slightly more interesting alternative might be to use audio recordings. Over the course of a weekend, or a day, record various ambient sounds in different locations, for example, at a café or restaurant, at the supermarket checkout, in the park, at a leisure centre, and so on, even, perhaps, driving (as a passenger, for example). Having played the sounds to students, either as a group or in small groups, they then could:

- say the places
- describe what they can hear
- identify people, actions and/or things associated with those places
- talk about the last time they went to those places
- talk about how often they go to those places
- discuss and write about issues concerning those places.

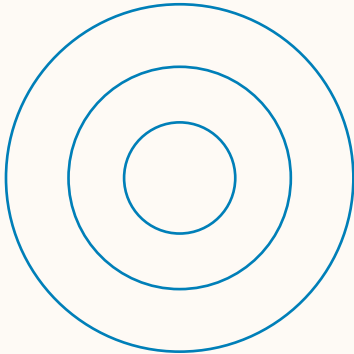
People

Another rich source of activities is to focus on people. Again, images are a simple and very accessible place to begin. These could be photographs or

even videos selected from online sources (copyright notwithstanding, of course) or simply supplied by yourself and / or the students. Alternatively, the old standby of cutting up magazines could also be productive, with students perhaps cutting out their own choices.

Again, questions can develop discussion effectively here:

- who are the people?
- what do they look like?
- what do they do?
- where do they go?
- do you have any problems with them?
- do they have any problems that you help with?



Another source for discussion of people is to use a diagram of circles arranged in a target arrangement. It needs to be drawn sufficiently large for the task, so as a starting point, demonstrate the task by drawing this up. You then write the people closest to you in the middle circle (perhaps immediate family, close friends), then close, but not that close in the middle circle (neighbours? Work colleagues?), with people even less close in the outer circle.

When demonstrating, it's important to make sure you include close friends and other non-family in the inner circles to make this clear to students; the point of this activity as opposed to a family tree is that it encompasses a wide range of individuals, and therefore allows students to make more personalised and honest choices, so they feel free *not* to talk about family members if they so choose. Questions could follow the simple structure as above or be much more open – simply get students to compare and discuss their diagrams in groups or pairs, circulate the room and capture language as you hear it. Obviously, there is a lot of scope here for some very personal information which students may not wish to share – this is absolutely fine: remember that in this you are not the boss, or the manager, or even much of a controller – students will often supply a great deal of information without being forced into it. A simple “getting to know you” task for the start of a course is the simple Venn diagram, where students discuss things, they have in common, and which are different. Student A writes their name in the left circle, student B in the right, and they must find their similarities and differences in order to complete the diagram. This task, of course, is not limited to comparing individuals and can be used to explore anything where two or three things can be compared – town & country, bus / train / car travel, etc.

Texts

As mentioned above, texts provide an opportunity to bring outside language and experiences into the classroom which may not otherwise make their way in. Texts could be as simple or as complex as wanted, from simple signs and labels to news articles and extracts from novels. There does need to be some consideration of students' levels and confidence in reading here, but there is not always a need to modify the text – ESOL students, regardless of level, will always encounter texts which are beyond their “level” but need strategies to manage those texts. A very simple task is simply to get students to write questions based on a given text, then swap texts and questions with another group. This inevitably doubles as a lesson based on question forms, something which many students will

struggle with, but very often the final reading activity is done as a kind of afterthought, because the process of getting there has been so productive. A simpler variation of this is to give students a text and a black marker and ask them to create simple cloze tasks for the other group. A more teacher-led activity is to simply select details (e.g. names, dates, places, etc.) from the text (or from a selection of texts), write them on the board and then get students to find out what the details mean.

Capturing language

All of this is all very well, but it is also necessary to capture language as it emerges. My preferred method is the sticky note. Many retailers sell a slightly larger version with lines, something which can be useful when working with students with beginner literacy needs. Alternatively, and more cheaply, simply cut up old handouts into postcard (A6) size pieces (or even smaller, A7) and keep a supply to hand. Using these notes, when an interesting language item, corrected error, new language, or similar arises, you write it on one piece of paper or sticky note. You then either collect these up for a whole group discussion and analysis, for example if it represents a common issue, or simply leave them with the speaker for them and their group to discuss.

Taking this the extra step and developing these in-class interactions into a full retrospective syllabus requires a little more effort and preparation. In my study, for example, I simply recorded the language on the whiteboard during lessons, often in a fairly haphazard manner. This was most likely because the college I was working in at the time had interactive whiteboards with whiteboard software which could be used more or less as an infinite writing space. I then took photographs or screenshots of the boards and shared these with the students in our shared online space. Again, in my study this was Microsoft Teams, but similar alternatives would function just as well, for example Google Classroom, a VLE, some form of online noticeboard such as Padlet, or simply published each week on a class blog hosted online for free. An online class could make use of Google's Jamboard or a shared drive with presentation slides which you develop during the lesson. Technology is a great enabler here, as the interactive nature of many of these systems means that you can share links to more dedicated practise for specific language items, extending the classroom from the emergent classroom space into the online space.

Challenges

One of the main issues discussed in my project has been barriers to making use of this. The biggest barrier, perhaps unsurprisingly for those of us working in mainstream FE colleges, is the institutional resistance to challenging the top-down status quo of "delivering" units and outcomes to students. Here, audit requirements often include the laying out of a structured, predictable plan of learning, sometimes requiring learning outcomes to be laid out six months or more in advance. Targets must be set, audit must be satisfied, and challenging organisational expectations is not always easy. So how to face up to this challenge? The simplest and most honest option is to plan your course using your organisation's document, focussing on the learning activities first, but leaving the "learning outcomes" blank. These can then be filled in after the fact. This then becomes a genuinely useful document, as I found in my year of study on this theme,

as you can share it with students, and help them to understand how the progress has been made (not to mention reassure you). When I completed this in class, for example, it quickly became clear that language items were returning in lessons, and in one very striking case, something which had arisen only briefly in one lesson (fronted non-finite clauses) kept popping up in exam presentations at the end of the year (“having lived in the UK for 10 years...”). Progress is a slippery thing to identify in language learning, but students were constantly producing work which received feedback, but which served as the course progressed as evidence of progress. It may not have been easy to analyse by an outsider, perhaps, and certainly not by a non-specialist, but the evidence was there. Going forward, perhaps, I would attempt to further reify the progress through a more consistently maintained record of work, for example learner diaries or portfolios of work.

If LOs must be included, then these can be written more broadly than is generally expected but couched in terms familiar to the core curriculum. If the lesson is to be discussion or conversation led, simply use “outcomes” which don’t identify specific language, like “participate in a discussion” or “listen and respond to others”. A text-based lesson is likely to involve some form of detailed reading, so could easily be written as “identify details in a text” etc. These can then be updated if required as a running record of emergent language as the course progresses. There are challenges here for the teacher too, a point to which we shall return later. One of the other key demands we often have is that we have to produce lesson plans. This should really not be a problem – such an approach is *not* an absence of planning, but rather planning for the unplanned. *Activities* are planned, *interactions* are planned, all of which have space on the traditional lesson plan document. The only catch is the question of learning outcomes, which we have dealt with above.

In reality, your expectations of the lesson are more expansive than whatever you write on any lesson plan, but this has always been the case. We know that learners take away from a lesson more than we often think, because we know that a lesson is a much richer experience than can be captured on a form. Another challenge comes, perhaps surprisingly, from the students. Students come to classes with expectations. Perhaps they believe that there should be a certain amount of teacher explanation, for example, or that there should be structured handouts with gap fills. Perhaps they have had a very controlling teacher in the past who was very directive and controlling. Or perhaps they enjoy the lessons but don’t really see how it is helping them learn. Certainly, I found that students’ beliefs about the role of the teacher and how learning should happen are very deeply held, and hard to challenge. However, the flip side of this is that they *trust* their teacher, and their teacher’s ability to understand language and learning.

The answer to this is to be honest and open about *your* beliefs and practices as a teacher. Even when I was teaching from a coursebook in an EFL classroom I recall students complaining if we “played games” as part of language practice or did “too much/not enough” of something. The only realistic response is honesty and openness. I have always levelled with my students – essentially telling them that I believed what I did would help them and giving my reasons. Your students are not stupid, nor are they children. If you treat them as adults, they will respond accordingly. Students trust their teacher and, as I found, if you treat that trust with respect and integrity, and tell your students why you are doing things in a certain way,

they will respond in kind. Get them to think about their own language learning experiences, get them to reflect on the progress they have made and the learning which has happened for them, and how classroom interactions have made this possible.

The other aspect of this is that there is no rule which says every lesson *must* be this way. If an item of language emerges that the majority of the class are struggling with, or have questions about, then you can plan in a traditional outcomes-led lesson to cover that language. The joy of an approach like this is that you become what Baynham et al. (2007) describe as a *bricoleur* – a handy-person, as it were, using the most appropriate “tools” for the job. And if that job is a CELTA styled Presentation-Practice-Production lesson, then so be it. The final challenge comes from within, so to speak. Like most of us, you have likely spent your career sharing learning outcomes and setting targets. You have been told that your course must be “sequenced towards cumulatively sufficient knowledge and skills” (Ofsted, 2023). You perhaps even fully believe that you are in control of the learning process, that you decide for the good of the learners what they must learn in each lesson. You may even fully believe that this is learner centred because you’ve based your content on a couple of errors in a diagnostic assessment you did six months ago. To make something like this work requires a fundamental shift not only in how you view the conjoined acts of teaching and learning, but also in terms of who *you* are in the classroom. While you have, perhaps, greater knowledge of the target language and culture, and with some sort of mediatory role between the students and the systems in which they exist, you are nevertheless equal in all other regards.

Risk taking

It is essential to go in with an open mind. Although it is often possible, not to mention tempting, to predict language which might arise, this might still be wrong. For example, an Entry 1 lesson developing from a bus timetable might suggest present simple for timetabled facts, or “what time” questions. In reality, you might end up touching on present simple, but some members of the class have issues with prepositions (“I go in a bus.” “I go by walking.”), or talk about how they prefer to travel, and why the buses in their town are always late. Or they might ask “What does *cheese* mean?” before some amusing negotiation makes you realise that the student is asking for the meaning of “cheers” as a way of saying thank you. *All* of these are learning opportunities, and all of these are worthy of your time and energy. If your students take away a couple of accurate prepositions and can say “cheers” as they get off the bus, then that’s just as valid as your expected language, if not more so because the language comes from the students themselves.

The absence of “learning outcomes” can feel strange as well, particularly as we are conditioned by our training to have these in mind when planning our lessons, tantamount to not knowing what we are doing. Cooke et al. (2023, p.22) identify the desire for language teachers to systematise the language learning process, and my own long instilled habit sometimes led me to feel guilty that we hadn’t “covered” some grammar or other. Indeed, I even tried to assuage this guilt at times by “doing some grammar” during the process. Of course, there are risks involved in this, just as there are in trying any new method or teaching resource. Language learning is risk taking in itself. We regularly force our students to take risks, to push their own boundaries, to be uncomfortable. During a traditional grammar lesson, students might be

asked to use some of that grammar in a final speaking task, during which they might make mistakes, and possibly embarrass themselves in front of their peers. But we ask our students to do this because errors lead to correction, and therefore consciously addressing what has gone wrong.

From this comes learning. Why not, then, apply this logic to your own practice? Risks are *good*. If something doesn't work out, you reflect, you think, you learn. You talk to the students at the end, ask them what they thought of the lesson. Ask them what you could have done differently, ask them what they would like to do next, if you can. Why not open up a genuine dialogue between you and your students? I have had the excuse of doing a PhD to help fuel these discussions, but I will continue to have them as future courses play out. To begin with, perhaps, students may be respectful and praise *you* unconditionally, and not comment on the lesson at all. But as your relationships develop, you might get a more productive response. The rewards, however, are potentially enormous. The language and the learning opportunities which can arise from opening up your classroom in this way can be far beyond what you might expect. The learning from these opportunities can outweigh enormously the risks of things not coming out the way you thought. Remodel your role in the classroom, and leave your preconceptions and expectations, not to mention your ego, at the door. Embrace the unpredictability and the risk and enjoy.

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Challenging stereotypes of adult learners in mathematics

Jenny Stacey

Mathematics courses up to Level 2 (GCSE) are free of charge in the UK, and offered by many providers, including FE colleges. Classes for adults (19+) can include a diverse range of learners in terms of their ages, gender and whether their first language is English or not. In this qualitative, mixed method research a number of participants completed a questionnaire, which included attitude scales for self-efficacy and anxiety, and opportunities for comments (n=21). The questionnaire gathered information about participants' perceptions of course content, classroom dynamics and assessment. When the data was analysed by participants' characteristics, it revealed that younger participants were more anxious and less likely to pass, that males were just as anxious as females, and that those whose first language was not English were more likely to pass, had higher self-efficacy and lower anxiety than first language English speakers. These findings challenge the findings of other research, and thus stereotypical assumptions of learners, which indicates a need for further study of this under-researched group. Recommendations include surveying learners, using 'spiky profiles' to build confidence, encouraging learners to construct word problems, so that they can better engage with de-construction, and finally including techniques to manage examination anxiety.

Introduction

The purpose of this mixed method research was to increase our understanding of the diversity of adults (19+) who engage with GCSE mathematics in FE colleges, in terms of their self-efficacy and anxiety levels about mathematics. Self-efficacy is defined by Bandura in his 1997 work as a belief in or personal judgement on one's ability, as quoted in Holloway (2013). The research compared the responses of participants to their examination grades, to address the question 'Does it matter?' For instance, a learner may be very anxious about an examination, or have doubts about their ability in the subject area, but still pass. This paper describes one strand of the findings from data collected for a doctoral thesis, which I am completing on a part time basis at Sheffield Hallam University.

Context

The number of adults who were signed up for GCSE mathematics in 2020 was 30,650 in England alone (Gov.UK (1), 2020). The majority of these are likely to have received Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGS) due to the Covid 19 global pandemic which caused the cancellation of public examinations. GCSE mathematics, a level 2, fully funded qualification, is taken primarily by 16-year-olds in schools, and approximately 60% of students will pass at that stage. This examination is a marker qualification for most entrances into

university courses, in conjunction with Level 3 qualifications such as A levels or successful completion of Access to Higher Education (HE) programmes. The approximately 40% who do not pass at 16 will have to re-sit the examination until they leave education at 18 years old, or until they pass. Older (19+) learners who have not yet passed, adults who have migrated into the UK with or without mathematics qualifications from their country of origin, and UK residents with a first language other than English may have to re-engage with these courses to make progress in careers in England.

The label 'L1' is used in this paper to refer to those whose first language is English; 'LX' (Dewaele, 2018), will be used to indicate those who have another first language regardless of what this might be, e.g., for ESOL, EAL or ELL students. The term 'LX' was first suggested by Dewaele as a more inclusive phrase than other ways of referring to participants, such as native and non-native speakers. For the purpose of this research, the LX term protects the identity of participants, as it encompasses all of those participants whose first language was not English. 'Spiky profiles' is a term used to describe variations in ESOL learners' abilities in English to speak, read and write the language, which may also be present in their first languages (Colquhoun & Delaney, 2009). The term has been used in mathematics to describe variations in adult learners' abilities in different topic areas, such as number work compared to, say, algebra (Coben, 2003).

Literature review

Existing research shows a correlation between mathematics anxiety and performance for many age groups (Ashcraft & Moore, 2009), but adult learners, often on non-traditional pathways into HE or engaging with career changes, may have different motivations to learners on traditional pathways (Bélanger, 2015; Tennant, 2006), which may alter or exacerbate that relationship. Consequently, adults may differ in their perceptions and performances from students on traditional pathways, as shown by existing research from the USA (Jameson & Fusco, 2014; Watts, 2011).

Research on mathematics anxiety in adults has been in the public domain for many years (Betz, 1978; Skemp, 1987). Analysis of adult learners' characteristics in research have revealed that as learners get older, they generally become more anxious (Jameson & Fusco, 2014; Betz, 1978). Other research on students in school settings has shown that females are often more anxious than males (Hunt, Clark-Carter, & Sheffield, 2011; Szucs, McLellan, & Dowker, 2017). Research on school aged and adult students has shown that L1 English speakers will perform better than LX learners, perceived to be due to the language demands of the courses and examination papers (Kersaint, Thompson, & Petkova, 2013; Woolley, 2013). This strand of my research explores whether these earlier findings, which may lead to the establishment of stereotypical assumptions about learners, applied to a small group of adult participants (n=21) on GCSE mathematics courses in Further Education (FE) in England.

As humans with survival mechanisms in place, we are naturally inclined to form assumptions about our relationships with others based on our previous experience, whether this is a result of what we have read, heard, or seen. However, stereotypical assumptions can be damaging for learners if teachers knowingly or unknowingly hold or believe in them, or if learners adopt or internalise them. Both can potentially encourage conformity to the

stereotype in the mathematics classroom, with a subsequent reduction in ability for the affected group (Holloway, 2013).

In addition to investigating potential stereotypical assumptions, this research included an investigation into word problems. Changes in the GCSE mathematics curriculum over previous decades have involved a move away from more traditional algebraic and geometric content to mathematics which involves the interpretation of 'real life' problems, resulting in an increase in the language content of examination papers (Brown, 2001). This challenge has been explored by other researchers such as Evans (2000), who highlighted the challenges that adult learners might face with these questions. For instance, in one example learners are asked which box of cereals they would purchase, a smaller or larger size, based on the price of each. However, in real life learners might not be able to either afford or store a larger size, so the decision is not simply based on price (Evans, 2000). Word based problems which require interpretation could be a challenge for both L1 and LX learners (Dewaele, 2018). This challenge, with ideas for solutions such as learners constructing their own word problems, has been identified in the field of mathematics by those concerned with both LX and L1 mathematics learners (Barwell, 2009; Swan, 2006).

Sample

Several colleges and college groups were contacted in the East Midlands and South Yorkshire areas with a view to inclusion of their adult learners in this research. College managers were contacted via an email which contained copies of the information letter, consent form and paper-based questionnaire, and a link to the online versions on a website approved by the university (Qualtrics, 2024). Due to the Covid 19 pandemic I was unable to visit classrooms to recruit participants, so a PowerPoint presentation with a voice over by myself, explaining the content and purpose of the research, was also included. Once consent for the research to proceed within individual colleges had been given, the email was circulated by managers to teachers, and subsequently to students.

Data was collected from more than one college, from several classes with different teachers, and in two academic years, namely 2020/21, and 2021/22. The extension of the data collection over two years was due to insufficient numbers engaging with the questionnaire in the first year, which was believed to be a result of a lack of face-to-face contact with potential participants, due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. The first group were subject to CAGS (College Assessed Grades), as public examinations were cancelled for the second year in a row. Public examinations were re-established for the 2021/22 group.

Methodology and methods

This research is based on a critical realist ontological perspective (Bhaskar, 2020), with its underpinning beliefs in the possibility of change, and the value of research as a catalyst for improvement. This research is underpinned by pragmatism; whilst the small numbers of participants in qualitative research cannot be generalised to larger populations, the research can be used to describe perceptions which are present within

the population, which may lead to further investigations and research, and be used to inform teaching and learning.

A mixed method approach has been taken to the data collection (Cresswell, 2014), as a questionnaire has been the main source of data. The mixed method approach of using a questionnaire, which incorporated a combination of attitude scales and opportunities for comments, was chosen because it was found to be an effective method to gather the required data. The pilot study demonstrated that participants found it easy to understand and use. In addition, all participants were offered the opportunity for a semi-structured interview to correct or elaborate on the perceptions and insights gained from the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 15 statements, nine of which were based on the Abbreviated Math Anxiety Scale (AMAS) (Hopko, Mahadevan, Bare, & Hunt, 2003), which has been validated by extensive testing and confirmed as just as effective as much larger surveys (Hopko, 2003). The six additional statements were based on the findings from other research, including that of Evans (2000), the pilot study, and the personal knowledge gained from almost 20 years of teaching mathematics to L1 and LX adults.

The AMAS questionnaire's nine statements include using the tables at the back of a maths book, thinking about an upcoming test one day before, watching a teacher work an algebraic equation on the board, taking a mathematics examination, being given a homework of many difficult problems which is due in the next class, listening to a lecture in a mathematics class, being given a 'pop' quiz, and starting a new chapter in a mathematics book. These were amended to improve their relevance and suitability, e.g., 'using the tables' was amended to using a times table grid, the word 'pop' was dropped from the quiz statement, and 'starting a new chapter' was altered to 'starting a new topic'.

The additional statements which were unique to this research included one on word problems, another on drawing charts and graphs, rather than interpreting them, and a statement on non-mathematics examinations, to allow for a comparison between participants' views of mathematics and other examinations. The word problem given to participants was 'Working on word problems, such as if it takes three people five days to fit a kitchen, how long would it take two people?' The three additional statements drawn from other sources, included one on percentages, one on fractions and another on asking a question in class (Evans, 2000).

Each statement was accompanied by two scales, one for self-efficacy, and one for anxiety. The choices on the self-efficacy scale ranged from 'very confident' to 'I definitely can't do this'. The choices on the anxiety scale went from 'no anxiety' to 'high anxiety'. The scales are shown in Table 1.

Self-efficacy scale	Very confident	Quite confident	Don't know	I don't think I can do this	I definitely can't do this
Anxiety scale	No anxiety	Some anxiety	Moderate anxiety	Quite a bit of anxiety	High anxiety

Table 1: Attitude scales included in the questionnaire.

The use of two scales was justified by the understanding that self-efficacy and anxiety are two very different emotional states, which can evoke very different responses to stimuli. For instance, a learner might be quite confident when they go in for a public examination, but still very anxious

about it. Equally one might say 'I don't think that I can do this' when faced with the tasks of drawing a chart or graph but have no anxiety about the prospect of doing so. Participants were given the opportunity to make comments after each choice and at the end of the questionnaire. The data analysis was thematic (Braun & Clarke, 2013), based on both the themes identified in the questionnaire content, and additional themes that emerged from the analysis.

Analysis

The number of participants who responded to the questionnaire was 21 in total, which yielded 630 ranked responses to the 15 statements, 315 for self-efficacy and 315 for anxiety. Approximately 100 comments were collected.

The participants characteristics in terms of age, gender and first language were:

Age: Four participants were 19 to 24 years, 17 were 25 or more

Gender: Three participants were male, 18 were female

First language: Four were LX users, 17 were L1 English users.

Overall, 13 out of the 21 participants passed at their first attempt on the GCSE mathematics examinations, although a number passed on their second attempt, showing the value of persistence in mathematics.

The choices on the self-efficacy scale, which ranged from 'very confident' to 'I definitely can't do this', were ranked from one to five, and the anxiety scale choices, which went from 'no anxiety' to 'high anxiety', were also ranked from one to five. When the scores for individuals were added together it gave totals for self-efficacy and anxiety for each participant, which allowed for a median (middle) value to be established. The data for individuals was then categorised as either high or low self-efficacy and anxiety, compared to whether they were above or below the median value. Based on this analysis, the findings are that those with high self-efficacy and low anxiety tended to pass the examination (n=7), and that those with low self-efficacy and high anxiety tended to fail (n=4), but there were exceptions to both of these statements, as two of those with high self-efficacy and low anxiety failed, and three with low self-efficacy and high anxiety passed.

When the data is interrogated by age, only one of the four 19–24-year-olds passed, thus a low pass rate, and although they displayed similar self-efficacy levels to the 25+ participants, they showed higher anxiety levels. None of the younger participants provided additional comments. Males in this research (n=3), one of whom was an LX participant, showed lower self-efficacy and higher anxiety than some females and had a similar pass rate. All of the males made comments on their questionnaires, which expressed a number of issues including concern about word problems, algebra, testing generally, and worries about the opinions of their peers. These comments were very similar to those made by the females (n=6). However, the two withdrawals and the three participants who could not ask a question in class were all female. The four LX participants (three females and one male) in this research had generally higher self-efficacy, lower anxiety, and a higher pass rate than their L1 peers. In fact, three of the four passed, and the fourth LX participant (a female), withdrew from the course prior to

the examinations. Three out of the four LX users made comments, which included the most positive comment made by any participant, which was “I am comfortable with math”.

Other LX participants expressed concern about word problems, and timed testing in all its forms, as did many of the L1 participants, as shown in Table 2.

Statement	Comments from LX participants	Comments from L1 participants
Word problems	‘I don’t know how to work it out’. ‘7.5 days?’	‘I read too much into it and panic...’ ‘I always struggle with wordy questions’
Doing a quiz in a maths class	‘It always brings anxiety’	‘The worry of a time constraint makes my mind numb’
Thinking about an upcoming maths test one day before	‘I’d try to keep myself calm and I’d encourage myself that I’d do fine’	‘The anxiousness would put my mind in a spin’
Starting a new topic in a maths class	‘There’s always some anxiety with new topics’	‘It depends on the topic, I think. Algebra is worrying me.’

Table 2: Similarities of comments from LX and L1 participants

The comments made by participants and shown in Table 2 demonstrate the similarity of feelings and perceptions experienced. One slight difference between the L1 and LX users was that none of the LX users made any comments about the algebraic statements, in spite of a range of similar responses on the self-efficacy and anxiety scales, whereas many of the English speakers expressed concerns about this topic area even in statements that did not include algebra but mentioned ‘a new topic’. However, there was also evidence of contrasts in some of the responses to the statements, such as the statement on percentages which showed that whilst some participants were competent in this area, others were not. For instance, the LX participant who used the questionnaire as an opportunity to answer the questions, correctly identified both a method and the correct answer, which demonstrated that percentage calculations are a strong topic for this participant. However, the two L1 participants who made comments both identified percentage calculations without a calculator as a challenge, with comments such as “I panic when I see the % sign” and “(the method) is not something that stays in my head”.

Conclusions

It is clear from the findings that for these participants, whilst high levels of self-efficacy and low levels of anxiety were desirable, they were by no means essential. This may be very re-assuring to adult learners studying mathematics, especially those whose onward journeys into HE could be affected by the results. The findings from this qualitative research shows some contrasts with the generalisations made by other, larger scale research studies, and challenges stereotypical assumptions which might be present in mathematics classes around age, gender, and language

issues. If present, these may be unhelpful for both teachers and learners (Holloway, 2013).

For instance, the younger participants in this study displayed higher levels of anxiety than the older ones and were less likely to pass, which indicates support for research which showed a correlation between anxiety and success (Ashcraft & Moore, 2009). However, there was a challenge to research on age differences conducted with adults in the USA (Betz, 1978; Jameson & Fusco, 2014). If these findings on age are substantiated by a larger study, it could indicate a difference between the two countries, or a change over time in the UK, possibly as a result of curriculum changes (Brown, 2001). The findings of this research contrast with larger, school-based studies completed in England, which found that males were generally less anxious than females (Szucs, McLellan, & Dowker, 2017; Hunt, Clark-Carter, & Sheffield, 2011). In this study males were just as much and sometimes more anxious than their female peers, which may reflect the fact that the perceptions of these males had been influenced by their prior experiences of 'failing' in mathematics, as none of them so far have passed the examination.

The deficit view of LX learners (Woolley, 2013; Kersaint, Thompson, & Petkova, 2013) has also been challenged by this research, as these participants were more likely to pass than their L1 peers, were less anxious, and expressed higher self-efficacy. In addition, the comments and ranked scores on the questionnaires of the LX participants indicated just as much, but not more, concern about word problems and timed testing as the L1 participants, and the comments made are strikingly similar. These findings indicate the importance of word problems for learners generally, which has implications for teaching, and shows the need to help learners with examination techniques, such as controlling breathing to reduce adrenalin levels. Finally, there was evidence of spiky profiles in certain topic areas, such as percentages, which varied between learners.

Recommendations

My first recommendation is that practitioners conduct a short survey of their learners, probably not in the first week or two, when their responses might be more affected by the newness of the classroom, teacher, and peers, but certainly soon after that. I learned so much about these participants from their responses which would have informed both my teaching, and classroom management, especially in terms of word problems, and how I checked on the understanding of those who would not ask a question in class. This sort of information is not included in initial and diagnostic assessments. I have developed a revised survey form which could be used for this, included here in Appendix 1. It fits on an A4 sheet with a text size of 11 and allows learners to add up their own scores. The key statements that came out of this research are included, and please note that some statements ask for self-efficacy, while those on timed testing ask for anxiety. This is due to the responses given by the participants which indicated the relative importance of each attitude. Please feel free to share with colleagues and send feedback!

Secondly, I recommend the discussion and use of spiky profiles, with the intension of both boosting confidence in individuals' ability in some topic areas and encouraging peer support, if that seems appropriate.

The existence of spiky profiles is commonly understood in ESOL, as some learners may have, for instance, contrasting speaking and writing skills (Colquhoun & Delaney, 2009), but they are perhaps less applied or recently considered in mathematics (Coben, 2003). It was clear from the questionnaire responses that some participants were competent in some topic areas, such as percentages, but others were not. The use of spiky profiles could mean that the latter could be helped by the former if a climate of peer support can be established in the classroom. Thirdly, the techniques recommended by Barwell (2009) and Swan (2006), among others, to help learners engage with word problems, include asking learners in twos or threes to develop their own word problems (with solutions), and then exchanging the word problems with neighbours for each to solve. The idea here is that the process of understanding of how word problems are constructed could enable easier deconstruction, to identify the necessary mathematics required, which seems to be the challenge for learners in these tasks.

A perusal of the command word content and structure of word problems by teaching staff, so that they are aware of the language that learners will see on examination papers will be invaluable, as teachers can then ensure that they are using the same language in the classroom. However, a word of caution here, as examination boards periodically review and change their command words, and the language used differs from board to board. For instance, one board might use 'convert', whereas another uses 'change', when asking students to 'convert' centimetres to metres. Lastly, timed testing has been identified as an issue for many participants in this study, whether that was an in-class quiz or a test, as shown in Table 2. Whilst a certain level of adrenalin is necessary for a good performance in tests and examinations, a surfeit of adrenalin invokes the 'fight or flight' response which is known to impair brain function (Ashcraft & Moore, 2009). Techniques to manage anxious responses in examinations may need to be included in the taught sessions, so that learners are better able to counteract the effects of a surfeit of adrenalin in the body. Techniques are likely to be different for each person, but one example involves slowing the breathing, which can calm the mind.

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Appendix 1: revised questionnaire

This questionnaire contains mathematics and examinations confidence scales by Jenny Stacey

Name	Date / /
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Think about the situation described and rate how confident you would feel about your ability in each case. Tick the box, or write in the score:

Task	Very confident 1	Quite confident 2	Don't know 3	I don't think I can do this 4	I can't do this 5
Using a times table grid to find out what 7×9 is					
Drawing graphs and charts					
Working out 12% of £42					
Finding two thirds of £42					
Working on word problems, such as "If it takes 3 people 5 days to fit a kitchen, how long would it take 2 people?"					
Solving an algebraic equation, such as if $3x - 2 = 7$, what is the value of x ?					
Asking a question in a maths class about something you have not understood					

Think about these situations; how anxious you would feel in each case? Tick and write each score:

Task	No anxiety 1	Some anxiety 2	Moderate anxiety 3	Quite a bit of anxiety 4	High anxiety 5
Thinking about an upcoming maths test one day before					
Taking the final maths exams at the end of your course					
Taking any other exams that are NOT maths					

Now what is your total score? Write it here: [Minimum 10; maximum 50]

Do you have any comments about any of the above? If so, please make them here or overleaf.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to my supervisors, Dr Iain Garner and Dr Peter Rowlett, of Sheffield Hallam University, and to all of the participants.

The author

Jenny Stacey, PGCE, L5 Numeracy Specialism, MEd with ESOL, has taught mathematics and occasionally ESOL in FE for almost 20 years. Her speciality is delivering mathematics to ESOL/EAL learners. This paper contains some of the findings from her data collection for an EdD. Email: stillknitting@gmail.com. Website: www.esolmaths.co.uk

ESOL and progression pathways

Angela Palmer

Migrant English Support Hub (MESH) attended the NATECLA 2023 conference this year and were very pleased to present a workshop based on our project *Progression Pathways*. In NATECLA Co-Chair Greg Dugdale's speech during the opening Keynote session at the conference, he referenced the need for a united approach to ESOL, from local ESOL hubs co-ordinating provision, working outwards at a regional level to eventually form a UK-wide strategy that would link together ideas and provision to form a cohesive ESOL offer. This is the goal of everyone who works in the ESOL sector, as it is unlikely to be forthcoming at Governmental level at present. The aim of our *Progression Pathways* work is to create a regional link between ESOL classes and wider opportunities which are available to those moving on from ESOL within a wide range of sectors. Although the work of MESH is regional, it is replicable across all regions and as such can join up to become nationwide.

This project began towards the end of 2022, when MESH secured funding from Asylum, Migrant Integration Fund (AMIF) to explore what support was available in the Yorkshire and Humber region to help migrants move on from ESOL classes. ESOL learners come from a huge range of diverse personal and professional backgrounds, carrying with them an equally huge range of end goals they want to achieve in the UK, ranging from access to Higher Education (HE), gaining employment or starting their own business, to helping others in similar situations to integrate through volunteering. During networking events, visits to ESOL providers and classroom focus groups with learners, a lot of frustration has been expressed around progression. This comes from many directions: the learners know they need to improve their English to continue their profession or advance their studies in the UK but feel frustrated at being 'stuck' in ESOL classes for years. Providers and tutors are frustrated because they feel that the information is not readily available for them to usefully guide their learners towards next steps (or parallel steps) out of ESOL.

The question of where learners can go after ESOL, and how providers, tutors and other support services can support and advocate for them, has arisen repeatedly. This is challenging, as information is not always easily forthcoming and tends not to be coordinated in a way that makes it accessible. When mapping support and provision it is important to consider the 87% of providers who told us that their learners do other courses to supplement ESOL. Parallel journeys need to be mapped alongside ESOL in order to get a full picture of support needs. Provision and support changes all the time, due mainly to funding, so this information needs to be constantly updated in order to be relevant.

Taking all of these things into account, we decided on a course of action that would involve researching, mapping and then producing a resource to help provide information to those supporting ESOL learners. This resource will be dynamic and continually updated, as with our Learning English in Yorkshire and Humber (LEYH) and Learning English (LE+) websites. In this way, *Progression Pathways* will complement the work already being done by MESH by providing an evolving portfolio of contextualised learner

journeys, in the form of infographics which map these journeys, supported by the Wider Learning Opportunities section of the LEYH website. In this Wider Learning Opportunities section, we list any courses that may be complementary to ESOL, or help those who have finished their ESOL courses to find further study.

The research

Evolving as it did out of MESH networking events and discussions with tutors and providers, our research initially took the form of informal interviews, and then questionnaires sent out to providers and support services with questions that arose from these discussions. Once we had gathered a sufficient number of questionnaire responses from providers, we analysed the results.

The headline information that we have gathered so far via questionnaires from tutors and providers is summed up here:

- 40% of respondents said that they do not have enough information to help their learners progress to another course
- 33% of respondents in non-college settings said that they refer learners directly to colleges after finishing the course, while **20%** said that their organisations helped learners find another course
- 87% of respondents said that learners do additional courses alongside ESOL.

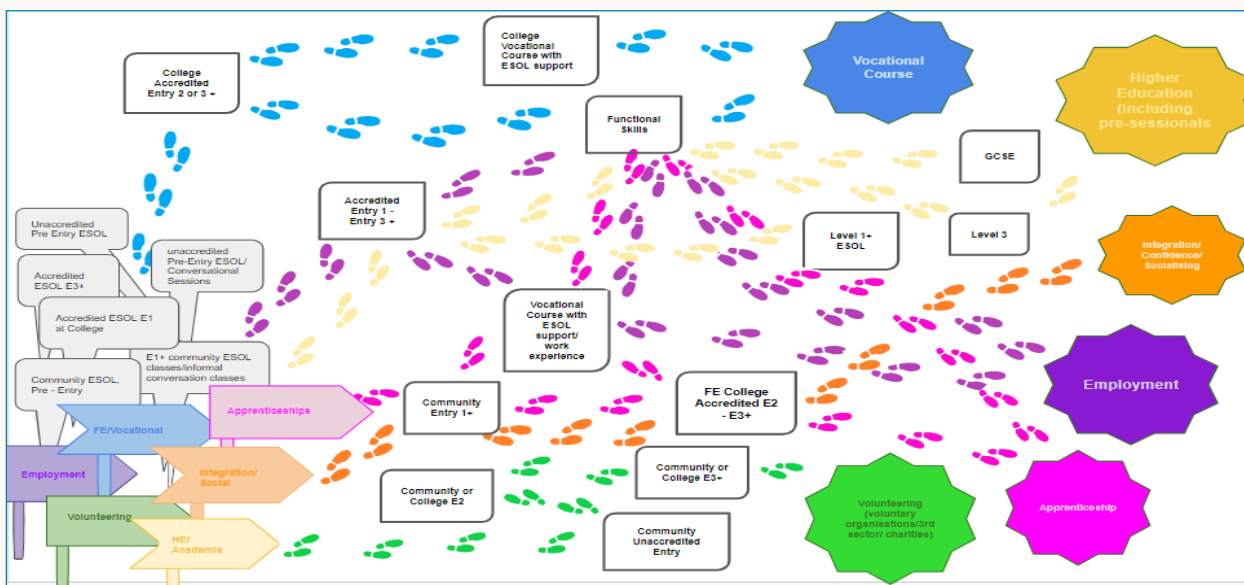
Further anecdotal interviews with providers and tutors helped to flesh out some of the issues behind and reasons for these headlines. Within the 40% who do not have enough information to help their learners progress, there seems to be a correlation between size and type of organisation and knowledge of other provision. If tutors work for a large organisation such as a Further Education (FE) college, there is likely to be more support for them in terms of advice about other courses. However, there is also likely to be pressure on them to advance their ESOL learners on to further courses within the college, regardless of the individual goals of the learner. We heard from some tutors, for example, who are encouraged to refer learners who complete Level 1 ESOL to Functional Skills English. Although this may be a useful further qualification, it is not necessarily the most suitable course for every learner. If that learner is a qualified nurse, for example, whose goal is to gain employment in the NHS, they would be much better served by being directed to the OET (Occupational English Test – specifically for those who wish to work as healthcare professionals) rather than Functional Skills. This also goes for IELTS, which is often signposted as a next step to those wanting to gain access to specific professions, but is often the longest, most difficult and expensive route.

Again, it seems quite telling, in relation to available ESOL and knowledge of what is available, that 33% of non-college providers and tutors refer their learners directly to colleges. The majority of these referrals are for Functional Skills courses, adding to the significant numbers of learners already at college, most of whom will progress onto Functional Skills. Although these courses offer a qualification and further opportunity to learn English, they might only offer more decontextualised and lengthy study rather than considered routes towards learners' end goals. As mentioned in the introduction, additional courses alongside ESOL

are very popular for learners. Part of our motivation for the *Progression Pathways* work was to follow up on this and find out what kinds of courses they are doing, and whether their motivations are social, professional, academic, or all the above! The second part of our research has been conducting interviews with current and post ESOL learners, both individually and in focus groups. This has been a very interesting process, where we have heard first-hand stories of lived experience of ESOL from people with a range of different backgrounds and goals. It is important for quick and coherent progression that learners have information about and access to courses or support that is specific to their areas of expertise or professions. This has been a large focus of our research: once we identify a learner's background and goals, we can start to identify what is available for them in their local area and in the wider region.

The infographics

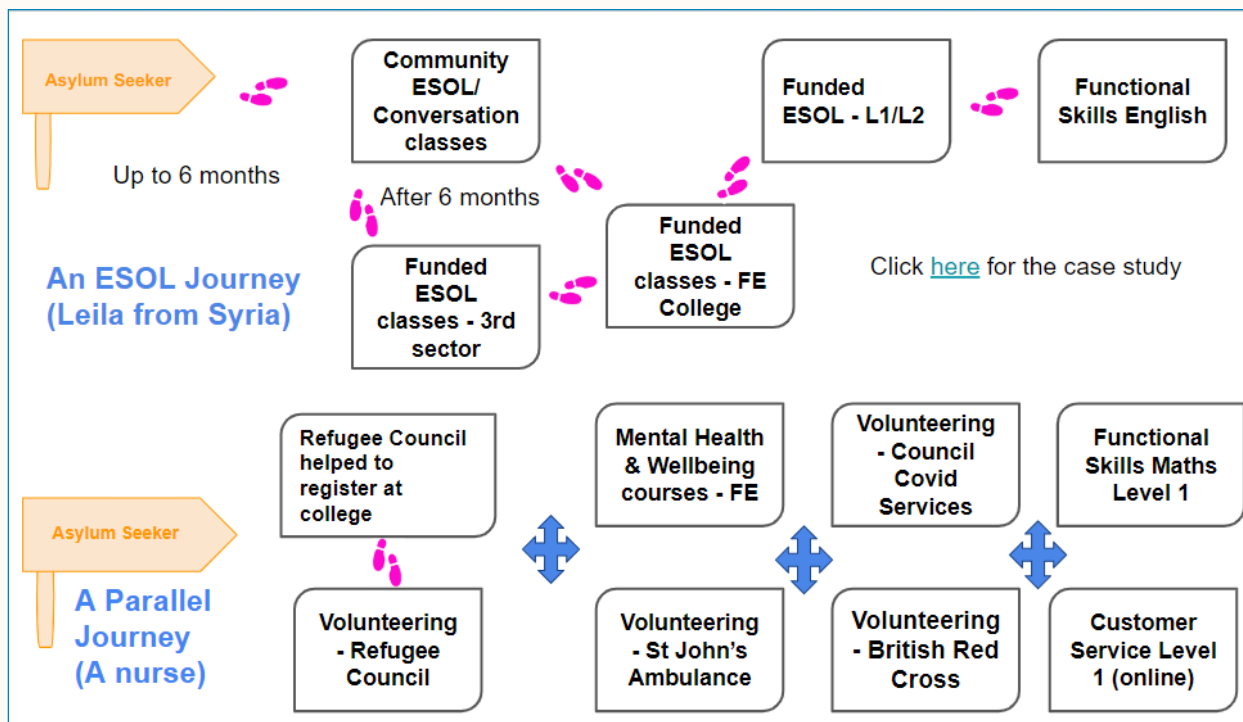
Our initial idea was to produce a single infographic that would act as a kind of 'map' for people to follow, from their starting point towards their specific goal. Our first attempt at this 'one size fits all' infographic, based on our learner interviews, looked like this:



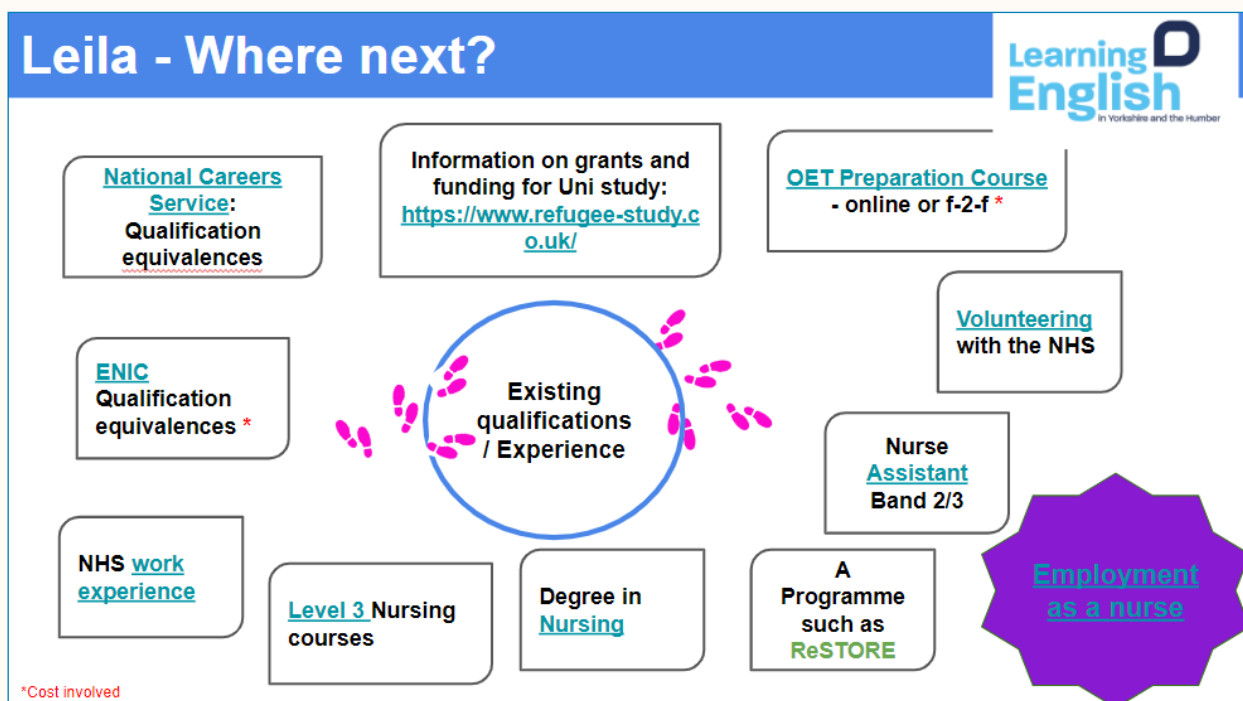
As can be seen here, the variety of different starting points and end goals is so wide that a single infographic becomes impossible to read. It is a good reflection of the range of journeys undertaken by ESOL learners in Yorkshire and the Humber, but as a mapping tool its usefulness is limited. The sheer variety of different starting points, journeys and goals led us to the idea of producing a portfolio of individual journey infographics instead, showcasing a range of different options for reaching specific end goals. In the first instance we chose one learner who had spoken to us as part of the research and created a new, individual infographic of their ESOL journey along with a parallel journey, which might include additional courses or volunteering. Once this was mapped, it became clear that we needed to produce a further infographic with the learner's options for what they can do next to advance them towards their goal. Each learner experience, then, is mapped on two infographics: the ESOL journey and parallel journey they have been on in the UK up until now, and then the 'Where Next' infographic, which maps their possible routes going forward.

An example case study

Here is one of the individual infographics that we produced:



The learner journey is Leila’s. She is a nurse from Syria, who has been in the UK for 6 years. As can be seen on the infographic, she has completed a number of ESOL and Functional Skills courses in that time, as well as undertaking a large amount of volunteering within the healthcare sector. However, these have not yet led to employment as a nurse, due to lack of a clear route for Leila to gain employment as a refugee nurse with qualifications that are not recognised in the UK. When researching her ‘Where Next’, there were several interesting points that came to light. Here is her ‘Where Next infographic:



*Cost involved

Leila has a range of different options which may help her gain employment as a nurse. She has tried getting qualification equivalences already. There are two options for that shown here, one through the National Careers Service, who contact ENIC on behalf of their client, and one through ENIC directly, which requires a fee. As her qualifications were not equivalent to nursing qualifications in the UK, she needed to look at other options which include undertaking a Level 3 nursing course, and then a funded degree in Nursing. Obviously, this is not a particularly attractive option for Leila as it means 3 more years at least of studying before being able to earn a wage. She is a single mother with two children to support, so this would be very difficult. Her best route into employment might be volunteering in further roles with the NHS while studying for the OET Preparation Course. This is an alternative to IELTS which is specifically for healthcare professionals, giving her the English, she needs to be able to work in the UK nursing environment. These things together could ensure that she gains the language skills and references to be able to apply for a Nurse Assistant role. Nevertheless, it is still a long, slow, frustrating road for her to continue a career that she loves.

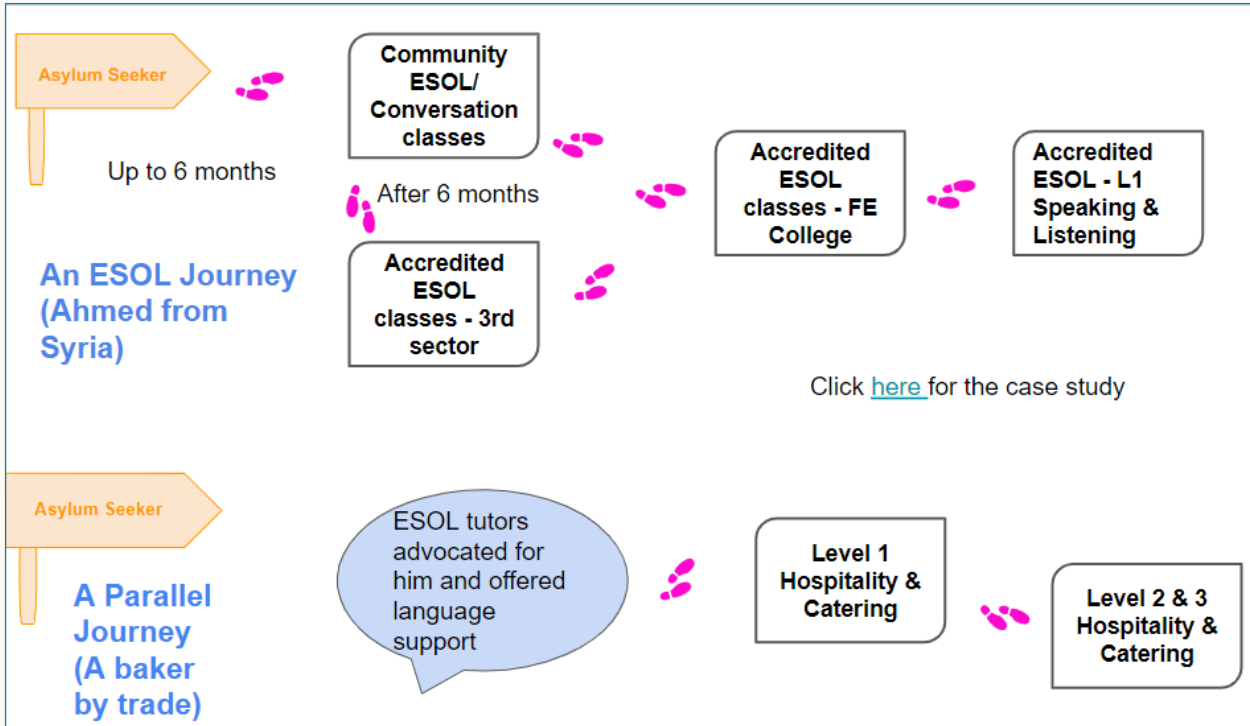
During the course of this research, we discovered a resource that had been set up to address this problem in Sheffield and South Yorkshire. The ReSTORE program, set up by Blerta Ilazi in 2023 and funded by South Yorkshire Primary Care Training Hub, aims to support refugee nurses living in South Yorkshire to enter employment as registered nurses with the NMC (Nursing and Midwifery Council). They gather once a week in Sheffield and focus on their support needs – they study for the OET together, and those who need extra English support are referred to ESOL classes. They also get support with securing employment as healthcare assistants, OSCE training (a practical exam which is a Test of Competence for nurses and midwives), and CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) to address trauma. As well as this, it also provides a range of pastoral support, from housing advice to childcare and immigration advice.

Blerta, herself a nurse who works in an NHS GP practice, came to the UK as a refugee 20 years ago, and has lived experience of the barriers that nurses face when attempting to continue their careers in the UK. She runs it with colleagues including Emma Matthews and Michael Draffan, who give their time over and above busy careers in the NHS to help people. It makes so much sense – the NHS is crying out for employees (there is a shortage of 50,000 nurses in the UK), while there are thousands of skilled and experienced healthcare professionals who want nothing more than to work for them. This kind of holistic program, which addresses the multiple needs and challenges of individuals, offers a clear route forward for refugee healthcare professionals, and it exists due to the hard work and motivation of a small group of people. The programme is just getting started, and is dependent on further funding, but they have already succeeded in placing two people in nurse assistant roles and are strengthening links with organisations willing to take people on work placements. Getting the word out amongst ESOL providers about programs like this can hopefully go some way towards supporting the formation of more, and allowing for those with knowledge and lived experience of working as professionals to mentor those who are working towards the same goal. To go back to our case study, Leila would need to re-locate from where she lives in Wakefield to be able to join ReSTORE, but even without doing this she can be referred to them and given advice and support about her area, and even put in contact with those who are able to arrange work placements.

The progression pathways learning resource

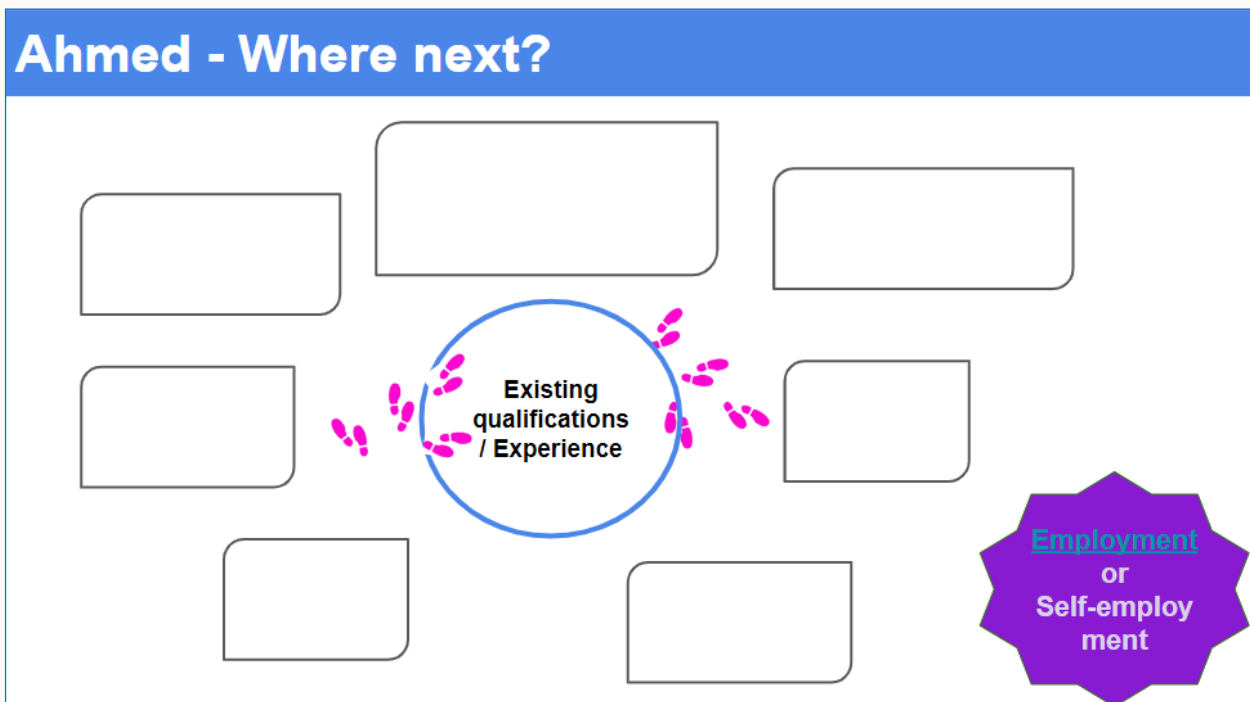
The research on this project continues, and we plan to deploy it in different ways. A key way forward has been to prepare some of our research and infographics as a resource that can be used in the classroom. The resource, accessible via our [Learning English Plus](#) website, includes several ESOL and parallel journeys along with 'Where next?' slides for people with various starting points and end goals. These will be added to as the research continues (subject to funding). There are a variety of suggested ways to use this resource included in the overview, but one of the most valuable ways that it can be used in class is as a reflective tool for learners. Once they have looked at and discussed a couple of learner journeys, learners can be encouraged to map their own journey on a similar template, and then research their options to fill in their own 'Where Next' infographic. This process can be very motivating, as it will help learners fit their current ESOL course into a broader context of learning and progression. With this knowledge and understanding of what is available, learners may feel more motivated to continue to work towards their aims and take control of their own path. Our research shows that in general, the current formal structure of ESOL learning does not support learners to do this, and ESOL tutors do a lot of hidden work behind the scenes, doing research to support learners who go to them for help and support. This is very dependent on the area where these learners end up living, and what support is available for new migrants in that area.

The resource created to go with the *Progression Pathways* work follows the same model as our previous learning resources (accessible via our [Learning English Plus](#) website), helping learners to understand where ESOL fits into the wider scheme of learning and training that is available in the region. Instead of going to English classes to improve their English in a decontextualised space, they can begin to position themselves as part of a network which offers information and support with their goals. As an illustration of this, here is the part of the resource that offers information about Ahmed, an ESOL learner who had owned and run a bakery in Syria, who now wants to open a bakery here in the UK.:

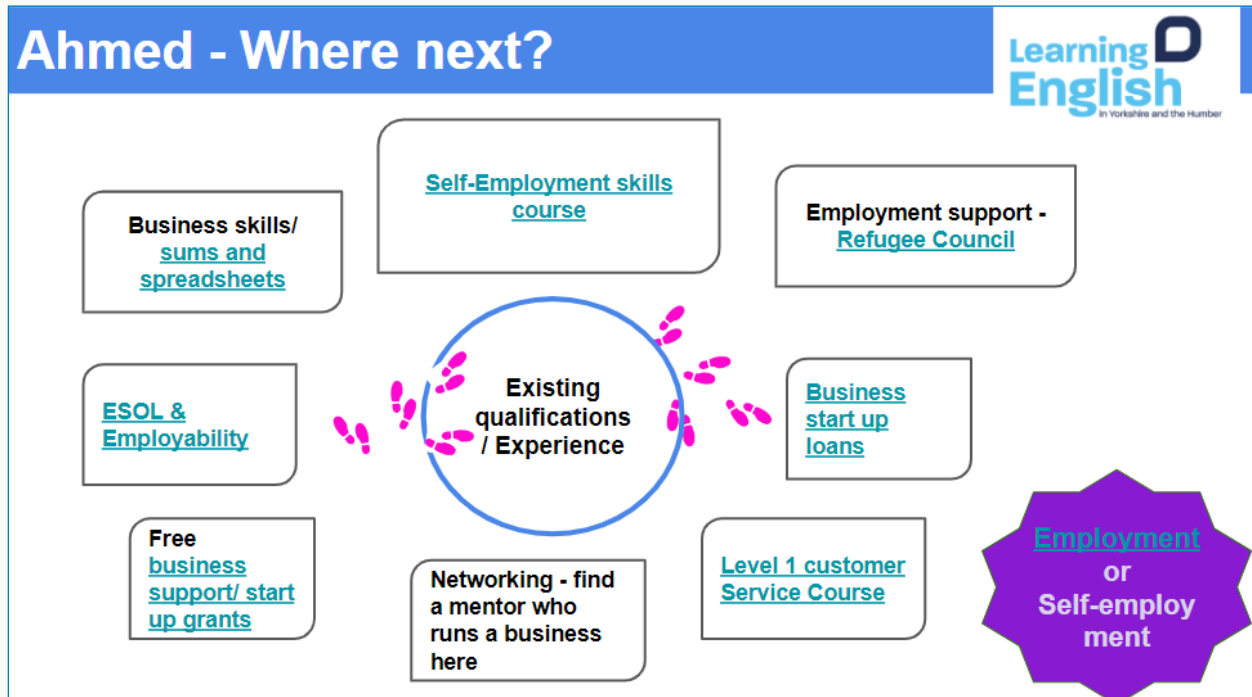


This infographic shows Ahmed’s ESOL journey to his current Level 1 Speaking and Listening class, as well as a rather unusual parallel journey, where he was advocated for by his tutors when he was in Entry 2 ESOL to join a Level 1 Hospitality and Catering course. He is currently doing the Level 2 course – something which would have taken him several years to achieve if it had not been for the intervention of his tutors after they tasted the extraordinary cakes that he baked. The question is: how far can the catering course go towards helping him achieve his goal of running his own bakery? Does he need the skills he will learn there or does he already have them? Where can Ahmed go next in order to achieve his own personal goal?

As part of the resource, learners would then get a template ‘Where Next?’ infographic to discuss and fill in:



They might be able to use the Wider Opportunities page on the LEYH website to find courses such as Self-Employment and Business basics. Here is the completed example for Ahmed the baker:



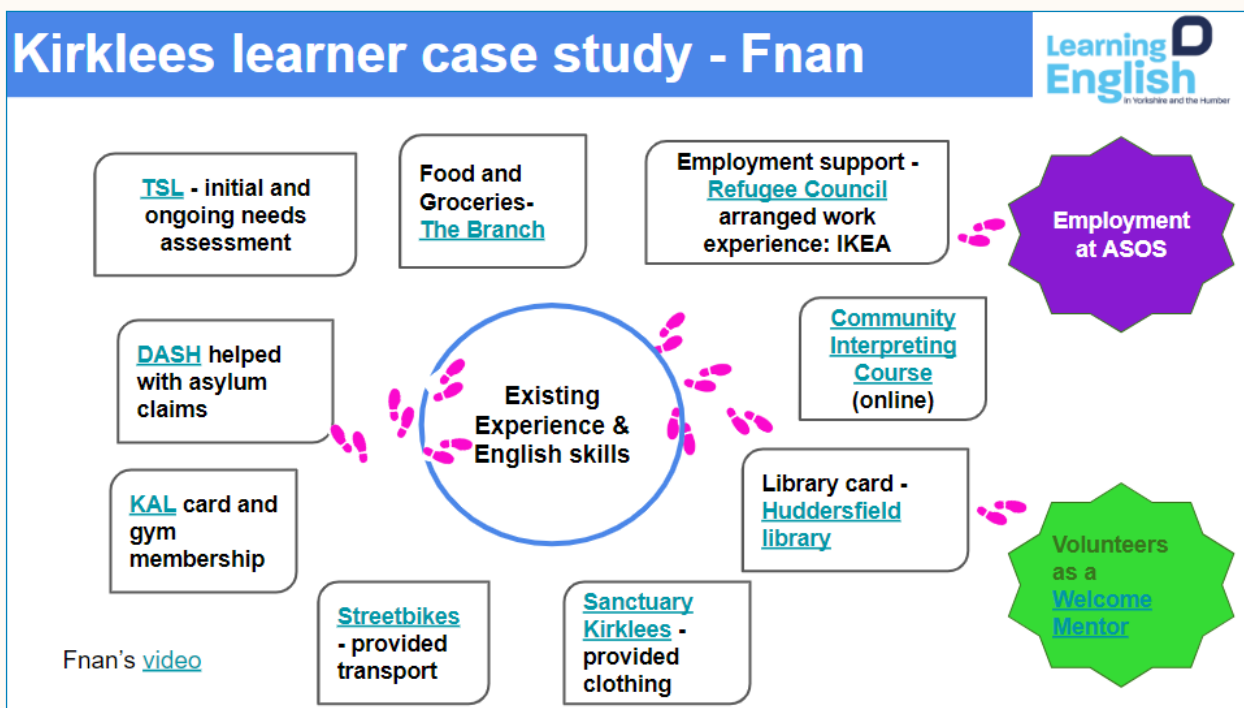
A key point for Ahmed might be to find somebody who is already running a similar business in the area and using them as a mentor. Whatever the route, giving ESOL learners the opportunity to look at real case studies of people who have been through the system they are currently in can give them the ability to place themselves in the middle of their own ‘Where Next?’ mind map, which in turn can lead them to information about opportunities that they didn’t previously know existed. This hopefully goes some way towards filling in the gap for migrants in the region between living from day to day and living with hope and aspiration.

‘Where next’ for progression pathways?

The Progression Pathways research and thinking about ESOL learning in a wider context led us to understand and appreciate the significance of a broader approach being taken by some local authorities in our region. This approach expands the idea of looking at the ESOL learner more holistically and considers how supporting the learner outside the traditional norms of classroom education can make a significant contribution to their timely progression. As part of our provider interviews, we spoke to Christina Simpkin from TLS Kirklees and Naheed Hussain from Bradford Council about the Single Point of Access (SPA) strategies that they are implementing to help people settle.

Applying the Progression Pathways model, and based on our interviews, we have produced a case study and infographic mapping the provision in Kirklees and are in the process of doing this for Bradford. This mapping process and the infographics we produce from it, aim to provide important information to all areas of the region about how providers and support services can work in partnership to facilitate progression for new migrants.

Here is the learner infographic that we produced based on the Kirklees SPA model:



As you can see, the system has supported Fnan in putting his existing experience and skills to use, leading to employment at ASOS and a role as a Welcome Mentor for new arrivals to the area. This holistic approach effectively supports integration through working in partnership. He has only been living in Kirklees for one year, but in that time all of his basic needs have been met, allowing him to reach for further aims which will enrich and enhance not only his life, but the community as a whole. Fnan was a teacher in Eritrea, and his goal may be to continue teaching as a career, or further study and a change of career, and this is where the infographic approach of Progression Pathways can help him find the information and support, he needs to do that.

Our overall goal with this project is to produce and continue to add to a portfolio of support infographics which will help signpost ESOL learners and those supporting them towards meaningful next steps. Making this resource accessible to all providers of ESOL, tutors, learners and support services will hopefully support people in making informed choices and shorten the length of time that learners spend in frustrated limbo before beginning to make progress towards their ultimate goals. Equally, if there isn't a clear, defined goal, these infographics may help to inspire people and give them ideas about what is possible as a migrant in the Yorkshire and Humber region. Encouraging reflection on an individual's position in the broader system helps them to feel less helpless, ultimately leading to empowerment of people to take control of their own situation. We also hope to build on the insights in this research, developing new approaches to contextualised ESOL learning which work on the principle of reflective empowerment to produce more rounded, holistic approaches to learning for migrants coming to the UK.

The author

Angela Palmer joined MESH as a Development Worker in January 2022. She is an experienced ESOL and EFL teacher with a passion for supporting learners to achieve their goals. She is interested in integrating English into the daily lives of learners, particularly developing resources that can help them navigate their new communities.

Sustainability in ESOL: what stories can we tell to help others embrace it?

Carol Samlal

Share and spread the message through stories

Telling stories is one of the most powerful means to influence, teach, and inspire. When it comes to sustainability and climate issues, it is evident that we need new stories to help us navigate the challenges ahead. More of these challenges will be explored later, as will ideas on how we can incorporate them for sustainable living into story writing for the ESOL classroom. However, it should be mentioned here that the underlying message of sustainable stories and be summed up in one simple word – kindness.

Kindness might seem disconnected from all the things we are told to do about being sustainable, but if we consider the reasons driving sustainable living, then the links to kindness becomes obvious. In addition, given that sustainability is about making decisions that are in the best interest of the planet for the rest of our lives, then each decision needs to be a kind one. It requires us to carefully consider every aspect of our lives; needs versus wants as many of the things we consume are based on the latter. By including kindness in every story, we can encourage others to decide whether decisions taken would either harm or help our environment (our home) and all living things (our relatives).

Inspiration for sustainable stories

The idea of stories came from the outpourings from other language professionals, journalists, indigenous authors, and various natural and social scientists writing about specific topics. They all speak of creating a new story to replace the one that is no longer working for us. Three individuals who inspired the story telling ideas in this workshop are Native American elder, Sherry Mitchell, Dr Nate Hagens, Executive Director of The Institute for the Study of Energy & Our Future (ISEOF) and Charles Eisenstein, public speaker, and author on ideas for an alternative “story of interbeing”. They see things from different perspectives – nature and life, science and economics, and spiritual and community building. Sustainable stories in ESOL can link these perspectives to help give people agency. It would add strength to the individual effort and expand into a classroom and community effort.

A deeper appreciation for a sustainable approach

Before exploring these ideas, take a step back to view the wider picture. What does it mean to be sustainable? What is the goal? And why? Understanding the root of the problem leads to effective solutions and enhances commitment to the changes that are required. Sustainability has a far simpler a definition than [proposed by the UN](#) – it is basically making decisions in the best interests of the planet (our home) and continuing to do so for the rest of our lives. The everyday choices we make are directly related to ESOL type topics – travel, shopping, food, clothing, transport, festivals, and celebrations. They all carry some element of [purchasing decisions](#) and how we purchase or consume has an impact on our environment. For example, shopping for [new shoes or clothes](#) – is this need for the item or a bit of retail therapy? If therapy is being sought, then there must be some stress involved and shopping is not the cure. On the other hand, there is more satisfaction from the [anticipation of shopping](#) than in owning things (which inevitably ends up in a landfill).

Re-thinking our consumption habits is an important element of sustainable living and adopting a more circular approach. Everything we have ever made uses ‘resources’ from the planet – some form of biomass and minerals. It has been a very linear economical approach where we take from the Earth, make goods and services, and then [throw it away](#). It would be more beneficial to have a more circular type of economy coupled with [degrowth](#) economics. It is widely proven that burning fossil carbons is one of the chief anthropogenic drivers for global heating which impacts on climate change and weather. But the climate crisis, as dire and extremely dangerous as it is, is but a subset of a much larger problem – overshoot.

[Overshoot](#) is basically human’s over-consumption of more than Earth can afford to regenerate. We are demanding goods and services that we are told we need to ‘improve’ upon some deficiency in ourselves. Corporations dictate that we must have the latest phone, gadget, car, fashion, holiday etc. Seeing beyond this needless consumption allows us to be mindful to use only what we need, leaving an abundance for the generations to follow so that they too can enjoy a fulfilling life. Individuals and corporations have a responsibility to ensure we do not cross [planetary boundaries](#). It is this deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of consumption, energy, economics, and overshoot that drives the choice to be kinder to our environment.

Sustainable stories in ESOL

Sustainable stories help people to view the environment with more kindness; the environment is our home, all living things are relatives, and Earth as our mother. Now, for the lessons in stories in ESOL.

Dancing with the Cannibal Giant – planning and writing a sustainable story.

Sherri Mitchell, in her book, *Sacred Instructions*, told the extinction story of the Wabanaki people. One where a fearsome cannibal giant, Kee-wakh is awakened much to the demise of humans. Learners could be asked to think about what are some of the terrible things Kee-wakh might have done/ would do and what of his motives. The story itself, once read to listeners

(and telling/listening to a story, is also a great aspect of storytelling) reveals that Kee-wakh is not actually the monster, he is a protector. The true villains in the story are us and our persistent appetite for continued growth and consumption. He merely facilitates our demise so that Earth Mother can be rid of us, the scourge, so that she can heal, and life (not necessarily, human) can continue. It is in essence, a wake-up call for humans and an impetus for learners to think carefully about their consumption habits. Learners are encouraged to examine their own lives and see what they can change to protect Earth Mother (and in the long run, themselves) by putting Kee-wakh back to sleep, so that we can continue to live, but this time, sustainably.

Ideas, as one of the groups attending the workshop shared, involved a man who had removed much of the greenery in his garden, and then discovered that it he could no longer enjoy his open space as it became too hot and devoid of the birds he once enjoyed. He realised that he needed to undo the harm he had caused and return his garden to a place where it could be a mini ecosystem because he understood that all the little creatures and plants in his garden were connected to each other. Learners can collaborate ideas and plan a story which could be written later. A storyboard works wonderfully for getting learners to put their ideas in both writing and images (especially for lower-level learners or where there is a lack of vocabulary to express what they are trying to say). The teacher could then of course spend a little time with each group to help them flesh out ideas or offer vocabulary / expressions where needed. Writing the actual story could remain a group effort or it can be assigned individual homework.

Reshaping words

Words create a certain perception and can lead to a dumbing down of the urgency of the changes needed. The idea of eco-linguistics as part of this workshop was inspired by Professor Arran Stibbe and funded by the University of Gloucestershire's 'Stories we live by' online course. To add to this, was Professor Nate Hagen's take on more 'climate' type and regular everyday words you might hear in media. The words we choose are integral to our sustainability stories because they can change perceptions and behaviours. Take for example the expressions 'creepy crawlies' which instil some fear or disgust as opposed to 'mini beasts' which empower and inspire awe. With insects populations in decline globally, it is crucial that they are seen as integral to the food web instead of as pests.

Teachers can show some 'regular' word and ask learners to think about what they are. For example, what image comes to mind when you think of 'milk'. Perhaps a pint from the supermarket, or a white liquid that goes well with cereals or tea. But what is it really? It is not just milk it is dairy milk, or even better, cow's breast milk. The word milk (meaning cow's breast milk) on its own has become the default and everything else must be defined – goat's milk, breastmilk (human) etc., but by so doing, we remove the cow from the equation and therefore from our minds when it comes to manufacturing. By initiating the shift in thinking about the word 'milk', it opens up the discussion as to how cow's milk relates to sustainability, which leads to industrial dairy practices, animal cruelty and emissions.

There are other words and expressions too. For example, consider the well-used, well-meaning term, 'fossil fuel'. Only part of that expression is accurate because the latter half is an invitation of sorts to assume that

its purpose is for burning. A truer expression for the remains of fossilised aquatic plants would be fossil carbons or fossil hydrocarbons. It might not have the same alliterative ring and runs the risk of sounding too 'sciency', but two good reasons to adopt a realistic alternative is that: one, it takes away the right to burn it and two, science is cool and embeddable in ESOL! Here are a few more terms from Nate Hagens for you to take away and mull over:

- **consumer** – *humans who live in a culture that promotes consumption*
- **fish stocks** – *fish populations* (consider the recent and continuing rise in sea surface temperatures, the waters off [Florida](#) rose to about 38C and one third of the coral reefs are now dead. Rise in SST temperatures mean less oxygen – fish and marine animals are literally fighting to survive)
- **relative** – *having a common ancestor* (religious, evolution, star dust whatever you believe, there is one common origin)
- **change** – *climate crisis* (or emergency, catastrophe as we continue to see record loss of sea ice at both poles, especially Antarctica where the sea ice loss has been ongoing despite its winter season).

Part of the larger problem we are facing with the use of words in tackling climate, biodiversity and overshoot issues has to do with our mental conditioning in a neoliberal capitalist economy. It has exploited the fact that humans are more attuned to imminent danger than some distant one happening elsewhere and could be solved by someone else. Cognitive dissonance and brain biases are real phenomena with the slow rise to action and climate denial. More can be read about this topic, and perhaps advisably so in order to better understand why some learners might resist suggestions for change or even hold opposing views. Here are a couple of articles to start you down this particular rabbit hole. [How your brain stops you from taking climate change seriously | PBS NewsHour](#) and [How brain biases prevent climate action – BBC Future](#).

Creating the future story

Most typical future tense activities revolve around a prediction exercise, but when it comes to sustainability there is an urgency for plans (of action). There are two fun collaborative story writing techniques to get learners thinking about a more sustainable future. [The next five years](#) is going to be quite challenging for humankind (as this year's heatwaves, wildfires and extreme storms have indicated), and Charles Eisenstein's talk on this topic prompts us to think about what we are going to do in the short-term future. He says, "It's really hard to hold a story in opposition to the story that surrounds you, and we are immersed still in the story of separation"; this powerful statement tells us that we cannot hope to succeed in any sustainability effort without collaboration. We should still endeavour to make changes in our personal lives; we can consume less, fly less, change our diets etc. (MJ's song, *Man in the Mirror* comes to mind with clarity of meaning now). But we should also emphasise on how we can work together, and what better way that starting with the ESOL community?

Instead of a prediction exercise in asking learners what they think what's going to happen in the next five years, we could turn this into a plan for the future. Eisenstein, in [one of his talks](#) asks, what happens if we asked our partners or family members what is going to happen tomorrow or this

weekend, they would suggest a plan. And so too, we could extend this to the next five years, to make a plan instead of offering a prediction. Given the activity: *What are you going to do over the next five years?* Learners could write this either from an individual perspective on becoming more sustainable or from a community perspective. Ideally this sort of activity is preceded by an open discussion about reasons for and how to be sustainable. They would then plan their story in groups and each learner could write a paragraph. They could then look at strategies to link their paragraphs so that it makes sense as a whole.

On the other hand, as one of the groups at the workshop decided, each person writes a sentence on one line, folds the paper, and writes one word, then passes it along to the next person who then starts their sentence with that word. They repeat the process until it is time to stop. At the end, the completely folded paper is opened to reveal the entire story and is read out to the group. Of course, there is a huge surprise element to this as it might or might not make sense. This particular group's story leaned towards the latter and provided much entertainment for the rest of us, but in a class, it provides a fantastic atmosphere for the group to then tweak their story as needed. There would be a mixture of story writing techniques involved from planning, structure and language needed. But underlying the writing, is the collaboration – a key sustainability skill we need to develop as we work together as communities to get through the increasingly difficult times ahead.

The true embedded sustainability lessons

Group sustainability story writing in ESOL has a two-fold purpose. The more obvious is the writing skills and awareness of issues/ideas to deal with what is happening in the environment. The other purpose is the importance of working and sharing together, reinforcing collaboration and collective effort, respect, and kindness. Living and working together with sustainability goals means that every decision we take is based on what is in the best interests of our Earth Mother. It is one step closer to putting Kee-wakh back to sleep and if you are familiar with the Disney story of Moana, [healing Te Ka](#) so that she returns to her form as the life-giving Te Fiti – the environment (force of nature / Mother Nature) that sustains life as we know it. I cannot, in this one (not so) short article, express how important it is for us to change our ways. To be kind first to the smallest creature and that kindness will spread, untamed, to all life. With a kindness and respect for all life, change to reduce overshoot becomes easier. So, let's tell it like it is and create new stories for humankind and all our relatives. Stories that will change the path we are currently on and shape a way for cooperation and life in the coming storm.

The author

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How can we make ‘International Women’s Group’ better?

What insight can be gained from collecting informal feedback online from refugee learners of ESOL

Amna Smith

There is a focus on ESOL provision to educate women in vulnerable communities (Pennachia et al., 2018). The research in progress will investigate feedback data from an informal ESOL class in the east of England. This comes from a need for research on refugee ESOL learners and the barriers they face in education (Stewart & Schaffer, 2021). The class provides basic ESOL instruction for refugee and asylum-seeking women. Volunteer teachers, creche works and paid members of staff from a local charity run the service. Women who attend the group come from a BAME background, in the east of England. Approximately forty women meet each week, their ages range from 18 to 60 years old. It is notoriously difficult to gain feedback from refugee learners as individuals are reticent to criticise services that they receive for free. There is a great paucity of research on refugee learners and how to teach them (White, 2021).

Data will be collected during a “feedback collecting” session in September 2023. Volunteer tutors have previously introduced the feedback giving process – by using QR codes linking to a Padlet, an online platform. Volunteers will assist weaker students with typing/ dictating their feedback, whilst every effort will be made to anonymise the posting process and reduce fear of prejudice, there may have been observer effects. The data collection design was based on Feuerherm & Oshio (2020) who conducted a client partnership and needs analysis for one ESOL community group in Utah. The aim of the feedback collection was to improve the ESOL services provided by the charity and assist the curriculum planning and teaching of the group.

The feedback received will inform future planning of lessons and activities within the community group. It will offer insight into the experiences of these women in the ESOL classroom, and the views of the ESOL tutors who teach them. Consent and support of the refugee support agency who organises the ESOL classes, was gained prior to the start of research. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Southampton prior to starting the research. Individual consent was gained from the learners prior to feedback collection, via a participant information and consent form. Special consideration needs to be given to the consent forms, as there are challenges with gaining adequate informed consent from refugee participants (Mackenzie, McDowell & Pittany, 2007).

Informal ESOL provision can facilitate integration into life in the host country for refugees (Cheung & Phillimore 2014). Further, participation in

an ESOL class or community group can have positive effects on a person's mental health. The setting of the study in progress is a same gender, all female ESOL class in the east of England. The study aims to examine the feedback received and any relationship between membership of a specific ESOL class. For example, feedback given by a Pre-entry class learner may differ from feedback given by a learner in an E2/E3 class.

The method of data collection will be rapid, as it will be collected during a two-hour ESOL session. The purpose of the feedback gathering exercise, the use of data and how their privacy and anonymity will be maintained will be explained to the participants, by the volunteer tutors and supervised by the researcher. By posting a comment to the Padlet, participants are actively participating in the study and give permission to have their comments shown and analysed. Padlet was selected as a platform to collect data, because of its ease of use and comprehensive data protection statement. The reason for collecting feedback is the ongoing goal of improving women's group as a service and provider of ESOL.

The research questions are:

1. What insights can be gained by collecting feedback from Padlet?
2. What suggestions do the learners have for improving the International Women's Group?
3. Are there opportunities for the learners to lead sessions?

The research objectives are:

1. to collect and analyse feedback from learners participating in an informal ESOL class
2. to foster a culture of feedback within the community ESOL group
3. to acknowledge suggestions on the planning of lessons and activities in line with learner feedback.

The research will inform practitioners about the benefits of collecting feedback from refugee learners, and the best practice of doing so, regarding privacy, ethics, informed consent and information sharing. This feedback collection study is a pilot study for a larger ongoing PhD project, investigating the barriers female refugee learners face accessing ESOL provision in the east of England. It is hoped that the simplicity of the proposed project will inspire future Padlet feedback collection activities across other refugee support agencies and organisations.

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Thinking differently for the future of the planet: UNESCO key competencies for sustainability: what are they, and how can we incorporate these competencies into teaching ESOL

Ann Cowie

We have known about global warming and the effect of greenhouse gases for many years. The first United Nations conference to set environmental targets took place in 1972, and annual United Nations COP (Conference of the Parties) meetings have discussed and promised action on climate change since the mid-1990s. According to Nasa (2023), 97% of the world's scientists now agree that our planet is warming and that this is due to human activity. In 2015, the United Nations identified 17 new sustainable development goals (SDGs), a 'universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere' (United Nations, 2023). These targets were adopted by all UN member states as a global action plan to achieve the goals by 2030. Individual countries each developed their own plans to meet the targets. However, progress has been slow and at the midway mark; although emissions have been reduced, progress now seems to be reversing, and we need to do more (UN, 2023). The United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report (2022) states that we have a short window of about five years to make changes to avoid the most serious effects of climate change.

However, at a national level, according to Chris Stark, the ex-chief executive of the UK Climate Change Committee, the UK is missing almost all its climate targets (2023). The London mayor, Sadiq Khan, faces court action over his plans to extend the Ultra Low Emission Zone to cut emissions and improve air quality. At my local level, there has been heated opposition to the local council's attempts to reduce air pollution by restricting traffic on certain roads, and even the announcement of a consultation on reducing the frequency of bin collection in an attempt to encourage recycling was met with outrage. At a personal level, friends and colleagues who take a lot of trouble over recycling and eating plant-based diets, are still being slow to limit their overseas travel and to give up their cars. Lack of information does not seem to be the problem here.

We might ask why more is not being done, given the severity of the situation. Some of the reasons that have been proposed for the lack of action include the following:

- the dominant economic system (capitalism) is based on perpetual growth
- those who have a vested interest in the current system will resist change

- our society encourages people to be competitive, materialistic and individualistic
- people (and countries) tend to act in their own immediate interests
- altruistic behaviour is more likely if people feel a sense of responsibility towards others
- we have lost our connection with nature and, therefore, our appreciation of living things
- there is a time lag between taking action and seeing the results
- the initial effects of the climate crisis are being felt by those living in the global south, who are not the perpetrators
- taking action now will involve us making sacrifices now for the benefit of future generations and those living in distant countries
- the issues are so overwhelming that people become paralysed by inaction.

Gibson (2013) used the term ‘wicked problems’ to describe many problems facing society today, including climate change, refugees, poverty, and loss of biodiversity. He felt that wicked problems differ from other types of problems in that they are difficult to define, with many unknowns and the problem and solution constantly shifting; there are many stakeholders with conflicting perspectives; some elements are unknown and unpredictable; and there are no precedents. It seems that when tackling issues such as this, there are no straightforward answers and, so some sophisticated thinking is required.

According to UNESCO, education has an important role to play in promoting more sustainable attitudes, skills, and behaviours (UNESCO, 2017). Quality education, as well as being a goal in itself, is seen as a way of achieving the other 16 SDGs. One of the actions taken by the UK government, via the Education and Training Foundation, was to include in the new professional standards for teachers in our sector, the responsibility of promoting education for sustainable development (ETF, 2022). However, we might ask whether informing our learners about sustainability and teaching them some relevant skills is enough when we need to change the way we think about the planet and our responsibility towards people we have never met. If we reflect on the ultimate purpose of state education, we may conclude that schools and colleges tend to act to reproduce the status quo rather than to initiate social change. If the status quo and our current approach to education has led to the crisis we find ourselves in, can it be relied on to solve the problem? Do we need a different type of education to address these wicked problems?

Stephen Sterling back in 2001 claimed that our education system tends to reinforce unsustainable values as students are educated to compete and consume, rather than to care and conserve. He also pointed out that some of the most highly educated people are living the least sustainably, concluding more education might not be the answer. He and others have distinguished between ‘transmissive education’ which tends to involve the passing on of knowledge from the experts to passive students (as in Paulo Freire’s banking model of education), and ‘transformative education’ which encourages students to think differently and to reframe their world view. The latter is characterised by taking a responsive bottom-up democratic approach to classroom decision-making, and a focus on process rather than product, working towards open-ended enquiry rather than pre-determined outcomes (Mezirow, 1990). Lotz-Sisitka et al go further, stating that learning

for sustainability has to overcome the status quo, and that as teachers we need to prepare the learner for disruptive thinking and the co-creation of new knowledge: ‘the nature of the sustainability challenges currently at hand is such that dominant pedagogies and forms of learning that characterise higher education need to be reconsidered to enable students and staff to deal with accelerating change, increasing complexity, contested knowledge claims and inevitable uncertainty’ (2015:1).

Systems thinking competency: the abilities to recognize and understand relationships; to analyse complex systems; to think of how systems are embedded within different domains and different scales; and to deal with uncertainty.

Anticipatory competency: the abilities to understand and evaluate multiple futures – possible, probable, and desirable; to create one’s own visions for the future; to apply the precautionary principle; to assess the consequences of actions; and to deal with risks and changes.

Normative competency: the abilities to understand and reflect on the norms and values that underlie one’s actions; and to negotiate sustainability values, principles, goals, and targets, in a context of conflicts of interests and trade-offs, uncertain knowledge and contradictions.

Strategic competency: the abilities to collectively develop and implement innovative actions that further sustainability at the local level and further afield.

Collaboration competency: the abilities to learn from others; to understand and respect the needs, perspectives, and actions of others (empathy); to understand, relate to and be sensitive to others (empathic leadership); to deal with conflicts in a group; and to facilitate collaborative and participatory problem solving.

Critical thinking competency: the ability to question norms, practices, and opinions; to reflect on own one’s values, perceptions, and actions; and to take a position in the sustainability discourse.

Self-awareness competency: the ability to reflect on one’s own role in the local community and (global) society; to continually evaluate and further motivate one’s actions; and to deal with one’s feelings and desires. Integrated problem-solving competency: the overarching ability to apply different problem-solving frameworks to complex sustainability problems and develop viable, inclusive and equitable solution options that promote sustainable development, integrating the above-mentioned competences.

Table 1

In addition to classroom approaches described in the paragraph above, guidance on how to get learners to think differently is available from UNESCO in its booklet, ‘Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives’. As well as identifying specific learning points that relate to each of the 17 SDGs, it also identifies seven competencies which are needed to achieve all of the other specific learning targets (2017:10). These are described as broader ways of thinking that go beyond basic problem solving, and which will help learners to understand the complex world in which they live. ESOL learners may already possess some of these competencies, as there is evidence that moving to live in another country forces people to view the world from a different perspective, providing

some insight into the different ways of doing things. 'A foreign language may contribute to lifting individuals beyond the familiar solutions grounded in their immediate conventional or habitual thinking and their routine or ordinary experiences, resulting in broader, counter-stereotypical thinking for outbox imagination' (Li, 2020:24).

Reflecting on my own ESOL teaching, I felt that some of these competencies, for example collaboration and critical thinking skills were familiar and probably taught to some extent by many ESOL teachers. On the other hand, I was not familiar with systems thinking or anticipatory competency and decided to investigate these in more detail. Anticipatory competency, according to Keeler (2010) assumes that we have some control over the future, and that we need to be able to evaluate the future consequences of our present actions, as well as looking towards predicted future scenarios to determine what actions we should be taking now. This and the other competencies cannot be taught explicitly, but rather can be acquired through experience and reflection. An example of a task that might develop learners' anticipatory competence might be to consider the likely future of their neighbourhood. They could be given a series of questions to discuss:

Imagine the future of your neighbourhood. Discuss the questions:

- What changes have already taken place over your lifetime?
- Are similar causes still operating?
- Do we fully understand the factors that are involved in changes seen?
- Can we reliably predict the outcomes?
- What does the desirable future look like?
- What is the most likely future scenario given known factors?
- What are other possible outcomes?
- What wildcard events might disrupt current plans?
- What might be a surprise outcome?
- What is our current understanding of risks and how might they be avoided?

Table 2: Questions to develop learners' anticipatory competence

These questions could be adapted according to the level of the learners and could be applied to a range of topics. Systems thinking is a rapidly developing field and is becoming a popular approach to problem solving and decision making in a range of disciplines including science, IT and business management, as well as global issues. It can be used as a tool to gain insight into a system, which could be any set of interrelated entities: a team or an organisation, a living being or a natural cycle such as the oxygen cycle which supports animal and plant life. The tool helps one to analyse the system in order to better understand a problem and therefore find an effective solution. Systems thinking involves taking a holistic approach, considering all aspects of the system, in contrast to analytical thinking, which looks at the parts separately (Burton, 2021).

Again, at its most basic, learners could be encouraged to reflect on some of the most basic aspects of a system through the use of set questions, that are designed to aid understanding of a system at a deeper level. Instead of only considering the visible external events and patterns, the systems thinker is encouraged to consider how the organisation is structured, which will in turn have an impact on how it operates, and at the deepest level,

the origin and purpose of the system. This least obvious part of the system will be the most crucial in determining how it behaves, as for example a privately run public service would ultimately be motivated by the need for profit. See figure 1 for some questions to set learners:

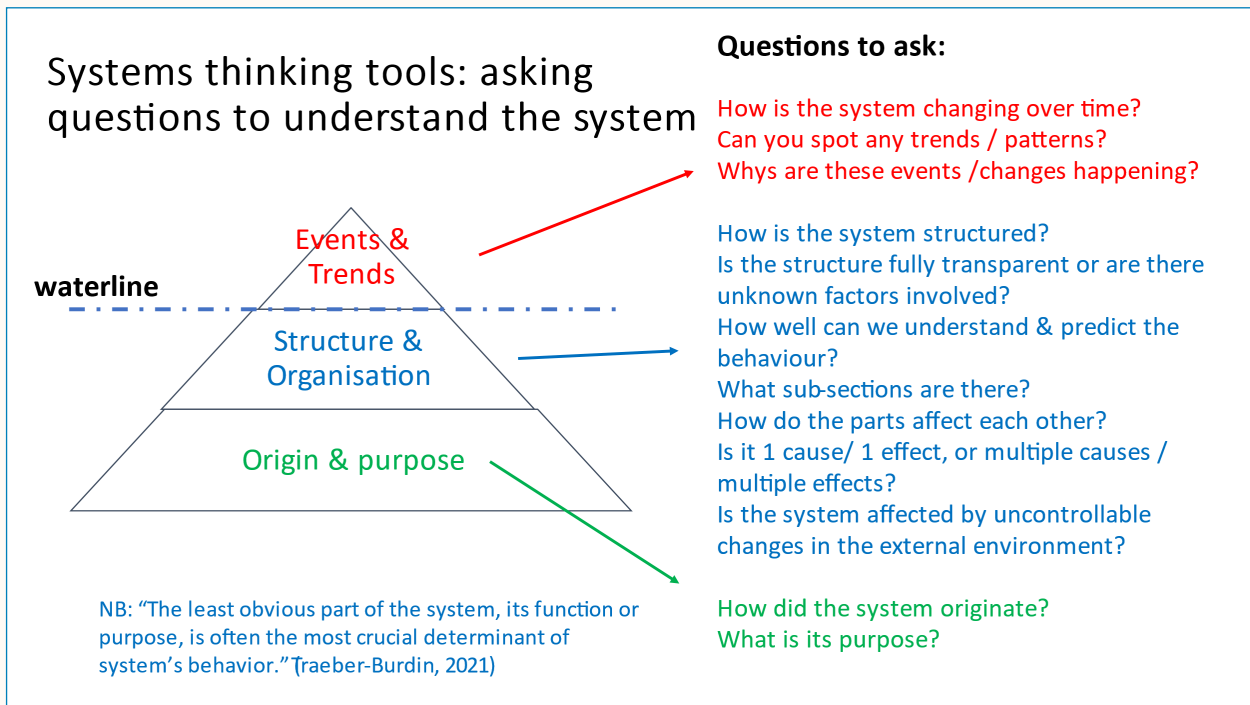


Figure 1: Questions for systems thinking

Another technique from systems thinking is the Five 'Whys'. One would start by asking what the problem or issue is, then ask why this happened. When one decides on an answer to that question, one can ask, 'Why did that happen?' repeating the process until one has asked a series of five 'whys', which should lead the thinker to the real root of the problem. An example of this in practice is provided:

Example: an inspector sees a pool of oil on the factory floor.

She speaks to an employee:

- Why is there oil on the ground? Because the machine is leaking.
- Why is the machine leaking? Because it is broken.
- Why is it broken? The gaskets are defective.
- Why are the gaskets defective? The company bought the cheapest ones available.
- Why did the company buy the cheapest available? The company has adopted a purchasing policy to buy the cheapest possible replacement parts.

Solution: change the purchasing policy.

Figure 2: Example of the Five Whys

Other remedial actions, such as speaking to the cleaners, or fixing the gasket, would not provide a long-term solution, as they are not addressing the root cause (Burton, 2021). A third tool of systems thinking is to encourage learners to create diagrams to represent the structure and stages of a system, focusing particularly on connections of cause and effect,

and feedback and reinforcing loops. An example could be this mind map, which identifies some of the factors related to obesity:

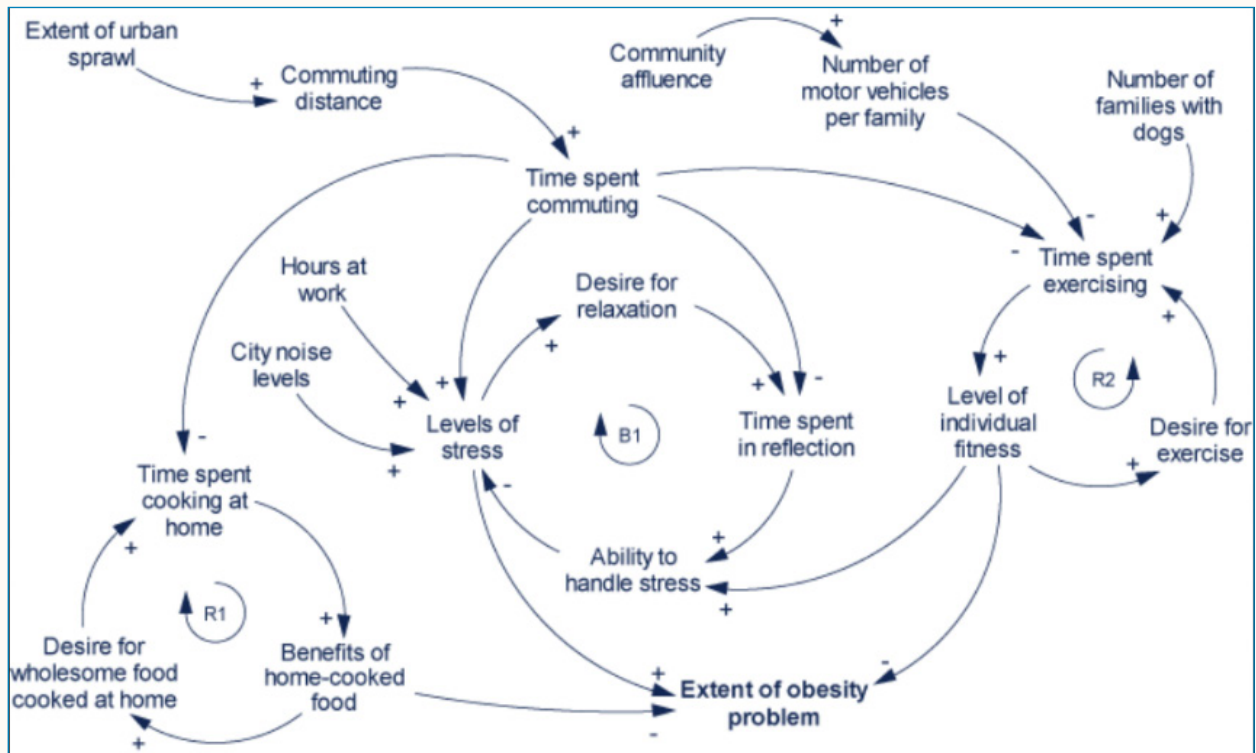


Figure 3: A systems map for causes of obesity, including multiple interrelated causes (NSW Public Health Bulletin, 2007)

Here we can see that several factors operate to reduce physical activity, and increase stress levels, which then exacerbate the problem of obesity. Trying to encourage people to change their diet without acknowledgement of other factors would be unlikely to solve the issue. Thinking about how these competencies might be embedded into a topic based ESOL lesson, I identified a couple of examples. The 17 SDGs, or sub-targets of them, seem to be useful starting points for topic based ESOL lessons as they raise important issues that affect many people, for example health and well-being, poverty, healthy cities and equalities issues. Having identified a topic for the lesson, learners can then be set tasks according to their level, which will have the added benefit of developing one or more of the key competencies.

Lesson focus: SDG 5: gender equality

- Group projects to research pay disparity and/or recognition of unpaid work (collaboration)
- Invite a speaker to talk about working in a non-traditional job. Ask learners to prepare questions. Follow up with class discussion on jobs suitable for women & men (critical thinking). Finally pairs reflect on own life choices (normative competency)
- Organise an event to celebrate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (November 25) (strategic competency)

Lesson focus: SDG 8: decent work

- Students in small groups map out multiple possible life and career paths for themselves (anticipatory competency)
- Explore differing needs and perspectives of employers and employees through role play interviews (normative competency)
- Research and discuss multiple causes of growth of gig economy (systems thinking). Research who benefits and who loses (critical thinking)
- Class organises a clothes swap event for the school (strategic competency)

These types of tasks would fit in well with current thinking about how people learn languages which recommends getting students involved in cognitively challenging activities centred on issues that are meaningful to the learners (Tomlinson and Masuhara, 2021). The teacher then helps learners to focus on language points that emerge from engagement with the tasks. The tasks could be incorporated into a participative approach, as proposed by Reflect for ESOL and English for Action. Recommended classroom methodology would involve a democratic bottom-up power structure where learners take the lead in deciding lesson content, and where learning objectives are not specified in advance, but emerge from the completion of meaning-based tasks.

To conclude, it seems that merely informing people about challenging issues such as the climate crisis, microplastics or desertification is not going to lead to significant change that will preserve the future of our planet. Most of us as individuals, communities or at government level cannot claim lack of education is preventing us from taking action. We know what needs to be done, yet we are still being too slow to make the necessary changes. Time is running out and we need to get people thinking differently. There are various views on what form this thinking might take, but UNESCO is promoting seven cross-cutting competencies, based on international research, which should encourage and enable people to tackle some of these existential problems. It seems to be possible to embed the type of tasks that would promote development of these competencies into a meaning-focussed curriculum. The added advantage is that these types of activities would also promote language development.

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Book Review:

English Language Teaching: Now and How it could be

Geoff Jordan and Mike Long, 2022

Reviewed by Linda Ulrich

While this book concentrates on ELT, it includes a section entitled 'How Adults are taught EFL and ESL' and there are some very interesting points for ESOL teachers towards the end. The introduction promises 'new, very different ways in which we think English should be taught'¹ (spoiler alert: it's Task-based Learning – didn't Prabha say this 40 years ago?) The book is divided into four sections – on Adult Language Learning, on teaching today, on evaluating language learning and political and socioeconomic issues. Each chapter also includes discussion questions and suggested reading, probably more for the use of pre-service trainees and teacher trainers. In their introduction, the authors describe the book as 'political act': reassuring for our practitioners as involvement in local and national politics has informed much of recent research and practice in and around the ESOL classroom.

The first section on language learning tells us about Interlanguage – a learner's transitional version of their target language, and, rather obviously, that learners' L1 influences their development. The authors also explain, more than once, that the age of 6 'marks the end of most people's ability to speak a second language without a detectable foreign accent'² and that 'native-like abilities become impossible quite early'³: bad news for all those wonderful Non-NESTS teaching in our classrooms, and surely we all know examples which refute this claim.

In another non-political moment, the authors acknowledge that the 'variety of English a person speaks is also a (fairly) reliable indication of their social class'⁴ (ouch).

A strong, political take-home, however, mentioned in Chapter 1 is the power, inflexibility and lack of language acquisition knowledge in course books. The authors refer frequently to the four-part 'hydra' of ELT: the coursebook publishers, the course providers, teacher education training and the major assessment centres. All four of these actors are critiqued negatively in the chapter on how learners are taught today⁵. Chapter 1 is not the round-up of past research that the authors had promised, but this is covered in Chapters 5–7, discussing cognitive processes, research findings and how learners are taught now. What is interesting in this first chapter is the discussion on the importance of meaning – that the learner can produce, for example, plural forms in a drill, but when concentrating on meaning may lose this function. One of the facets of the learning process that the authors discuss well is with respect to developmental stages and

1 P.2

2 P.2

3 P.45

4 P.8

5 Chapter 7

the (possible) difference between those learning in the classroom and those learning in a naturalistic way, i.e. on the street or on the job. These two groups master the structure of the language in roughly the same manner. In fact, drilling can lead to overuse of a function and the authors quote research which suggests that ‘instruction was only successful in altering developmental sequences temporarily, in a trivial [...] manner’.⁶ The authors conclude that instruction is not especially helpful in processes or sequences but does influence positively the rate at which learners progress. Also relevant to this comparison of instructed with naturalistic learners is a lack of studies, especially at low level, of ‘on the street’ acquirers of English.

In the section on how adults learn languages, the authors offer us two methods to combat the simplified language used in course books – these two are elaboration and attention drawing. An example of elaboration would be a text that changes ‘the witness to the accident was...’ into ‘The person who saw the accident, the witness, was...’. Naturally, in an ESOL class of, for example, learners from Hong Kong, Ghana and Kurdistan, elaboration rather than translation will be the norm.

The example of attention drawing is that of planned disclosure, using the learners’ own language to draw attention to a rule, rather than the PPP methodology of many grammar books which push learners onto the next stage without continued free speech production or practise: Jordan and Long stress that ‘few learners receive anything like enough practice’⁷.

Section Two of the book looks firstly at seven different skills acquisition theories with five reports from researchers or teachers on how these have been introduced into coursebooks; particularly enjoyable is Scott Thornbury’s report on ‘Grammar McNuggets’⁸. Again, the authors point clearly at how course books have turned these theories into a synthetic syllabus described as ‘inert and decomposed knowledge’⁹. The book then turns to ‘How English could be taught much better’¹⁰, and the alternative is TBLT: task-based language teaching. While the authors rather ingenuously call it ‘our TBLT’¹¹, this chapter is extremely helpful and well explained, and it is worth every ESOL teacher taking another look at the task-based methods described here. The basis of this is to simplify the task, not the language, and to create a learner-centred collaborative syllabus, with the valid conclusion that task-based learning is significantly more efficacious on communicative outcomes.

Chapter 9 in this section discusses methods used principally with school children: in immersion courses and with the teaching of, for example, history and economics in the target language. Lastly, the section looks at Teacher education. The CELTA course receives a bad press as the authors write that it includes no second language acquisition material, and that the course has hardly changed in the last 40 years. The chapter uses a report on CELTA by Brandt (though the reference to her paper in the list of references says that she was writing about TESOL)¹², explaining that trainee teachers complained about limited teaching practice time – six hours – and the pressure on them to teach according to different tutors’ expectations.

6 P. 33

7 P. 80

8 P.126

9 P.133

10 Chapter 8

11 P. 266

12 P.285

There follows a valuable chapter on assessment, critiquing the Cambridge assessments, GSE and IELTS as biased towards inner circle English and with emphases on grammar and teacher-centred syllabi. The authors offer task-based assessments as an alternative, with assessment criterion-referenced tests (in the UK ESB is an example of this), looking at the achievement of tasks rather than a point-based system. Interestingly, Jordan and Long advise questioning who will use the assessment result and for what? For example, pragmatic errors may be unimportant for a learner entering the buying industry, but of greater value in industries such as tourism. In their last section, on political and socio-economic issues, the authors look at who benefits from the EFL industry, that is: nation-states offering citizenship, private schools, testing centres and publishers. They are quite clear that it is not the teachers who benefit from this powerful industry!

The final chapter in the book is a joy to read. Like eager fans, the authors have written to six practitioners – Thornbury of course, but also two from the UK: Nick Bilbrough of the Hands Up project and Clare Courtney of Heart and Parcel in Manchester. Their stories, successes and advice make the chapter (and the whole book actually) come alive. All six advise changing English teaching at the local level, with non-commercial motivation and the authors describe these six practitioners as efficacious, radical and inspirational. It is well worth reading this last chapter if you are looking for something to bring energy into your ESOL classroom!

The author

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