

LESLLA Symposium Proceedings



Recommended citation of this article

Simpson, J., & Sunderland, H. (2009). Adult ESOL in the UK: Perspectives on Policy, Practice and Research. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, 3(1), 25–31. <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8000707>

Citation for LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

This article is part of a collection of articles based on presentations from the 2007 Symposium held in Newcastle upon Tyne, England. Please note that the year of publication is often different than the year the symposium was held. We recommend the following citation when referencing the edited collection.

Young-Scholten, M. (Ed.) (2008). Low-educated adult second language and literacy acquisition (LESLLA): Proceedings of the third annual forum. Roundtuit.

<https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/issue/view/447>

About the Organization

LESLLA aims to support adults who are learning to read and write for the first time in their lives in a new language. We promote, on a worldwide, multidisciplinary basis, the sharing of research findings, effective pedagogical practices, and information on policy.

LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

<https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org>

Website

<https://www.leslla.org/>

ADULT ESOL IN THE UK: PERSPECTIVES ON POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

James Simpson, University of Leeds
Helen Sunderland, London South Bank University/LLU+
Melanie Cooke, King's College London

1 Introduction

Adult migrants who are speakers of languages other than the dominant one of their new country do not exist in a social, cultural or political vacuum. Their literacy learning is inextricably linked to issues of power, politics and decisions made at global and local levels. However, there exists a disjuncture between policy, practice and research, whose respective concerns have tended to lie in separate spheres.

For some, the clearest focus for research into literacy acquisition for adults is cognitive: What are the distinctive mental processes at play when adults are learning to read and write for the first time, and in a new language (Kurvers 2007, Van de Craats et al 2006)? Yet the need to situate adult L2 literacy research within its contexts of practice has not always been well recognised. There are recent moves, associated with the social turn in second language acquisition research more generally (Block 2003), to address this need, and to connect linguistic and applied linguistic research to broader matters. In the UK, this means engaging with the field of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in policy and in practice. This chapter comprises two short papers by the members of the UK panel at the third annual LESLLA conference which took place in Newcastle, England, in autumn 2007. The aim of the chapter is to contribute to a holistic understanding of ESOL literacy learning, including an appreciation of policy and pedagogy.

British Government policies which impinge on students who are adult learners of ESOL are riddled with confusion. Since the beginning of the decade, ESOL in England, Wales and Northern Ireland has been under centralised control, and together with literacy and numeracy is part of *Skills for Life*, the national strategy to reduce the number of adults with low levels of basic skills, literacy and numeracy. Scotland has a separate policy, the 2007 *ESOL Strategy for Scotland*. In many government reports, and in much political and media discourse on migration, a great deal of attention is paid to English and to the perceived need for everyone to be able to speak it to integrate fully in their communities. The contradictions in policy are evident, however. As Helen Sunderland describes in the first paper of this chapter, the same government that has stressed the importance of English for integration is simultaneously responsible for cutting funding for the very ESOL classes that would enable the poorest and most marginalised migrants to meet this requirement.

A major concern for the current government is how English language education can contribute to the economy of the country. The idea of functional literacy, a restricted, unquestioning literacy, is powerfully evident in the discourse of educational policy, as is the positioning of ESOL students as subservient to the needs of business and industry (Cooke and Simpson 2008; forthcoming). In educational policy, the 'function' of literacy, as with learning in general, is often economic. Literacy is widely assumed to have an economic impact, as part of a 'knowledge economy', where knowledge itself can be sold or exchanged. In a knowledge economy, the over-riding purpose of literacy education is to make students more economically productive. Paradoxically, however, as Melanie Cooke shows in the second paper, policy and broader social and cultural changes risk excluding lower level students of ESOL and literacy from the employment that they so badly need.

The two papers together present a snapshot of ESOL in Britain towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

ESOL FOR VULNERABLE LEARNERS: POLICY AND PRACTICE

Helen Sunderland

In October 2006, the British government, *via* its major funding body for post-16 education, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), announced that from September 2007 ESOL classes would be free only for a targeted set of people, those who are ‘unemployed or receiving income-based benefits’ (LSC 2006: 5). Justifying the introduction of fees for ESOL, Bill Rammell, Minister for Lifelong Learning, made the following statement in July 2007:

Our priority focus is to move forward with the ESOL measures ... if they are to make an impact in reaching those learners most in need of public help and support.

It was not the first time he had spoken up for vulnerable ESOL learners. In a letter to *The Guardian* newspaper in January 2007, he said:

I want to ensure those in the greatest need continue to get full support ... we must also address the needs of those settled in the UK who have been disadvantaged through poor skills for too long and who will remain a cost to the economy without the means to progress.

The government has signaled support for ESOL learners on numerous occasions, starting with the *Skills for Life* strategy (DfES 2001). The *Skills for Life* strategy, launched in 2001, is a major initiative which aims to ‘deliver radical improvements in standards and achievements’ in adult literacy and numeracy. As part of this strategy, the government has invested heavily in curricula, resources, workforce development and increasing both provision and achievement.

The strategy document (DfES 2001) asserts:

It is essential that the specific literacy and/or numeracy needs of these (ESOL) learners are not seen as secondary to the needs of English-speaking adults.

More than a Language (NIACE 2006), reporting after a national enquiry into ESOL in 2006, spoke up strongly for vulnerable learners in ESOL:

There is also the risk that some members of the resident communities who have had few educational opportunities and may have no or limited written literacy skills (particularly women) become reluctant to join classes where provision designed to meet their specific needs is not available.

This report was warmly welcomed by Bill Rammell, who promised action on most of the recommendations.

So there is no doubt that the government is supportive of the idea of immigrants and refugees learning English, and that Bill Rammell has been particularly supportive of those with greatest needs. In fact, if it were not for the evidence of ESOL learners queuing round the block to sign up for courses, one would be forgiven for thinking that the government is even keener than potential learners to champion the cause of English classes. Here is Prime Minister Gordon Brown, speaking in February 2007:

There is now agreement with the proposition I made some time ago that for new citizens, learning English should be a requirement.

And Jim Murphy, Employment Minister, suggested in *The Guardian* in February 2007 that the money currently spent on in-house translators within Job Centres¹ could be better spent on educating individuals to speak better English.

We must utilise the resources we have to redress the balance, to put the emphasis not just on translating language to claim a benefit, but to teaching language to get a job.

These are the policy statements coming from government sources. So why is the reality in further education colleges (for non-advanced post-16 education) and adult education centres around the country so different? From evidence from ESOL teachers and programme managers, it would seem that a series of recent measures have combined to restrict opportunities for the most vulnerable ESOL learners. These measures are as follows:

- The government has prioritised provision for 14 to 19 year olds and achievement of Level 2 qualifications (the ‘standard’ qualification for 16 year olds), as highlighted in the LSC’s priorities from September 2006 (LSC 2005); and this has led to further education colleges cutting down on their adult and lower level provision. (ESOL in *Skills for Life* is divided into five levels, running from Entry Level 1 (beginner) through Entry Levels 2 and 3, Level 1 and Level 2. These levels are roughly equivalent to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels A1 to C1.)
- The government has set *Skills for Life* targets at Entry Level 3, Level 1 and Level 2, meaning that what has been termed “residual provision” i.e. provision that does not lead directly to target qualifications, has been cut.
- The LSC funding requires providers to run 80% of their courses as leading to *Skills for Life* qualifications, a problem for learners with very basic literacy levels who could take some years to achieve Entry Level 1, the lowest level of qualification, in all modes of assessment (speaking and listening, reading and writing).
- Fees for ESOL have been introduced for asylum seekers (refugees who are awaiting a decision from the Home Office) and learners not on benefits. These fees vary from organisation to organisation; at the time of writing providers have no way of knowing how much difference this will make to recruitment.

Taken together, these measures have led to overall cuts in ESOL provision (one college in the south-east of England has cut its ESOL staff by 60%) and they impact particularly strongly on the most vulnerable and needy learners:

- women who are not on benefit but have no income of their own, and who make up the bulk of learners in the mixed level, community sites that are being cut;
- learners at low entry levels who do not read and write much in any language; and
- asylum seekers.

This is what ESOL teachers and managers’ report is happening in colleges:

At w College in 2005-2006 we had 1,200 ESOL learners. This year, in spite of long waiting lists, we’ve only been allowed to enrol 700. Our target for 2007-8 is the same as it was for this year: 700 students. All enrolments need to be on accredited courses. (March 2007)

¹These are government run centres which provide “help and advice on jobs and training for people who can work and financial help for those who cannot.” <http://www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk/JCP/index.html>

ESOL at x College is being cut by 20%. This is a result of the 6.6% adult cut and the cut in 'residual provision'. The cuts will be concentrated in 'residual provision' i.e. E1 & E2. (March 2007)

£1.5 million (cuts) at y college. £0.4 of it is to fund required full level 2 increases. Cut coming from various sources: £1.1 to be found from residual across college but the bulk is in Lifelong Learning and ESOL is the largest part of that so will take the brunt of it. (March 2007)

Basic literacy courses here at z college are slowly being eroded ... employment related courses are growing, yet we are finding it hard to find students for some of these (while we have plenty of demand for E1) ... On top of this the introduction of fees this term means that even though students have enrolled for many of our courses, most haven't paid their fees yet and we are not sure that they will actually be able to pay and return to college. (September 2007)

And from the website of NATECLA, the National Association for teaching English and other Community² Languages to Adults:

We note that many of NATECLA's surveys show that at least 40% of learners will be adversely affected by the introduction of fees. (September 2007)

So why is the situation on the ground so different from the government's stated intentions? Whether one believes this is a conspiracy or just a lack of joined-up thinking, it is clear that the consequences of LSC policies are having a detrimental effect on those learners most in need of support.

Postscript February 2008

Since this presentation was given at the LESLLA conference in September 2007, there have been some developments. The government has announced its intention to provide free ESOL provision to certain groups in the interests of social cohesion and is holding a public consultation on the best way of managing this. Interested readers can visit the consultation website <http://www.esolconsultation.org.uk>

ESOL, LITERACY AND EMPLOYABILITY

Melanie Cooke

There is a growing move in the UK to encourage employers to fund the basic skills training – which include ESOL – of their employees. Although at the present time employers are asked to do this on a voluntary basis, by 2012 they will be under a statutory obligation to do so. This paper discusses these changes in policy and, through a short case study of an Afghani migrant, suggests some potential consequences for ESOL individuals, especially those with low levels of literacy.

Recent years have seen an increasing private sector involvement in ESOL. This tendency is associated with a strengthening of links in policy between learning in the adult education sector and business. Further education colleges are increasingly expected to market themselves and teach their courses in workplaces. ESOL departments in colleges are expected to provide work-related courses and to cooperate closely with local employers. This, coupled with government initiatives which are

² 'Community' languages here are known as 'heritage' languages in some countries. The term generally distinguishes these languages from the mainly European languages (known as 'modern' languages) taught in schools, and refers to languages spoken or written in bi- and multilingual communities.

encouraging employers to fund their workforce's literacy, numeracy and ESOL studies has led some to believe that adult education is in fact undergoing a slow wholesale privatisation. Private sector investment in the education and training of adults, be it in infrastructure, in materials and methods, or in direct funding of courses, brings with it an obligation, implicit or explicit, to orient learning and teaching towards work and employment.

However, in many contexts, employment-focused courses provide only the most generic, decontextualised focus on the skills of employability such as writing letters of application and CVs, and preparing for interviews. This is reflected in the growing number of ESOL courses and qualifications which concentrate on ESOL for work. These courses can be contentious amongst teachers, who are resistant to teaching them because of their narrow generic focus and because of the associated shift of responsibility for funding adult ESOL courses away from colleges and towards employers (Cooke and Simpson 2008). One ESOL manager, interviewed by the author about her college's new ESOL for work programmes, observed the following problem for many ESOL teachers in the new turn towards the generic workplace:

We came into the public sector and we could all be earning more money if we were doing other things, but we had a belief in education, in colleges, in students or the politics of asylum or whatever it was, but this new agenda has nothing to do with that, it is all about being business focussed, and we're not business focussed people, that's why we're here (from unpublished interview data Quality Improvement Agency 2008).

Another reason teacher and others in the ESOL sector are resistant to the shifting of funding to the business sector is their awareness of the complex long-term needs of their students, especially those with literacy needs. Literacy is becoming more and more important for work, even if the job does not, on the face of it, require high levels of literacy skills in English. Literacy acts as a gatekeeper in employment contexts as never before. However, the association between functional literacy and work is a complex one, and one that can be explored through the example of an individual case, that of Abbas.

Abbas is originally from Afghanistan and is a speaker of Dari. He was interviewed for a project which was attempting to identify what helps adult basic skills learners to 'persist, progress and achieve' (Quality Improvement Agency 2008). At the time he was on an ESOL course at a private training provider in London whilst in the middle of a difficult period of unemployment. In Afghanistan his education had been interrupted at the age of twelve because of the civil war and the activities of the Taliban regime. He has acquired a high level of fluent spoken English, as the unedited excerpts presented here testify, but reports serious problems with English literacy, particularly writing.

The story of how he came to the UK is complicated and traumatic. He fled Afghanistan as an unaccompanied minor at the age of 15 or 16, becoming a displaced refugee in Tajikistan and then Pakistan. In Pakistan he was unable to make a living because there were so many refugees trying to do the same, so he paid a large sum of money to get out of Pakistan, arriving in England some time later after an arduous journey. He was dispersed to several different English towns in succession and waited two years for the authorities to make a decision about his claim for asylum. During this time his family had no idea where he was and he had no contact with them until the Taliban were ousted in 2001.

Abbas has worked in many jobs since he was given permission to work. He was determined to work at any cost in order 'to survive'. He has a long work record, having had jobs in warehouses, factories and shops. He began as a cleaner in a warehouse ('I was happy to do it') and while there informally learned the trade of some of the other workers, such as fork-lift truck driving. He has found work through several employment agencies, some of which are less scrupulous than others. The inefficiency of agencies has meant that he has lost jobs on occasion and has had to spend time with no work and no money. Recently he has had a spate of bad luck and has been unable to

get work either through the Job Centre or through agencies, so has been going around employers on foot and trying to get work through his contacts and word of mouth. He is currently doing *ad hoc* pizza delivery work.

One of the problems facing Abbas is that recently he has found that his low level of literacy is a barrier to employment. In attempt to get a steady job he applied for training as a bus driver, a job which in England has severe recruitment problems which companies are addressing by recruiting in new EU countries such as Poland.

The last job I applied was for bus driver I've still got the letter from them. They called me to the Job Centre in Finchley, one person from the bus company was there and he was checking how we write and speak. So when I went he gave me a piece of paper and said OK you have to write something and I said oh my God this is the worst thing for me. I asked them why, to drive a bus? They say that this is a new rule, sometimes if you have an accident or some passengers have a fight inside the bus if the police are involved you need to describe to the police what happened and you need to write a report to the company as well. So this is the new rule, you must be able to understand English but you must be able to write as well. They said I had to improve my writing. They said 'once you can write, call us again.'

More seriously, Abbas is also finding that jobs he could easily get previously are becoming less and less open to him because of the literacy demands of even menial jobs.

Most of the companies now they are saying you must have reading and writing English so you need to know about safety and so on ... most of the warehouses they are saying you must have basic writing because they are saying sometimes we will give you the basic paperwork we don't have time so you have to write the reports. For example, where I used to work, when you are handling the goods for the customers, if the box is damaged they don't accept it they ask why it is damaged so they say they want [compensation] so now they say you should write a report, what are the damages, what happened and what the customer is saying, what compensation he wants, so this is the kind of thing they want in all the warehouses. Writing is the most important thing now, it's everywhere. The first question when you apply for a job is this.

This case study throws up several questions, about literacy, about 'employability' and about funding of adult education and 'skills'. Abbas is a hard worker, prepared to do almost anything to get by. He has a young family to support and is very frightened by the thought of unemployment. Getting a job is proving increasingly difficult for him because it is very competitive (he says 'every job is a war') and because he is being asked more and more frequently for a level of literacy he does not have. Aware of this, he is doing his best to learn what he can at the training centre and to study at home. As he says, though, acquiring literacy is a slow process:

My writing is getting better now. I think I can see the difference ... it is not getting lots better but I feel better anyway. I know it is quite hard and it takes time.

Abbas faces several problems, some of which may prove intractable and which may mean that he never gets the ESOL literacy education he needs. Firstly, he has to find a class which can provide the intensive, sustained instruction he needs to improve his literacy, which would involve consistent support and detailed feedback. This is not available to him at the training centre he attends because the tuition there is funded only for six months and because his tutor, although well qualified in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), has no experience of teaching people with neither low literacy, nor the training in how to support them. Aware of this, Abbas has made several attempts to get a place at the local college, where literacy expertise is available, but each time has been placed on a long waiting list without success.

Even more serious is what might happen to Abbas in the future. The model of funding for basic adult education in England is changing fast. Responsibility for who

pays for training for adults is being transferred gradually from colleges onto the shoulders of employers, who are being encouraged to identify which skills they, as businesses, require their workforce to acquire, and train them accordingly. Companies tend to invest in narrow skills training which is tailored to their needs as employers; they are less likely to invest in the long term, broader language and literacy as well as general adult education needed by workers such as Abbas. In fact, Abbas is finding it difficult to get into any workplace at all; if he does find a job it is likely to be in a firm which is either too small to be able to invest in training or too concerned with profit to care. Stories of extreme exploitation by companies of foreign workers are hitting the news every day and give little cause for optimism. The deputy general secretary of the Trades Union Congress, Frances O'Grady, pointed out in 2006:

The migrant worker horror stories are sadly all too familiar, but that doesn't make them any less shocking. Like the two Filipino women being paid £75 for an 80-hour week at a Norfolk care home. The Portuguese man and his pregnant wife working on a farm in Lancashire, sharing a house with 17 others, and left with just £6 a week to live on after deductions. This is not some Dickensian nightmare - this is happening here and now, in Britain, in 2006. (<http://www.tuc.org.uk/international>)

It can only remain an outside chance those employers who are unwilling even to ensure basic rights for their workers will be likely to invest in training of any kind, let alone in what Abbas needs.

References

- Block, D. (2003) *The Social Turn in Second Language Acquisition*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Cooke, M. and J. Simpson (forthcoming) Challenging agendas in ESOL: Skills, employability and social cohesion. *Language Issues*.
- Cooke, M. and J. Simpson (2008) *ESOL: A Critical Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Craats, I. Van de, J. Kurvers and M. Young-Scholten (2006) Research on low-educated second language and literacy acquisition. In I. van de Craats, J. Kurvers and M. Young-Scholten (Eds.). *Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition: Research, Policy and Practice. Proceedings of the Inaugural Symposium Tilburg 2005* (pp. 7-23). Utrecht: LOT.
- DfES (2001) *Skills for Life: The National Strategy for Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills*. London: Read Write Plus.
- Kurvers, J. (2007) Development of word recognition skills of adult L2 beginning readers. In N. Faux (ed.) *Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition: Research, Policy and Practice. Proceedings of the Second Annual Forum* (pp. 23-43). Richmond, VA: The Literacy Institute.
- Learning and Skills Council (2005) *Priorities for Success: Funding for Learning and Skills*. <http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/LSC/2005/funding/streams/priorities-forsuccess-2006-08.pdf>
- Learning and Skills Council (2006) *Our Annual Statement of Priorities*. <http://www.lsc.gov.uk/National/default.htm>
- NIACE (2006) *More than a Language*. Final report of the NIACE Committee of Inquiry on English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL). Leicester: NIACE.
- Quality Improvement Agency (2008) *Stick With It! Motivating Skills for Life learners to persist, progress and achieve*. London: National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy.

