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## CHAPTER 7

### **ESOL, Emancipation and ‘Comfort Radicalism’: Perceptions of ESOL Practitioners in the Scottish Further Education Sector**

**Steve Brown**

#### **Abstract**

Scotland was the first UK nation to develop a national strategy for delivering English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) (Scottish Executive 2007, Scottish Government 2015). This strategy’s vision and objectives contain language that implies an emancipatory agenda and a call for ESOL practitioners to draw on principles of Critical Pedagogy (Giroux 2011). However, capacities for practitioners to implement such an approach are undermined by a number of factors, particularly in the Further Education (FE) sector, where the majority of Scottish ESOL provision takes place (Brown 2017). This chapter describes a study that sought to explore college ESOL practitioners’ perceptions of ESOL. Participants appeared to value individual learner empowerment over social emancipation, but the study also suggested that practitioners’ capacities to empower learners are themselves undermined by contextual limitations. The implication of these findings is that an ostensibly emancipatory ESOL Strategy may not necessarily lead to emancipatory practice in ESOL.

It is perhaps self-evident that people living in predominantly English-speaking countries benefit from opportunities to improve their English. The wider, social impact of the provision of courses in English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is also well-documented; Jane Ward claims that it not only ‘supports individuals to gain control over their lives, make informed choices, secure employment, communicate, access support and services and gain knowledge of their rights’ (Ward 2007: 53), but also that it can allow people to ‘contribute to the communities in which they live and combat racism and prejudice’ (ibid.).

Over the last twenty years, a period that has seen significant immigration to the UK and Ireland from non-English speaking countries, several government reports have recommended the use of ESOL to develop community cohesion and reduce the potential for minority groups to experience marginalisation or exclusion (see for example Cattle 2001; UK Government Report 2008; UK Government Report 2016;

Casey 2016). Despite these recommendations, however, most governmental administrations in the UK and Ireland have been slow to take a strategic approach to ESOL provision.

The exception to this is Scotland, where the Scottish Executive first launched a national ESOL Strategy in 2007 (Scottish Executive 2007). The strategy's vision statement stressed the importance of English in 'giving people a democratic voice and supporting them to contribute to the society in which they live' (Scottish Executive 2007: 4). Since then, the ESOL Strategy has been refreshed to include the following strategic objectives:

ESOL learners co-design their learning experience [...] transform their lives and communities [...] become active citizens and get involved in their communities fostering conditions for integration [...] apply their language learning skills in wider social contexts [...] effectively influence strategy and policy at local and national levels. (Scottish Government 2015: 21)

The vision and objectives of Scotland's ESOL Strategy, then, imply a *socially emancipatory agenda* on the part of the Scottish Government – a concerted effort not only to include ESOL learners in existing democratic processes, but also to involve them in the positive transformation of Scottish society.

The emancipatory implications of Scotland's ESOL Strategy suggest in turn that, from an educational perspective, ESOL providers in Scotland should be taking an approach that reflects principles advocated in *critical pedagogy*, which Giroux describes as being 'rooted in a project that is tied to the creation of an informed, critical citizenry capable of participating and governing in a democratic society' (Giroux 2011: 7). This pedagogical approach appears to be highly compatible with the aims of Scotland's ESOL Strategy.

However, while an emancipatory agenda appears to underpin the Scottish Government's ESOL Strategy, and while this agenda implies the need for a critical-emancipatory approach, there appear to be other factors at play that limit the emancipatory potential of ESOL. In this chapter I present findings from a study that explored the perceptions of ESOL practitioners in Scottish further education (FE) colleges - with regard to their learners, their teaching values and the values imposed on them by their teaching context. I present the findings of the empirical research and offer a critical interpretation of the data to reveal how the perceptions of the research

participants, and the context in which they operate, impact on the emancipatory potential of the programmes they deliver.

### **Key Concepts Contextualised**

The research presented in this chapter was part of a wider study that I conducted while writing a doctoral thesis for the University of Glasgow. Located within a critical paradigm, this study was concerned with the potential for college ESOL programmes to emancipate on a societal level, minimizing the risks of marginalization or exclusion that immigrants often experience (Millbourne 2002), promoting cross-cultural understanding and social cohesion as advocated by recent UK government papers (Casey 2016, UK Government Report 2016), and allowing immigrants to become the fully engaged, emancipated members of Scottish society that the refreshed ESOL Strategy's objectives demand.

In Liberalist philosophy, emancipation is regarded as a natural consequence of empowerment. By empowering the individual through the development of key skills for autonomous rational thought, the individual can become emancipated, or 'enlightened' - liberated from any position of disadvantage or oppression by gaining intellectual capacities that allow them to get out of this position (Kant 1784). However, educational philosophy has also been influenced by Marxist thinking, in which emancipation is regarded as a social, rather than an individual, phenomenon. This analysis requires people to engage collectively with their environment and find ways to alter the social structures that allow injustices and inequalities to exist. This distinction between empowerment and emancipation – in the context of education - is made clearly and succinctly by Tom Inglis thus: 'Empowerment involves people developing capacities to act successfully within the existing system and structures of power, while emancipation concerns critically analysing, resisting and challenging structures of power' (Inglis 1997: 4).

When I use the term *emancipation*, then, I refer to an educational approach that actively seeks to engage learners in the positive transformation of society which, following Biesta's (2010) interpretation of Marxism in education, requires 'the analysis of oppressive structures, practices, and theories' (Biesta 2010: 43).

When studying the benefits of ESOL to immigrant communities, it is also important to explore the concept of *integration*. While integration is a commonly used term in discourse related to the settlement of immigrants, it can be defined and conceptualised

in different ways. For example, *assimilationist* models of integration require immigrants to adapt and conform to existing social norms (Sommerlad and Berry 1970), while *inclusive* models place the onus on the dominant society to adapt in order to minimise the risk of minority groups suffering social *exclusion* – defined by Levitas *et al.* as ‘the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in society (Levitas *et al.* 2007: 9). In Scotland, the model of integration presented in Ager and Strang’s (2008) conceptual framework has been widely adopted as the preferred model in government policy (for example Scottish Government 2017: 6). Ager and Strang draw heavily on Social Capital Theory (Putnam 2000) and identify ways in which building social connections can facilitate immigrants’ capacities to function effectively in society. Ager and Strang reject assimilationist models, as they entail ‘the expectation that refugees [and, presumably, other immigrants] will adapt to become indistinguishable from the host community’ (Ager and Strang 2008: 174-175). While their framework allows immigrants to retain some of their own values, Ager and Strang stop short of a fully inclusive model by recommending that immigrants retain values that are in line with existing societal norms.

As mentioned in the introduction, the Scottish ESOL Strategy’s objectives imply a desire for ESOL learners not only to participate in Scottish society, but to use their voice as democratic citizens to ensure power structures facilitate their own integration. Inevitably this requires them to address any inequalities they may experience, promoting social justice by ensuring that their needs are incorporated into social structures. The participatory and transformative agenda of the ESOL Strategy’s vision and objectives also implies a model of integration in which structures alter to accommodate the needs of minority groups. There is considerable congruence, then, between the objectives of the Scottish ESOL Strategy, the Marxist conceptualization of emancipation, and an inclusive approach to the settlement of immigrants.

For ESOL to have the transformative impact that Scotland’s ESOL Strategy promotes, it would be useful to draw on the work of Paulo Freire, whose seminal book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1996) presented education as a means of emancipating oppressed communities by developing the critical consciousness (*conscientização*) of learners, and developing their skills to engage and participate in decision-making processes that affected their position in society and which they had hitherto had no involvement in. Freire argued that all participants in the educative process – teachers

and students – must regard themselves as both educators and learners. The result is an approach that encourages critical thinking and allows students (and teachers!) to use their learning to effect social change. A critical-emancipatory approach to ESOL has been advocated by the likes of Mel Cooke, who recommends the use of ‘pedagogies and ways of organising learning which place the learner at the centre of the curriculum in a meaningful way. These include [...] Freirean-inspired participatory and problem-solving curricula’ (Cooke 2006: 71).

### **Factors Limiting Emancipation**

However, while Freirean values and critical pedagogies appear conducive to the realisation of the ESOL Strategy’s objectives and the emancipation of immigrants from positions of vulnerability, it is important to acknowledge that critical pedagogy has had little influence on English Language Teaching Practice. Communicative Language Teaching, the dominant approach in ESOL, is based on the prioritisation of meaning over forms, encouraging learners to express their own feelings, thoughts and opinions, drawing on humanist philosophies of subjectivity (for example Moskowitz 1978). Students in the CLT classroom ‘must be involved in interpreting a meaning from what they hear and constructing what to say as a response’ (Hedge 2000: 57), implying a preoccupation with individualism rather than collectivism. Individual learner autonomy and empowerment are also promoted in Communicative techniques such as *Guided Discovery* (Harmer 2001: 75-76) - which encourages learners to work out language rules for themselves, *Task-Based* approaches (Willis 1996, Long 2015) - which focus on language use in ‘real-world’ contexts, and in the *Negotiated Syllabus* (Clarke 1991), which uses data collected through needs analysis to inform syllabus content. All of these techniques promote autonomy in that they require learners to use language first before noticing patterns or structural rules. While individual autonomy is crucial to the conscientization process advocated by Freire (1996), its lack of focus on collective action or societal needs means it cannot be described as emancipatory.

With this in mind, concerns have been expressed that commonly-used English Language Teaching materials and methods appear to deliberately avoid any critical analysis of existing social structures, or any encouragement of community action or activism (see for example Block *et al.* 2012, Copley 2018). In a profession that appears to prioritise individual empowerment over social emancipation, then, it is perhaps logical to anticipate a reluctance among ESOL practitioners to engage in emancipatory

practice, favouring instead an approach that seeks to empower learners *within* the existing paradigm.

Another limiting factor is the fact that the majority of ESOL in Scotland is delivered in the FE sector, which is currently driven by policies and practices that are heavily influenced by Human Capital Theory. Based on the assumption that the acquisition of skills is a form of capital that increases ‘capacities that contribute to economic production’ (Little 2003: 438), this approach to policy-making regards government investment in education as an investment in the nation’s economic development, rather than focusing on its benefits to society. The Scottish Government’s preoccupation with using FE to meet industry needs is evidenced in its 2011 policy on post-16 education, which claims that ‘the fundamental role of education is to provide people with the skills they need to get a job [...] keep a job or get a better job’ (Scottish Government 2011). Furthermore, a later policy document (Scottish Government 2014), explicitly aimed at developing the young workforce, has become a key driver of FE strategy. This document proposes ‘much more focus on providing [learners] with the skills, qualifications and vocational pathways that will lead directly to employment opportunities’, which in turn would ‘enhance sustainable economic growth with a skilled workforce’ (Scottish Government 2014: 7).

While Scotland’s ESOL Strategy appears to promote an emancipatory agenda, then, the above factors raise questions about the extent to which college ESOL practitioners are likely to identify social emancipation as a valid feature of their praxis, and also about the capacity for the college sector to achieve the Strategy’s (ostensibly) emancipatory objectives. These factors must therefore be considered as potential obstacles to the Strategy’s effective implementation, and are examined in more detail later in this chapter.

### **The Study**

My study sought to explore how ESOL practitioners operating within the FE sector in Scotland perceive the concept of emancipation, and whether, in view of other factors that impact on their teaching context, they regard it as a legitimate feature of their praxis. I used my own positionality as an ESOL practitioner in the college sector to interpret the data from a critical perspective. I started by developing the following research questions:

- What are the perceptions of people who teach ESOL? If current methodology is

grounded in liberalism, does this mean that ESOL practitioners only seek to empower?

- Is emancipation in the form of societal transformation something that practitioners consider as a valid goal?
- How are their perceptions reflected in the praxis of ESOL practitioners?

I selected a questionnaire as the primary source of data, and ensured that each limited-response question included space for participants to expand on - or provide alternatives to – these responses. Once the data had been collected, I followed Yin's (2016: 186) model of data analysis, using the five different – but recursive – phases of *compiling a database, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting* and *concluding*. My findings are presented below.

### **The Respondents**

The questionnaire generated fifty-four responses, which constitutes an estimated 15 per cent of college ESOL practitioners in Scotland. Ten respondents identified themselves as ESOL managers, and four identified as 'other'. Of those who selected 'other', three described roles that related to leadership or staff development while the fourth had a role that was purely classroom-based – this participant's responses were therefore categorised along with non-promoted lecturers, and the other three with ESOL managers.

With regard to qualifications, the data shows that the respondents had a wide range of qualifications, with many holding multiple undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, certificates and diplomas - though not all qualifications were necessarily related to ESOL. All lecturers who responded to the questionnaire held an initial TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) qualification, and 82 per cent also had a further qualification in TESOL, a generic teaching qualification, or both. Interestingly, the level of subject-specific *professional* qualifications (as opposed to academic qualifications) was higher among lecturers than it was among managers. Of the thirteen managers in the sample, three had no professional qualification in TESOL, while one had a TESOL qualification pending.

In terms of teaching experience, more than 83 per cent of respondents had more than five years' experience of working in the UK FE sector. In addition, over three quarters had worked in the private sector, either in the UK or abroad. The fact that so many ESOL practitioners have experience of working in diverse contexts, including for-profit

educational institutions, and are therefore in many cases familiar with the concept of education as a global industry in a neoliberal paradigm (Block *et al.* 2012), may be significant in terms of how they responded to the questionnaire. Most ESOL managers in the sample had considerable relevant experience, with 85 per cent having more than five years' experience in the UK FE sector and 62 per cent having a further five years' experience in other contexts. However, it is interesting to note that two of the manager respondents had less than two years' experience in the FE sector, and less than five years' experience in total.

The above, largely quantitative data is intended to contextualise the research. In the sections below I present participants' responses in the form of themes that emerged during the data analysis process.

### **Views on the Purpose of ESOL**

#### ESOL is Valued for its Impact on Individual Empowerment

In response to the question 'What is the main purpose of ESOL provision in the Scottish FE sector?' – the most widely selected response was 'To facilitate learners' ability to function more effectively in Scottish society'. None of the alternative options, which included the economic contribution of learners and the potential for learners to transform society, received many responses. One ESOL manager responded that ESOL served a dual purpose – to facilitate the economic contribution of learners *and* to facilitate integration.

In offering their own, alternative responses to the above question, a number of respondents were concerned with ways in which ESOL develops learners' capacities 'to do whatever they choose to do', with four respondents claiming that they regard this as the main purpose of ESOL. This demonstrates a sense among some practitioners that ESOL learners should be allowed to make their own choices in terms of what they learn English for, or what they do with the English they learn. The focus on empowerment within existing structures is further supported by a majority of respondents stating that they value the ways in which their practice helps their students in their current social context, and also as a means of improving their own position in society.

#### ESOL as a Potential Source of Emancipation

Compared to responses related to the empowering role of ESOL, there is relatively little in the dataset to suggest that practitioners regard ESOL as emancipatory. While thirty-

four respondents identified the facilitation of learners' abilities to 'function more effectively in Scottish society' as the main purpose of ESOL, only four selected the more emancipatory purpose of allowing learners to 'influence and transform Scottish society', and only seven respondents prioritised the ways in which ESOL allows learners to contribute to the *development* of society. One respondent proposed that the purpose of ESOL is to allow learners 'to understand and then influence the society/world around them, and English is a tool in doing this'. This respondent clearly values the way in which ESOL can allow learners to participate in societal transformation. Only a small number (13 per cent) said that they valued how ESOL allows learners to make a societal contribution, though two further respondents pointed out that individual empowerment and societal emancipation are not mutually exclusive, and that both can be achieved through ESOL provision.

### **Views on Integration**

When asked to select their preferred definition of integration, the majority of respondents identified it as a process whereby 'immigrants' involvement in various aspects of life means their ideas and values are incorporated, so new social norms develop', implying support for a more inclusive model. It should, however, be noted that ten of the fifty-four respondents chose to provide alternative definitions to this question, suggesting that they did not feel the existing choices sufficiently reflected their views. Many of these alternatives were in fact modified versions of the 'inclusive' definition given above, such as 'retain their own values but respect and follow the norms of the host society'. The need to respect and follow existing norms recurred across a number of these alternative definitions, with one respondent pointing out that 'these norms are enforced by the host country's rule of law'. It is interesting that practitioners thus stress the importance of ESOL learners conforming to – rather than influencing - existing norms and legislation.

The majority of alternative definitions provided by respondents reveal perceptions that integration is a two-way process, requiring immigrants to take steps towards adapting or modifying their behaviour in order to 'fit in', but also requiring the host society to move towards accommodating immigrants' existing norms. These comments included the following:

Immigrants adapt to various aspects of life while retaining their own particular set of values and ideas and participate in the host society. The ideas and values of both

the new resident and the host society will be altered over time as a result of this participation.

I am not saying a person should ditch his/her 'old' culture, but rather develop the ability to be circumspect about it.

Immigrants adapt and conform to the majority of the existing norms of the host society but also contribute towards the development of that society's norms, values and culture.

While the above definitions appear to advocate a model of integration that requires behaviour modification on both sides, any requirements placed on the host community seem limited to allowing immigrants to retain certain values, and selecting imported values or customs that wider society *chooses* to incorporate. This is not the same as adapting the normative culture to accommodate the needs and preferences of immigrants, which would be advocated in an inclusive model.

### **Perceptions about ESOL Learners' Backgrounds and Needs**

When asked to describe the learners they work with, considerable emphasis was placed on diversity. Participants were asked to choose from the following twelve terms to describe the learners they work with:

Privileged; Vulnerable/at risk; Excluded/marginalised; Upwardly mobile; Self-motivated; Politically aware; Politically active; Integrated; Financially secure; On low income; Culturally open-minded; Culturally closed/inward-looking.

These terms were selected based on my own knowledge of the research context – a practice congruent with interpretive research, which '...assumes that we cannot separate ourselves from what we know' (Cohen and Crabtree 2006). I selected from a range of terms which could be identified as characteristics of learners I have either worked with myself or had described to me by other ESOL practitioners in Scottish colleges. Responses were spread across all twelve of the terms provided, which in itself indicates that ESOL learners are far from homogenous, given that some of the adjectives used are in clear conflict with each other. Moreover, participants were also invited to add terms of their own and added ten further terms, suggesting that despite their variety, the options provided were insufficient to encompass the diversity of attitudes. Additional comments included 'heterogeneous', 'students vary' and 'there are mixtures within classes – no specific trend can be identified'. Another comment

referred to EU nationals, international students and refugees all studying in the same context. It seems clear from the data that many respondents teach classes containing students from a range of linguistic, cultural and national backgrounds, who are in the UK for multiple reasons.

Despite this diversity of learner backgrounds and needs, it is important to note that almost all respondents (98 per cent) selected 'on low income', two thirds selected 'vulnerable/at risk' and 63 per cent selected 'excluded/marginalised'. Additional responses to this question included 'often exploited'. By contrast, only three respondents chose to describe their learners as 'privileged', and only four selected the term 'financially secure'. These responses reveal that ESOL learners, irrespective of their backgrounds, are widely regarded by practitioners as holding disadvantaged positions in society.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the diversity of learners, perceived attitudes towards the host society appear to conflict. Almost half of all respondents (twenty-five) described their learners as 'culturally open-minded', while almost the same number (twenty-four) described them as 'culturally closed/inward-looking'. Some respondents selected both of these responses, indicating that they have some learners who show interest in other cultures, and others, possibly in the same class, who may be far less open to learning about values that are different from their own. This evokes interesting images of classes where some students are motivated to discuss alternative cultures and values, while others prefer not to discuss these topics.

One respondent described the classroom impact of these varied attitudes to culture in this way:

Cultural awareness is difficult to assess – for the purposes of learning English, from my experience, the majority of learners are able and willing to work with others in the class regardless of religious, political, social, gender differences.

A smaller number of respondents (eleven) described their learners as 'integrated', suggesting that at least some of their learners are comfortably settled in Scotland and therefore do not need English for this reason, which of course raises the question of what they *do* need English for – possibly for instrumental purposes such as the attainment of qualifications or career management. Of course, as mentioned above, integration can mean different things to different people, and it is therefore difficult to make any assumptions about whether these 'integrated' learners are so described

because they have taken steps towards assimilation, or because society has developed in order to accommodate them, or because of something else.

### **Assumptions about ESOL Learners and Motivation/Agency**

85 per cent of respondents described their learners as ‘self-motivated’. This perception is supported by the use of the words ‘determined’ and ‘motivated’ in the additional comments section of this question. Further comments suggest that learners are instrumentally motivated by the prospect of attaining qualifications – for example: ‘passing the outcomes is very important to the students’ – and that motivation, wherever it comes from, is a requirement for successful language learning – ‘learner motivation is a key element to the process’.

However, despite many respondents describing their learners as motivated, only 18.5 per cent described them as ‘upwardly mobile’. This may mean that ESOL learners, despite high levels of motivation, still have problems in actually achieving their goals successfully. Perhaps, then, learner motivation does not necessarily lead to success, particularly if it is not accompanied by learner *agency*, as this comment illustrates:

EU migrants tend to be self-motivated and self-sufficient with a good understanding of how to study English [...] they tend to learn English quickly. On the flip-side, refugees and asylum seekers don’t always have the study skills or opportunities to learn English outside the classroom so they tend to learn English more slowly.

This comment shows, unsurprisingly, that learners with a solid educational background and a resulting high degree of agency and autonomy are able to progress well within the learning context offered, whereas those who lack the skills to function independently in a classroom context or take responsibility for their own learning are less likely to succeed. It is interesting to see practitioners identifying diverse degrees of agency among their learners, and a direct impact of this on learning and progress.

### **Impact of Learner Backgrounds and/or Current Situations on Classroom Practice**

As mentioned above, ESOL practitioners’ perceptions of their learners are likely to impact on how they plan and manage the teaching and learning environment. A range of additional responses reveals how varied this impact is. One practitioner mentioned using learner comments as prompts for lesson content:

Tutorial sessions have led to interesting conversations about social mores, which in turn have also led to interesting class discussions.

Another response showed how learners' lives outside the classroom also impact on decisions about topic selection:

Interesting authentic materials with local and historical relevance are important for motivation of students after usually twelve -hour shift work in tough conditions.

One respondent suggested that the level of focus on emancipation or empowerment could be affected by the learners' level of English, and/or the time they have spent in the country:

The answer differs depending on which level each learner engages with ESOL classes at. In classes of lower level learners who have recently moved to the country, I would say the main purpose is to help them to settle here and function more independently but for higher level learners, then influence and contribution become more important goals.

The above statement assumes, however, a correlation between level of English and length of time in the country, which is not always the case. Many migrants were able to learn English in their own countries and arrive in Scotland with a good level of competence in the language, while others may have lived in Scotland for many years without progressing beyond very basic skills in English.

The above responses suggest that learners' backgrounds and current circumstances heavily influence their learning needs, and that practitioners take these into account when planning and implementing their teaching practice. However, the diversity of these needs, which in many cases exist within a single classroom, presents clearly expressed challenges.

### **Institutional Values: Tensions, Conflicts and Limitations**

The questionnaire responses revealed interesting tensions between practitioners' own values and the values promoted at a wider, institutional level; I present these tensions here. Regarding the level of freedom available in choosing content and outcomes, responses suggested that the inclusion of externally-accredited qualifications – most commonly accredited by the Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) – limited

practitioners' freedom to select content that directly addresses the needs of their learners:

There is limited freedom for SQA courses.

If the students are participating in SQA courses, there is very little freedom in choosing course outcomes.

Outcomes are pretty much tied to SQA. Content is then dependent on SQA assessments. When not preparing students for assessment, we can choose to do whatever the students wish us to teach them/we think would benefit them.

Students have to achieve units and depending on the units this can be more or less constraining.

Mostly I don't have much scope as I have to get them through SQA or Cambridge exams so the materials have to be really specific.

It is a pity that so much of the ESOL course is taken up with preparing for accredited qualifications as I feel the students would benefit much more from developing essential skills for future study and work.

Other comments raise concerns about the validity of the qualifications themselves:

The college's programme values the SQA qualification, the lecturers tend towards developing competence in communication.

I struggle with SQA for a variety of reasons. I'm not convinced that achievement of outcomes necessarily equates to competence/proficiency on the relevant areas. This is especially problematic at the lower levels.

The impression that these comments generate – that SQA qualifications do *not* promote effective teaching and learning - is heightened by the lack of any comments to *support* their inclusion. One respondent suggested that the main focus of programmes in their institution is 'to develop *what SQA thinks* are essential skills for life, learning and work' (highlighting added), implying that SQA's understanding of these skills does not match the *actual* skills required by learners. We can certainly infer from the data that a lack of confidence in accredited qualifications, and SQA ESOL qualifications in particular, exists among many research participants, to the extent that some appear to regard the need to prepare learners for these qualifications as a barrier to 'actual' teaching.

Practitioners also raised a number of concerns that relate to the issue of performativity in their institutions. The practice of using measurable criteria to evaluate educational performance, which, according to Cowen, 'involves defining and measuring and publicising the 'results' of education in quantative [sic] terms' (Cowen 1997: 68), leads

to a de-prioritisation of aspects of education that are less quantifiable, so that ‘we laud that which can be measured and ignore what cannot be measured, even though it might be as important in the educative process’ (Forde *et al.* 2006: 25).

The prevalence of a performative culture in Scottish FE means that quality tends to be measured by rather crude criteria, principally *retention* (the number of students who complete a programme) and *attainment* (the number of students who pass course outcomes). Some comments suggest that the focus of programme delivery is concentrated on ensuring these particular Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) give a favourable reflection of quality. This can lead to what Ball describes as ‘fabrication’ – the act of presenting versions of the truth that ‘are not ‘outside the truth’ but neither do they render simply true or direct accounts’ (Ball 2003: 224). Evidence of fabrication in ESOL programmes is implied in these comments by ESOL managers:

The units are fixed, but some students can be unattached from the unit and their soft outcome is acknowledged.

Our main KPI problem is retention. The ones we keep, mostly pass, and we as managers make this work when it comes to performance review time.

The content is a big part of course design, but course duration, mode of delivery and timetable choices is one of [sic] our biggest factors in order to maximise Success outcomes and minimise Withdrawals.

As long as we meet credit targets we have a large degree of autonomy on content.

The above comments suggest that, in some institutions at least, managers take steps to manipulate course structure, content, or enrolment procedures, in order to ‘make it work’, or ‘meet targets’, or ‘maximise success’ in terms of KPIs. The final comment above also implies that meeting KPI targets means ESOL programmes are less likely to face external scrutiny. These comments could be interpreted as examples of what Ball calls ‘gamesmanship’ (Ball 2003: 225), whereby educators regard the fabrication of measurable information as a kind of game that they can turn to their advantage, but which can also create ‘pathologies of creative compliance’ (Elliott 2001: 202).

Further analysis of the dataset reveals concerns from respondents about the *impact* of performativity on learners and/or learning. When asked to identify what their institution values most from ESOL programmes, the most popular selection was ‘A reliable source of SFC credit funding’ – chosen by 68.5 per cent of respondents. In addition, 59 per cent selected ‘A body of students that can be recruited onto other programmes’ and 35

per cent selected 'Higher than average performance indicators'. These selections imply a broad perception that colleges are motivated to run ESOL programmes in order to boost numbers, gain funding and improve overall college KPIs. This interpretation is borne out by the fact that other, more learner- or community-oriented potential benefits of ESOL programmes, such as 'A successfully integrated local community' and 'Equality of opportunity for minority groups', were only selected by around a quarter of respondents. The below comment further reflects the perception that institutions take a rather cynical approach to ESOL provision:

I think we are a 'necessary evil' sometimes. An easy source of SFC credits at short notice and an easy way to say 'look at our amazing diversity'.

At an institutional level, then, the performative culture in the FE sector appears to have led to a preoccupation with using ESOL programme data to reflect positively on the institution, which diminishes the level of institutional interest in *actual* benefits of ESOL programmes for learners and communities.

Further tensions appear to exist between the values held by ESOL lecturers and those of their managers or institutions. Regarding the use of materials, only 57 per cent of all respondents selected published resources as their most commonly used materials compared to 100 per cent of managers. This suggests that, while managers are prescribing published materials as the principle source of content, some lecturers are using alternative materials – more than their managers realise. A similar mismatch exists regarding perceptions of the main focus of ESOL programmes. 46 per cent of all respondents selected 'To develop ESOL learners' employability skills' as a focus of provision, but among ESOL managers the figure was nearly 70 per cent. Furthermore, when asked to give their own view on the purpose of ESOL, the most common response from participants was 'To facilitate learners' ability to function more effectively in Scottish society'. However, this response was selected by only 35 per cent of respondents when asked to describe what their institutions value from ESOL programmes. By contrast, 72 per cent selected 'To provide learners with accredited qualifications' as an institutional value. This suggests that ESOL practitioners highly value the ways ESOL improves the social functioning of learners, but feel that their institution is more concerned with attainment of qualifications which, they believe, are unlikely to facilitate integration or participation in society.

Conflicting perceived values between practitioners and their institutions were clearly and unambiguously expressed by two respondents:

The college values are not in keeping with my own.

I am acutely aware that what I teach, what the students want to learn, and what the college expects, are not always in sync.

This section provides examples of clear tensions between the preferred praxis of ESOL practitioners and the rather cynical perception that they have of their employers' priorities and values when it comes to ESOL provision.

### **Critical Interpretive Analysis**

In the above section, I presented participant responses to the questionnaire, re-assembled according to emergent themes. In this section, I analyse these themes in more depth and from a critical perspective, identifying issues that are of particular relevance to the research questions driving the study.

#### ESOL Learners: Diverse yet Vulnerable

Despite the diversity that exists among learners, almost all respondents perceived ESOL learners as *vulnerable*. The range of vulnerabilities is broad, of course, and can relate to their status in the country, limited and insecure employment opportunities, or the very real possibility of facing discrimination or exclusion as a result of their race, religion or language.

The perception among respondents that ESOL learners belong to less privileged social groups is shared by a number of other studies, which identify non-UK born employees as occupying a disproportionately high percentage of unskilled or low-skilled positions (Scottish Government 2016). Furthermore, the Casey Review (Casey 2016), has identified high percentages of minority groups who are economically inactive, effectively forming part of a welfare-dependent underclass. These findings support practitioner perceptions that ESOL learners tend to occupy vulnerable positions in society, and strengthen the case for an emancipatory approach to ESOL. However, in this particular study, a key finding is that respondents, despite being acutely aware of their learners' vulnerabilities, do not seem to regard the emancipation of their learners as something they should involve themselves in; they regard their job as being to help

their learners to succeed *within* existing structures rather than to develop skills to challenge the inequalities built into those structures.

### Individual Empowerment as the Key Objective

It is perhaps unsurprising that individual empowerment features heavily among practitioner perceptions of the purpose of ESOL. The impact ESOL can have in helping learners to ‘do their own thing’ – whatever that happens to be – and achieve their potential as individuals, is clearly very important to respondents. The prioritisation of learner needs also explains the apparent resistance respondents show to the instrumental purpose imposed on their programmes by the inclusion of accredited outcomes. This preoccupation with individual empowerment and resistance to instrumental purpose also reflects the liberal influences on English Language Teaching that I described earlier in this chapter.

From a Freirean perspective though, a liberal ideology falls short of being emancipatory as it fails to address the inequalities that exist in current power structures. Comments stressing the importance of helping learners to *conform to* the rule of law imply a lack of desire to encourage any *challenging* of existing structures; if learners are expected to accept existing legislation uncritically, any scope to transform society will necessarily be limited. The paucity of responses that relate to societal transformation, the involvement of learners in community or collective activism, or the role of ESOL in promoting the rights of minority groups, suggests that respondents, while aware of the benefits of ESOL to individuals, are less concerned with its potential to address issues of social injustice on a structural level – including injustices that learners themselves suffer from.

### Conflicting Priorities

While the liberalist notion of individual empowerment is to the fore when they express their own views, ESOL practitioners also seem acutely aware of conflicts between their own preferred modes of practice and those of their institutions and the state-funded bodies that hold power over them. Tensions identified by practitioners relate to neoliberalism and the influence of Human Capital Theory in FE in Scotland, as mentioned earlier in the chapter. The use of HCT-driven policy to drive the FE sector is reflected in the research data; respondents perceived colleges as being largely concerned with meeting guidelines and targets set by government bodies, leading to the

fetishization of KPIs and the instruments used to measure them. This preoccupation with externally-imposed goals makes it more difficult to address any objectives that the learners themselves identify, or which practitioners might identify as being useful to their learners. Practitioners respond negatively to this imposition. For them, the ‘struggle’ lies in finding ways to promote individual empowerment and other liberal values within a (neoliberal) construct that is, arguably, *disempowering* in the way it leads towards a narrow and highly prescriptive curriculum.

### The Stifling of Emancipation

While opportunities to promote individual empowerment are limited within the neoliberal context of the FE sector, efforts to emancipate learners on a social level are even less apparent. When control over curriculum content is imposed from above, this leads to what Freire described as a banking model of education, in which knowledge is selected and transmitted unidirectionally, from teacher to students (Freire 1996: 61), removing the possibility to challenge institutional values and structures. However, it is also worth noting that the realisation of ESOL’s emancipatory potential is also inhibited by the position taken by practitioners themselves – namely their apparent prioritisation of individual empowerment over social emancipation. Practitioners in the study placed clear emphasis on the empowerment of their learners within existing social structures, but there is very little to indicate a perception that ESOL can, or should, play a socially transformative role. The level of experience and qualifications of participants suggests that this apparent lack of awareness of emancipatory pedagogies is unlikely to be due to insufficient training or professional development, but it may be due to the *type* of CPD they have received. Popular TESOL programmes and widely accepted ESOL practices, particularly those that take a global approach to English Language Teaching, tend not to focus on emancipatory practice, preferring instead to promote practices that are grounded in more liberal ideologies. Furthermore, the influence of neoliberal values on English language teaching and teacher education (Block *et al.* 2012; Copley 2018) may be particularly relevant here, given that more than 75 per cent of respondents have previously worked in the highly marketised and commodified context of the private English language teaching sector.

However, as I have previously argued in this chapter, empowerment does not lead to emancipation when analysed from a critical perspective, but leads instead to ‘a more subtle form of incorporation’ (Inglis 1997: 4). ESOL practitioners seek to empower

individual learners to function more effectively within their current contexts, but this only increases their compliance, allowing them to be more 'agile' in their ability to respond to industry needs as they evolve. Placing responsibility on individuals to adapt and conform to the demands of a changing society can be interpreted as a 'subtle, insidious form of governance where ends can still be aimed at merely by shaping actors' own choices' (Gillies 2011: 215). Within such a construct, individuals become self-regulating, and 'empowerment' becomes, in effect, compliance with the requirements of hegemonic forces. This interpretation of the concept of individual empowerment highlights how it fails to address the inequalities within existing power structures that allow migrants to be placed in vulnerable positions in the first place, ensuring existing hegemonies are maintained. Not only that, but it also places the responsibility for achieving success – or failure - onto the individual, absolving the institutions and organisations that preserve these unequal structures.

### **Conclusion: ESOL as 'Comfort Radicalism'**

There appears, then, to be something paradoxical about the perceptions of ESOL practitioners. A possible interpretation of the data is that they see themselves as seeking to usurp the will of their neoliberal 'masters' by empowering their learners, but in fact this only results in them enhancing their learners' capacities to conform to the needs of those same hegemonic forces. This leads me to suggest that ESOL in the Scottish FE sector, and the impact that it has on learners, is in fact a form of 'comfort radicalism'. This is a term used by James Avis (2017) to describe 'the contradictory relations in which we are enmeshed and the manner in which we become complicit with those wielding power while presenting ourselves as radical' (Avis 2017: 195).

Writing within the context of the FE sector, Avis (2017) explores alternatives to the current neoliberal model of capitalism, and identifies ways in which 'solutions' to current models merely result in a form of self-regulation, without altering existing power structures:

Social democratic concerns to address the needs of students resonate with the moral and pedagogic sensibilities of teachers together with their understanding of what it is to be a professional, which can lead to complicity in their own exploitation. (Avis 2017: 198)

If we apply the concept of comfort radicalism to the research data gathered in my study, it is possible to conclude that ESOL practitioners believe they are engaging (as far as they can) in some form of radical, progressive activity, when in fact they are merely conforming to the will of hegemonic forces. The fact that they are operating within the highly neoliberal paradigm of FE makes a liberal, empowering approach *seem* radical. However, Avis argues that such claims to radicalism among teaching professionals simply mean that

Teachers become complicit in their own exploitation and college leaders are able to feel good about themselves and their radicalism [...] This [...] does little to challenge existing power and capitalist relations but [...] appropriates a suitably radical language. (Avis 2017: 199)

We can conclude then that the preferred approach of college ESOL practitioners appears on the surface to promote equality and offer ways for immigrants to participate more actively in Scottish society. However, without any overt focus on finding ways to reduce inequalities suffered by immigrants in the first place, the transformational impact of ESOL is minimal, allowing instead for practitioners and learners alike to be more efficiently exploited.

It is clear from the research data that practitioners recognise and resent the disempowering nature of a neoliberal curriculum. However, it is less clear whether practitioners are aware that their own preferred goal of individual empowerment only serves to maintain existing power structures. While the neoliberal construct of the FE sector is clearly one barrier, the emancipation of ESOL learners also requires ESOL practitioners to develop a greater awareness of critical pedagogy and the societal benefits it can bring. What is perhaps required, then, is a re-examination of the types of training offered to ESOL practitioners and the widely accepted values embedded in TESOL programmes, which ultimately fail to exploit the potential for ESOL to facilitate emancipation on a social level.

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