Adult ESOL in the United Kingdom: Policy and research

CELIA ROBERTS and MELANIE COOKE – Centre for Language Discourse and Communication, King’s College, London
MIKE BAYNHAM and JAMES SIMPSON – School of Education, University of Leeds

ABSTRACT
In the United Kingdom adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) policy is included under the government’s adult literacy and numeracy strategy. This has produced tensions in ESOL provision, which has been politicised by wider debates on immigration and integration. Global flows that are transforming United Kingdom cities are producing ‘superdiverse’ classrooms with students from widely different educational backgrounds and literacy levels. The recent United Kingdom research has reflected the ‘social turn’ in adult ESOL studies, focusing on the relationship of context and language where the ESOL classroom is only part of a complex sociolinguistic environment. Both political and theoretical debates are illustrated in three sets of projects: the ESOL Effective Practice Project; the ESOL Case Studies project; and a series of projects that highlight some of the tensions in literacy and ESOL provision. Future research, we argue, needs to focus more on second-language development and the literacy/English language relationship, as well as taking a more critical stance on provision.

Introduction
In this paper we review current developments in adult ESOL research in the United Kingdom, identifying trends and future directions. For the Australian reader, the United Kingdom context presents some interesting similarities and differences. In Australia the late 1980s and 1990s saw a sustained policy focus on language and literacy with profound consequences for the development of language education, which made Australia a world leader in this field. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the 2000s have seen an unprecedented policy focus on adult education via the Skills for Life strategy, which in turn grew out of the Moser report to the Department of Education (DfEE 1999).

This policy is, however, different both in scope and funding methodology from the Australian policy. In Australia there has always been a significant separation of funding, with funding for adult ESOL research coming through
the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) and the then Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA)\(^1\) (Burns 1999), while funding for adult literacy and numeracy research came from a separate ministry and separate policy initiative. In the United Kingdom adult ESOL has been included under the Skills for Life policy umbrella, along with adult literacy and numeracy. It is somewhat ambiguously named in this policy as ‘language’, so a typical formulation will refer to ‘literacy, numeracy and language’; nevertheless, this is where adult ESOL and associated research is located in policy terms. It is as if, in the Australian context, all funding for adult ESOL research and development through the 1990s had been channelled not from DIMA to the AMEP as part of the AMEP programs, but as part of the Australian Language and Literacy Policy and Literacy for All policies (DEET 1991; DEETYA 1998). This policy decision in the United Kingdom has led, as we will argue, to tensions through attempts to fit adult ESOL into a generic Skills for Life pedagogy, and much of the research activity we review has been oriented to establishing the distinctiveness of adult ESOL pedagogy in relation to other basic skills areas. To this extent the situation in the United Kingdom is more similar to the situation in Australian schools, as documented by Hammond (2001) and Hammond and Derewianka (1999), in which a generic one-size-fits-all focus on literacy threatened to sideline the recognition of difference, in particular the needs of ESOL learners. So our review of adult ESOL research in the United Kingdom needs to be read with these policy-generated tensions in mind.

Policy and policy frameworks
ESOL is situated at the intersection of two major strands of current government policy: education in the post-16 sector (currently known in England, Wales and Northern Ireland as the Lifelong Learning sector) and the social cohesion agenda. The main policy directing the funding of ESOL in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, as suggested above, is Skills for Life. The process by which this came into being began with the Moser report, *A fresh start* (DfEE 1999), which recommended the launching of a national strategy to reduce the number of adults with low levels of basic skills. The language needs of bilingual students were not mentioned in the report, and ESOL was not originally included as a ‘skill for life’. This changed with the publication of a government working group report, *Breaking the language barriers* (DfEE 2000), after which ESOL became part of the Skills for Life strategy and thus entered wholly into the adult basic skills agenda for the first time, mirroring a long-established trend in the United States of America. Skills for Life brought with it the creation of a statutory Adult
Prospect Core Curriculum (DFES 2001), a new teacher-training framework and qualifications mapped against national standards.

As well as the changes wrought by Skills for Life, ESOL has found itself at the centre of bigger political debates concerning the economy and issues of citizenship, cohesion and integration. There is widespread vilification in media and government discourse of people seeking asylum in the United Kingdom, and some ethnic minority communities have been blamed for ‘self-segregating’ and causing a lack of cohesion in towns and cities (see, for example, Blair 2005; Hodge, cited in Wintour 2005). In such discourse, there is inevitably a focus on the English-language skills of immigrant groups. Politicians and the media have conflated an inability to use English with a breakdown in cohesion and even with national security. This notion has become a ‘common sense’ one; that is, one that is presented by certain politicians and sectors of the media as a basic truth, and accepted unquestioningly by many people. An example of the rhetoric employed by politicians is this, from a speech by Gordon Brown (2006), then Chancellor of the Exchequer:

People who come into this country, who are part of our community, should play by the rules … I think learning English is part of that. I think that understanding British history is part of that … I would insist on large numbers of people who have refused to learn our language that they must do so.

Government policy has been characterised by the creation of various commissions and legislation on the integration of ‘minorities’, with a heavy focus on English language as the glue necessary for community cohesion. A major plank in this policy has been the implementation of ceremonies for new British citizens and the introduction of a citizenship test, or in the case of people without the required language level, ESOL classes with a citizenship content. The responsibility for teaching these classes was placed with teachers of ESOL, thus bringing ESOL and immigration policy together for the first time.

The contradictions in government policy are evident, however: the same government that stressed the importance of English for integration was simultaneously responsible for cutting funding for the very ESOL classes that would enable immigrants to meet this requirement. Cuts to ESOL provision that were meant to focus public investment on provision for those most at risk of disadvantage in fact excluded three groups who are precisely those most at risk – asylum seekers awaiting a decision on whether they can remain in the United Kingdom (who are by law not allowed to work); unwaged members of families who are not claiming welfare benefits; and low-paid immigrant workers. So, at the time of writing we have the strange...
scenario of one government ministry advocating that all immigrants to the United Kingdom aspiring to citizenship should have reached particular levels in English, while another is cutting free provision of ESOL classes for some groups and introducing a user-pays environment.

A further strand in government policy, laid out in the Leitch (2006) review of skills and linked to Skills for Life, is the drive for an across-the-board improvement in the skills base of the United Kingdom, thus enabling the country to be competitive globally. Thus, there has been a strengthening of connections in policy between learning in the Further Education sector and business. ESOL departments in colleges are expected to provide work-linked courses and to cooperate closely with local employers in such programs as Train to Gain.\(^2\) These new trends, coupled with government initiatives that are encouraging employers to fund their workforce’s literacy, numeracy and ESOL studies, have led some to believe that the Further Education sector is in fact undergoing wholesale privatisation. Private sector investment in Further Education, 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. Yet with regard to ESOL, this has led to confusion between the broader aim of English-language education and a specific employment-related pedagogic focus.

**Second-language learners and programs**

The ESOL student population is extremely diverse and includes refugees and asylum seekers, European Union nationals (most recently from the countries that newly acceded to the European Union), people from established communities, newly arrived husbands or wives, so-called economic immigrants, people who are joining family members, people with work permits and people who were born in the United Kingdom but who spent their childhood abroad (Baynham et al 2006; Cooke 2006). Earlier sociological definitions of immigrant groups and ethnic minority communities fall short of describing the global flows seen in major cities in the United Kingdom, especially London, which Vertovec (2006) has labelled ‘superdiverse’. Other towns follow the older pattern of sizeable settled minority communities. But the extension of the European Union in 2004 has led immigrant workers to move to rural areas of Britain and, increasingly, although still in small numbers, to those towns with settled minority communities.

One of the major differences between many ESOL and other Skills for Life students is their educational backgrounds and literacy levels. Although some institutions take care to ensure those with literacy needs receive targeted tuition, it is still not unusual to find people who have received a university
education in the same class as people who have received little schooling and therefore have basic literacy needs. The range of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991) – qualifications, skills, knowledge and prior experience – that immigrants bring with them to the United Kingdom is extremely wide, but too often those who do find work are employed below their professional levels and may remain in these positions for years to come. In addition, many overseas-born people lack the cultural knowledge to negotiate procedures such as job interviews. These can be seen as linguistic gate-keeping processes, either implicitly or explicitly designed to control access. In their research, Roberts and Campbell (2006) have shown that job interviews present a major barrier to second-language speakers and contribute to high levels of unemployment amongst people with a dominant language other than English.

ESOL classes are offered by a huge range of providers, among them tertiary education colleges, schools (for the growing 16–18 ESOL population), voluntary and charity organisations, churches and mosques, government welfare-to-work schemes, the military, offenders’ institutions and employers. The actual physical surroundings of ESOL classes are variable. Some classes take place in large well-resourced colleges, while others occur in relatively poorly managed and isolated environments with fewer good teaching and learning facilities, although of course such community-based classes are often well taught and can do important work with isolated and hard-to-reach students. With the emphasis on skills for employment, ESOL provision is becoming more work-focused, with courses at even lower intermediate levels oriented towards the teaching of generic work skills or towards the language needed to work in a particular sector such as health and social care. At lower levels there is a persistent need for targeted literacy provision for people with low levels of literacy, but despite greater numbers of teachers trained to teach basic literacy to ESOL students, the time and investment needed for learning of this type is rarely sufficiently resourced.

In their desire to compensate for their loss of cultural capital, ESOL students often aspire to higher education. In order to achieve a university place they must go through the preparatory stages such as pre-Access and Access (a course that prepares students over 21 for higher education). ESOL students at this stage usually join classes that are not provided specifically for them but for all mature students. These classes are increasingly becoming sites where the line between ESOL and non-ESOL is blurred; in parts of London many learners, such as those from countries such as Nigeria who have received English-medium education but who speak other languages at home, share some features with ESOL students but are often not categorised as such. Students in these courses face a barrage of narrow skill-based literacy
tests at each stage of their learning trajectory. These tests are rarely adequate for a multi-lingual student cohort and produce irrelevant discursive barriers.

**The research landscape in adult ESOL**

Until the beginning of the 21st century, there had been little research in the United Kingdom with a specific focus on adult ESOL (Barton and Pitt 2003). What research there had been tended to be patchy, focusing on one specific area, as in the case of workplace ESOL (Roberts, Davies and Jupp 1992), or descriptions of practice (Nicholls and Hoadley-Maidment 1988) or small-scale policy-driven enquiries (Schellekens 2001), rather than designed empirical studies. The establishment of the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) at the Institute of Education in London in 2002 as part of the Skills for Life strategy provided funding for a range of research projects. Although neither ‘ESOL’ nor ‘language’ appears in the title of the centre, there have been seven dedicated ESOL research projects and a further four where ESOL sites have been included. This section discusses the major NRDC-funded research projects from 2004–07, since they represent the only substantial ESOL research in the United Kingdom.

NRDC research has focused on pedagogy, learner characteristics and planning, action research, issues of assessment and of placement on appropriate provision, and on progression and motivation. And while some of the case study work has addressed language socialisation, the empirical gaze has been on the conditions for second-language development rather than on the (socio)linguistic processes themselves. The skills agenda and policy focus of the NRDC has meant that a more critical perspective on policy and practice has had to be relatively underplayed in current research.

**Theoretical perspectives**

As we have pointed out elsewhere (Roberts and Baynham 2006), the theoretical landscape underpinning adult ESOL research is shifting in interesting ways. This is partly through the growing influence of approaches to second-language learning, which is informed by sociocultural theory (see Lantolf 2000; Pavlenko and Piller 2001; Block 2003), providing a viable alternative to the dominant second-language acquisition paradigm, which has been so influential in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) over the past two decades. It now makes as much sense to talk of second-language socialisation (Zuengler and Cole 2005) or appropriation (Baynham 2006) as it does of second-language acquisition.

It is always an interesting question to ask what theories of language
and learning are presupposed in a particular pedagogy, either explicitly or implicitly. Functional approaches to language of one sort or another have been an important influence in TESOL, particularly in Australia and the United Kingdom, but it is only fairly recently that parallel theories of language learning drawing on the work of Vygotsky and Leont’ev (cf. Lantolf 2005) have been developed and articulated to take the place of the narrow psycholinguistic orientation of much second-language acquisition. In addition to this, the work of Bonny Norton and others (cf. Norton 2000; Relaño Pastor and de Fina 2005) has significantly reoriented the scope of research into the psychological construct of motivation, drawing on notions of identity, subjectivity and investment.

The knowledge and practices of ESOL teachers themselves are also becoming part of this theoretical landscape, and there is now a developing literature with a focus on ESOL teachers’ theories in action (cf. Burns and Borg and current research described below). Language classrooms have become the focus of research from a number of perspectives, including ethnography (van Lier 2001) and conversation analysis (Markee 2000; Seedhouse 2004), again enriching the understandings that can inform our adult ESOL research. In brief, we think there has been a ‘social turn’ in adult ESOL research, similar to that taken by literacy research.

All of the perspectives mentioned above have in common an emphasis on the contextual – the situated nature of action, learning and knowledge – and we would argue that adult ESOL is a research site that problematises in interesting ways the language/context relationship. For the adult ESOL learner, the contexts of language use are not just those that have to be painstakingly evoked by the language teacher, but instead press in urgently and impact on the classroom, often decisively altering established patterns of classroom interaction (cf. Baynham 2006). So the contextualisation of adult ESOL teaching and learning emerges as an important theme in our adult ESOL research, not just as a pedagogical strategy, but through a recognition that the adult ESOL classroom is one site among many in a complex sociolinguistic environment where adult ESOL learners face communicative challenges and barriers to access, as well as opportunities in their life and learning trajectories. It is here that policy-oriented research demonstrates its relevance, examining how new policy directions, for example in relation to citizenship or the measurement of learning outcomes, can radically influence the structure of classroom interaction.

Classroom-based research has typically been rather insulated from other domains of the social world, resulting in a somewhat introspective body of research, not noted for looking outwards to examine that range of factors that
shape and influence what goes on within the classroom walls. It is for this reason we would argue that research into adult ESOL teaching and learning should go beyond the here and now, the face-to-face encounters of the classroom, situating these in relation to the broader processes of migration, settlement and integration in the complex ‘superdiverse’ environments of a globalised world mentioned above, then shifting back to the classroom to examine how these larger-scale phenomena can shape and influence micro-phenomena such as classroom interaction. As a result we are increasingly turning to research that can situate fine-grained work in classrooms in larger-scale social and sociolinguistic processes of globalisation and population flows (cf Collins, Slembrouck and Baynham forthcoming) to make sense of the problems of adult ESOL classrooms. So our research should be understood as contextual, invoking in systematic ways the larger-scale contexts that shape and inform the here and now of the pedagogical encounter.

**Current research in the United Kingdom**

In this section we review current and recent research activity in adult ESOL over the past five years, dividing it into three parts: the Effective Practice in ESOL research (EEPP), which is primarily concerned with teacher strategies and qualities; the ESOL cases studies, where micro-ethnographic methods focus on the learners and their linguistic capital; and, finally, a series of studies that looks at the tension between dedicated ESOL on the one hand and literacy and numeracy provision and practices on the other.

**THE ESOL EFFECTIVE PRACTICE PROJECT 2004–06**

Inspired by a United States correlational study (Condelli 2003), both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed, but more emphasis was given to the qualitative analysis in the EEPP project to produce a multi-method study (Baynham et al 2006; see Roberts 2006 for a discussion of methodology). The statistical findings were based on coding classroom teaching strategies and on correlations between these and assessment of learners’ progress. The problems of proficiency tests, including divergent interpretations of the test event by learners (Simpson 2006), together with the well-documented limitations of coding schemes, mean that these findings have to be treated with some caution. Nevertheless, they capture the broad patterns of adult ESOL classrooms and indicate trends in learner progression. The most observed strategies were creating a safe learning environment and allowing sufficient time on task, indicating how much teachers orient to learners and their socio-psychological barriers to learning. One subset of teaching strategies related to balance and variety (balancing fluency and
accuracy and providing a range of activities and materials) and correlated positively with achievement, suggesting that this is a core set of strategies. Getting the right balance is also significant in grammar and vocabulary, where either too much or too little produced fewer good results.

The statistical findings also showed that there was a significant difference in profile between the group of students who had been in the United Kingdom for less than five years and those who had been here much longer. The newcomers, who also had higher average educational backgrounds, made more progress than the longer-term residents. This suggests that any delay in newcomers accessing ESOL provision may adversely affect their chances of making rapid progress. The long-term residents would benefit from provision that is aligned to traditional adult skills courses, whereas the newcomers need more specialised pathways to meet their employment and higher education aspirations.

The qualitative data from teachers, learners and classroom observations and recordings, together with ten case studies that draw together quantitative and qualitative analysis, show that the two most important factors in shaping ESOL practice are the overall policy and environment and what Goodwin calls ‘professional vision’ (Goodwin 1994) of teachers. We found that many of the policy initiatives for ESOL as part of basic skills adult education betray a misunderstanding of language processes and ESOL learner needs. By contrast, the ‘professional vision’ of expert teachers is the single most important resource, as the summary of the ten effective practitioners in the case studies shows.

**SUMMARY OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE FROM THE CASE STUDIES**

- clear planning, both strategic and on-line, with sufficient time to explore and exploit activities, and explicit framing and metalanguage
- the bricoleur teacher who creatively and inventively assembles materials and activities: a ‘principled eclecticism’
- extended ‘talk from within’ combined with planned and on-the-spot form-focused work
- collaborative group work where socially distributed knowledge is managed and exploited
- using the classroom as a place to learn from and for the outside world, including the sociocultural knowledge learned through language and its use in communication outside the classroom
- constant re-visiting and reworking of linguistic items in different contexts
- safe and fun learning.
ESOL CASE STUDIES
These five case studies and their overarching themes anticipated some of the findings from the EEPP project and focused on the learners’ existing linguistic capital and their creativity and agency (Baynham 2006) in the classroom. Learners are often more resourceful and knowing than either the teacher or the task allows for in ‘bringing the outside into the classroom’ (Roberts et al 2004). In literacy classes, both the choice of text and how it was used limited students’ participation and did not exploit their existing resources (Cooke and Wallace 2004; Wallace 2006).

These micro-ethnographic studies also focused on talk, since talk is work in the ESOL classroom. Contrasts between numeracy and literacy classes highlighted the centrality of group processes for ESOL students in developing language (Baynham and Whitfield 2004). While policy, curricular and inspection frameworks have tended to dominate ESOL over the past five years, the case studies have shown how rich the multi-layered classroom interaction is when students can claim their own communicative space and teachers can turn talk into learning.

OTHER RESEARCH ON ESOL PROVISION AND PRACTICE
The other research projects centre on the definitional tensions between ESOL and adult education generally and adult ESOL and adult literacy in particular. This tension is manifest from the first decisions made about placing students through curriculum and pedagogic planning and practices to assessment. The recent project on placement in adult ESOL and literacy classes (Simpson, Cooke and Baynham in press) shows that the distinction between literacy and ESOL is complex and contested. Literacy classes are frequently not tuned to the distinctive needs of ESOL and Creole speakers of English, and literacy and numeracy tests are not culturally inclusive. The positioning of ESOL within the broader Skills for Life strategy has brought policy and financial benefits to ESOL provision but the distinctiveness of ESOL has been ironed-out by across-the-board policy and practice. This is particularly true in the emphasis in Skills for Life on individual learning and achievement, which betrays a misunderstanding of language socialisation processes, and in the assumptions that adult learners are reluctant to attend formal learning. The most recent study of student motivation currently being undertaken contrasts ESOL students with those in literacy and numeracy classes in both these respects (Baynham et al forthcoming).
**Issues arising/future research**

When turning to the future, three important issues have to be addressed: new thematic areas of research, new orientations to research and the issue of continuity of research. Recent ESOL research has focused on the themes of pedagogy, provision and policy, and, as part of the wider research on adult basic skills learning, on the experiences of being an adult learner (Barton et al 2004). However, there has been no substantial research of second-language development nor of the complex relationship between literacy and English language in the diaspora. Indeed, there is no adequate conceptualising of this relationship that takes account of the diversity in background of those for whom English is not their expert language. There is an argument for returning to first principles and questioning whether ESOL sits comfortably either with adult education or English Language Teaching (ELT) more generally. In the ‘superdiverse’ cities of the United Kingdom, where migration, integration, cohesion and intercultural communication are such hot issues, there is an urgent need for research that looks at the unique set of conditions that produce the multi-lingual Britain of the early 21st century and how these conditions can be exploited to enhance the linguistic capital of all those who are not local speakers of English.

The dependence of substantial research on the NRDC, while clearly advantageous in terms of funding and profile, has tended to limit the topics and allowable orientation to research. Critiques of current provision and practice have had to be muted and theorising, and critical stances of language learning give way to general recommendations on practice and provision. This dependence on a single source for funding also raises concerns about the continuity of research. Now that the profile of ESOL research in the United Kingdom has been raised, a more sustained body of both fundamental and practically relevant research needs to be developed.

**NOTES**

1 It is now called the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.
2 See www.traintogain for further information.
REFERENCES


Burns, A. & Borg


