

# Brokering Britain?

**Steve Brown and Joel Petrie review a crucial study.**

Melanie Cooke and Rob Peutrell (eds) (2019) *Brokering Britain, Educating Citizens: Exploring ESOL and Citizenship*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters

On the surface, the teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in the UK as a means of promoting and supporting citizenship seems relatively straightforward: give migrants the language skills they need in order to integrate into society and access opportunities to succeed. However, anyone who has worked in ESOL over the last 20 years or so will tell you that it is a lot more complex and nuanced than that. What do we actually expect migrants to do with the language they learn? Are we teaching them the English they need to assimilate - to comply with existing norms and values? Or is the purpose to provide migrants with the language they need in order to stand up for themselves in the 'hostile environment' of the UK - to challenge and transform current structures that disadvantage them?

With the Prevent Strategy requiring educators to take a negative view of all things 'un-British', the Life in the UK Test appearing to equate citizenship with the knowledge of random facts about British life, and the wider education-for-employability agenda encouraging the development of individuals' capacities to contribute to the nation's economy, it seems clear that the current UK government favours an assimilation model. Given that many ESOL learners came here to escape various kinds of oppression and abuse, and then find themselves in an environment where government-sanctioned hostility towards them is embedded within social and structural norms, the idea that ESOL learners should be encouraged to accept (or even embrace) these norms has, unsurprisingly, left many ESOL teachers feeling demoralised and disillusioned.

This paradoxical notion of 'citizenship but on our terms' is central to Melanie Cooke and Rob Peutrell's book. While ESOL practitioners are pushed in one direction by policy they must also address the real lives of their learners - their lived experiences and the challenges they face as a result of systematised inequity. From an educator's perspective, such challenges present opportunities for learning that cannot be ignored. Cooke and Peutrell's introductory chapter explores the duality of ESOL and citizenship to good effect, pointing out that being a good citizen in a democratic society does not simply involve uncritical

acceptance of authority; it also involves calling out and challenging injustice when it is identified. In doing so, they remind us that ESOL is a pedagogy with the potential to liberate.

The book, edited by Cooke and Peutrell but with contributory chapters from a number of respected ESOL practitioners and scholars, is divided into three parts. Part 1 explores the narrow conceptualisations of citizenship that have tended to inform policy in recent years, which appear to have reduced citizenship to a process of indoctrination and compliance. By presenting ESOL as something that allows migrants to 'fit in', ESOL practitioners become gatekeepers - both in terms of the content they select to facilitate this assimilation process, and in the assessment of whether or not their learners have done so effectively. Of course, the unease that this creates among ESOL practitioners has been previously documented, but the book's third chapter very effectively captures the intermediary role that ESOL teachers play in 'brokering' between externally-imposed expectations and the actual needs of their learners.

It cannot be denied that classroom discussions around the topics of British culture, traditions, institutions, values and working practices are not merely exercises for language practice, nor are they politically neutral. If ESOL and citizenship courses involve discussion of diverse topics such as Guy Fawkes, the British empire, the NHS and employment legislation, this cannot be done without unpacking and problematising issues like terrorism, slavery, social justice and trade unionism. And because language learning is interactive not unidirectional, learners cannot be expected to learn English simply by receiving information passively. They need to engage with the content, to express their views on it, to compare it with their own normative worldview, and to offer alternatives. This is what communicative language teaching is all about - the promotion of meaningful interaction, facilitating learners' capacities to say what they want to say in a specific context, or about a specific topic.

The ability to engage critically with the institutions and values of a nation is, then, a key citizenship skill. Citizenship is about rights as well as responsibilities. The role of the ESOL practitioner is to use the classroom as a space for negotiating between UK social norms and the values and expectations currently

held by ESOL learners. Part 2 of the book demonstrates how this can be done by providing examples of how the ESOL classroom has been used in this way: to map out required processes for refugee settlement, to develop capacities for argumentation and resistance, and to explore, from a sociolinguistic perspective, how the multilingualism of ESOL learners can generate fear, hostility and discrimination in the predominantly monolingual society of the UK - creating barriers to citizenship.

Part 3 is focused on the wider impact of ESOL and citizenship on the lives of migrants in the UK. By focusing on specific groups of students, the sheer diversity of needs becomes apparent - digital citizenship for those with limited experience of working with new technologies; active citizenship to enable communities to hear the voices of women who otherwise risk exclusion or marginalisation; the use of the ESOL classroom as a safe space for LGBTQ migrants through representation in materials and methodologies; and the role of ESOL and citizenship in allowing migrants to transition towards employment.

Cooke and Peutrell rightly point out that ESOL is only one element within the poorly funded and little understood (by policy makers) further, adult and community education sector. There has been a longstanding fixation on skills and employability (and as Frank Coffield has argued, FE students do not want employability, they want decent jobs). It is this dynamic of the book that should recommend it to readers other than ESOL specialists: the book's contributors consistently stress, often through practical examples, the urgent need to revisit those dynamics of the sector that were once intrinsic to further education (such as a commitment to local communities) but which have been lost. For the editors and the book's contributors this crucially includes the idea that the sector has a significant role to play in promoting democratic citizenship. The introduction's nuanced analysis of the concept of citizenship is especially useful; pointing out that the notion can be used (and abused) by both the Left and the Right; and that citizenship, a sense of belonging and full participation in the life of a community, may be impeded by factors such as economic inequality, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, language, culture and legislation relating to immigration, residence and nationality.

A critical leitmotiv of the collection is the argument that ESOL provision operates in a highly politicised space, and that by extension ESOL teaching is unavoidably political too. Again, a parallel argument can be made for the whole further, adult and community education sector; but in some respects given the regrettably liminal nature of ESOL in too many colleges, the particular vulnerabilities of this student cohort, and indeed the divisive post-Brexit political context; ESOL is perhaps the most politicised provision

in the sector. *Brokering Britain* hints at a lesson for all adult education professionals. The editors are surely right that ESOL teaching is intrinsically political, and this collection, along with publications such as the *ESOL Manifesto* (2012) are testament to the political and pedagogic engagement evident by teaching professionals in this area of FE provision. The whole sector would benefit from such an approach, and there is much in this collection that would assist to develop such sectoral engagement.

For ESOL teachers who feel they have been coerced into the uncomfortable position of indoctrinating migrants, promoting uncritical acceptance of what are nebulously described as 'British values', the upbeat and constructive nature of this book offers a far more palatable alternative. By exposing the duality of citizenship, and by conceptualising ESOL teachers as brokers rather than disseminators, Cooke, Peutrell and their contributors legitimise criticality and resistance as key citizenship skills. ESOL need not simply be about learning English in order to assimilate, nor should it be about the uncritical presentation of current normative structures. Citizenship requires the capacity to resist oppression and injustice, to stand up for your rights as a citizen, and to participate in the positive transformation of society. If ESOL entails the development of citizenship skills, it must therefore draw on pedagogies of criticality, resistance and freedom. This book does not only allow ESOL teachers to welcome such pedagogies into their remit - it also demonstrates ways in which they can manifest themselves in the classroom and impact the lives of migrants living in the UK today.

A possible criticism of the book is that it is too optimistic. When policy is so clearly geared towards indoctrination and assimilation, it is easy to present any other pedagogical goal - learner empowerment, for example - as some kind of radical practice. It is important, though, to acknowledge that empowering individuals does not lead to the emancipation of marginalised groups on a societal level; not if those individuals are simply empowered to work more effectively within existing structures. James Avis has warned of the dangers of 'comfort radicalism' - the belief that you are engaging in some kind of radical practice when in fact all you are doing is facilitating learners' capacities to work more effectively for 'the man'. We cannot ignore the complex nature of power and the role it plays within the concepts of language, identity, integration and citizenship. Still, this book creates space for these concepts to be explored and problematised through discussions about ESOL practice and its impact on wider society. These are the conversations that ESOL practitioners need to have, and this book makes a welcome and significant contribution towards facilitating this.