Adult ESOL in superdiverse Britain: Challenging imposed identities through participatory pedagogy

James Simpson
University of Leeds, United Kingdom

I discuss how current government policy agendas present challenges to adult migrant learners of English in the UK, and ways in which these challenges might be faced by learners and their teachers. I place this discussion in its historical and political context, and bring in examples from participatory ESOL projects in London.

I begin by briefly describing the recent history of inward migration to the UK, a history which has brought enormous diversity, including linguistic diversity, to the country. I then discuss the policy response to the linguistic diversity of Britain’s adult migrant population. I show how, in political rhetoric, the country’s multilingualism is regarded as a source of tension, a threat to national unity, and a problem that needs to be managed – like migration itself.

I turn next to adult migrant language learners themselves. Through the prism of identity, I argue that they find themselves positioned in policy and consequently institutionally in certain restricted ways. By examining curricula and teaching materials we see that the identity positions offered to students are as: immigrants and potential ‘citizens’, as learners of ‘skills’, and as low-grade employees.

Finally I reflect on how – partly as a result of current ESOL policy – spaces are emerging for alternative ways of considering ESOL classrooms and students in relation to the world. Although not by any means new in itself, critical and participatory pedagogy is a radical departure from current mainstream ESOL practice in the UK. I discuss two participatory ESOL projects in London which involve students reflecting on the material conditions of their lives and experiences, and engaging in action to effect change.

Keywords: language education, migration, language policy.