

Shaping ESOL: Addressing and Advancing Issues of Policy and Practice

An increasingly globalized workforce, coupled with 2020 marking a record high for the number of forcibly displaced people in the world (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021), means that millions of people are choosing to, or are being forced to, make a new life in countries where their mother tongue is not the predominant language. The result is that most towns and cities, in both the United States and the UK, are more multicultural and multilingual than ever before. Acknowledging and providing effective governance for these new “superdiverse communities” (Canagarajah, 2017, p. 2) is fundamental to creating inclusive, cohesive societies.

Regrettably, however, the failure of governments to recognize the central role language(s) can play in establishing integrated communities is common. Indeed, authorities often use language as a tool of control rather than as the means to create more cohesive societies. For example, language is frequently used as an instrument of immigration control (Khan & McNamara, 2017), in erecting barriers to employment or study (Piller, 2016), or as a means to promote the idea that monolingualism is crucial for a homogenous, integrated society (Simpson & Whiteside, 2015). Therefore, the ideological approach governments take toward providing language education for migrants, and how that plays out in ESOL provision in local contexts, is of great importance, and is why these themes were chosen as the focus of this special issue.

Stemming from decades of frontline ESOL teaching experience, of meeting people from other cultures with whom we share much in common, it was our frustration with the way in which language education is currently supported and organized in our local contexts that led to our desire to create and publish this special issue. Change at both policy and practice level is needed in thinking afresh about how language provision for migrants might be most effectively organized. The pieces presented here encompass both of these themes. At the policy level, convincing arguments are made for taking a multicultural, multilingual perspective on language education, while on a practice level, articles focus on how we can emphasize equality, diversity, and inclusion in our ESOL provision. The Black Lives Matter movement and COVID 19 both occurred since we initially proposed the idea for this special issue, and two of the articles in this collection, Baker’s and Graham-Brown’s, focus on these field-changing events.

The UK Articles

The need to challenge existing narratives that dominate discussion around migration and integration is a theme included in all four of the UK-based articles. Simpson, in his invited article, draws our attention to how analysis of political discourse can reveal the ideology behind the words. He notes that a system that emphasizes monolingualism is, in many ways, detrimental to the well-being of both migrants and community cohesion. In a call to move away from a one-nation, one-language ideology, he argues for a shift from viewing integration as a form of assimilation and suggests that grassroots initiatives, which promote local partnerships, may offer a possible solution.

One such initiative is detailed by Goodey, who also draws on critical discourse theory to make the case for such projects being crucial for successful two-way integration. Goodey focuses on integration and its value to society from a rights-based perspective rather than making the economic case for supporting migration. Like Simpson, she also suggests that formal language education is not sufficient to promote the benefits and learning opportunities for local people, not just for migrants, and paints a convincing

picture of language education as something other than the organization of formal, continually assessed, courses of language facts. She describes a heartening project that brings people from different backgrounds together. Through the reflections of the participants in the project, we come to see how “People became more than the label commonly used to describe them.”

Staying in Scotland, Brown and Nanguy also draw on Critical Discourse methods to investigate the use of published teaching materials from a UK equalities legislation perspective. As an inspired analytical framework, they use the nine protected characteristics from the UK’s 2010 Equality Act to assess the extent to which the content of coursebook materials used on ESOL programs comply with the legislation. They find that not only are globally published coursebooks unsuitable for the ESOL classroom, but also that the use of such materials quite possibly undermines language teachers’ attempts to adhere to legislation designed to promote equality and inclusivity.

In the final UK-based piece, Graham-Brown shares her experience of “Decolonising the Curriculum” while designing a training session for ESOL teachers. Graham-Brown imparts her planning strategies for the training session, which is rooted in a UK ESOL context and was developed against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter movement. She reveals how she adapted a framework to support ESOL teachers to develop inclusive materials, and help learners to identify intersectional exclusion. The helpful scripts she includes not only identify challenging themes for ESOL teachers, but also offer much-needed guidance and support.

The U.S. Articles

The remaining three articles are from U.S.-based practitioners. Though the United States and the United Kingdom contexts may be different, the articles from all authors evidence commonalities that present universal challenges for ESOL practitioners. Voegler, Kearney, and Boyd, via an ethnographic case study, illustrate how teachers’ value orientations shape their attitudes toward students’ heritage language resources. This addresses the increasing recognition of heritage languages and multilingualism as resources in classrooms, which arguably still are “an untapped national resource” (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007).

Sheppard’s article continues to examine classroom content. He argues that the reduction of ESOL to a workforce skill, especially since the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) has led to a narrowing of adult education. This negates learners’ needs in a variety of everyday and routine uses, including the language for shopping, visiting a doctor, talking with educators, and so forth. Sheppard presents a practical solution by offering a curricular model that incorporates a range of life-wide literacies.

The idea of resource is continued in Baker’s advocacy for SIFE, as she puts forward the notion that educators who work with SIFE students are now valuable resources for all educators who experienced interruptions in their semesters due to the pandemic. In 2020, most educators had to make a sudden shift to online instruction and then, for some time, toggled between face-to-face and online instruction, often teaching students who had little access to technology at home, inconsistent wi-fi, and little physical space. These challenges and interruptions helped coin the phrase “COVID slide.” Baker argues convincingly that because this slide or interruption is similar to the interruptions SIFE students experience, all educators can benefit from the wealth of experience of educators who already work with SIFE students.

Summary

From the collection of papers overall, it is clear that for effective language education to be provided, there is an obvious need for policy makers to support practitioners’ efforts to focus on learners’ real lives, and the diverse linguistic, cultural, and social and racial aspects involved in doing so. Moreover, as a number of the articles conclude, a reconceptualization of teacher education for those working, or about to work, in ESOL contexts is also sorely needed. Such improved ESOL teacher preparation would include, for instance, training in a pedagogy focused on the daily needs of the learners’ lives, would endow teachers

with a critical understanding of language education in their context, and would provide them with the tools and confidence to devise a syllabus that includes sensitive, social justice issues such as homophobia, sexism, or racism.

Many people have worked hard to get this special edition into (digital) print. Huge thanks must go to all the contributors, reviewers, and editors at the New York State (NYS) TESOL *Journal* and, of course, to my two co-editors for this special issue—Lesley Painter-Farrell, The New School, New York City, and Pauline Blake-Johnston, National Association for Teaching English and Community Language (NATECLA), Scotland. Its publication will, without doubt, serve to deepen our understanding of the field—providing much food for thought and many ideas for action.

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Note: The pieces by Brown-Nanguy, Goodey, Graham-Brown, and Simpson, which concern conditions of ESOL practice in the UK, have retained the UK spelling, phrasing, cultural and styling conventions, and any author emphasis or highlighting in italic. This editorial, though also coming from the UK, follows U.S. style. All text citations and Reference listings conform to APA 7 style to the extent of the information provided.

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