The Power of Discussion

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1. Introduction

The Power of Discussion was a participatory ESOL project which built on previous work carried out with support from the British Council, the *Whose Integration?* project (Bryers, Winstanley and Cooke 2013). Participatory ESOL is an approach to teaching English language and literacy that draws out and builds upon the experiences of students and develops a shared critical understanding of the world. In *Whose Integration?* we explored the usefulness of participatory methods for addressing potentially contentious topics which directly affected ESOL students. In that project, students and teachers engaged in discussions about complex issues related to integration; the report showed how themes emerged and developed, how the pedagogy worked and – most importantly for this follow-up project – how meaning was made collectively through dialogue and debate. We observed that when students engaged in meaningful discussions they produce language beyond their level, learn new language from each other and develop new communication strategies. In *The Power of Discussion*, then, we wished to examine the role of discussions in language development in closer detail.

This report documents the discussions engaged in by an ESOL class over the research period of six weeks and describes some of the most salient features of student language development. It also encompasses our reflections on the discussion topics which emerged and the pedagogic tools and techniques we used. It is a piece of practitioner research based on teachers' observations of classroom data rather than an empirical SLA study, which would be beyond the scope of this project.

We begin with a brief survey of discussion in education in general, and the potential of classroom discussions for second language development.

Research on interaction, dialogue and discussion

There are various reasons to study the role of discussion in ESOL teaching. The role of discussion and, more specifically dialogue, in learning has been a topic of interest since ancient times. In Socrates' famous dialogues, for example, he employed questions and answers to scrutinise his interlocutor's opinions and doctrines in an attempt to move beyond 'false beliefs' to the 'truth'. In the early part of the 20th century, the Russian scholar, Mikhail Bakhtin, proposed that meaning is not fixed but lies in the spaces which open up in dialogue as ideas are exchanged. Also in Russia in the 1920s, the psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, argued that human cognitive development was rooted *primarily* in dialogue with others, i.e. the interaction happens first and is subsequently internalised in an individual's mind. Vygotsky's 'sociocultural' approach to learning, with its emphasis on dialogue and interaction, has been highly influential in theories of teaching and learning, from primary schools to higher education, as well as language learning. For many educationalists influenced by these ideas, therefore, dialogue is absolutely central to educational discourse and learning.

Our own approach to teaching and learning, participatory ESOL, also draws on the work of Paolo Freire, the Brazilian revolutionary educationalist who likewise considered dialogue to be central to learning. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) Freire argued that dialogue was fundamental to the development of *critical consciousness,* i.e deep awareness of the causes and impact of injustice. Freire and his adherents developed several tools and techniques for dialogic teaching, such as problem-posing around issues depicted in 'codes'. A code is a depiction of an issue shared by the group, usually in the form of an image, which is then analysed (decodified) by the group in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the issue. Freire's work raised important questions about the role of power in interaction, which we also address in this report: Whose voices tend to be heard? Whose

are silenced? How are disagreements managed? Whose opinions are the ones which dominate? How do we deal with asymmetry between speakers?

Language learning

Participatory ESOL attempts to adapt Freire's principles to the teaching of English to adult migrant learners. It is commonly agreed in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, that in order for language acquisition to take place, learners need to produce language in meaningful communication with other speakers. The discussion about this traditionally centres on 'input' (the language that learners hear or read), 'output' (the language that learners produce when speaking) and the role of interaction. SLA researchers such as Swain (1995, 2000) argue that through output learners *notice* the language they produce and the gap between what they want to say and what they can say, and are able to test out what they know. We believe that this might be particularly pertinent for ESOL students who often have extensive language knowledge and do not necessarily need more language input, but rather need to restructure their current language in order to develop accuracy and to extend their linguistic repertoires. In this project, therefore, we were interested in working more systematically with *output*, reformulating students' language and observing how they negotiated and constructed meaning during interaction both with us and with each other.

Sociocultural approaches to SLA, drawing on the work of Vygotsky, stress that much learning takes place in and through dialogue; Swain (2000) argues that during interaction language learners can be observed to collaborate with each other not only to achieve understanding but to construct knowledge about language itself. Thus, Swain argues, the 'unit of analysis' in language learning is not input alone, or output alone, but the whole dialogue. (1995:14) Influenced by SLA research on the importance of interaction, exponents of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) develop tasks which encourage students to talk – these include activities such as debates, ranking tasks, decision-making and so on. Research shows different tasks produce different kinds of talk, e.g. tasks which require that interlocutors reach an agreement produce convergent talk whilst tasks such as debates produce divergent talk. Discussions are common activities in language classrooms and there is a wealth of materials and textbooks which contain ideas for conducting them. In our experience though, many of these are not particularly motivating for students as they do not speak directly to their interests and concerns and often serve merely as a vehicle to practise 'target language'. The teachers in the action research project reported in Cooke and Roberts (2008), for example, found that students carrying out textbook discussion activities seemed to just go through the motions of expected classroom behaviour: they rushed through the tasks and did not stretch themselves or struggle to express their own meanings. When teachers found ways for students to 'speak from within' (ibid), however, and made certain discourse patterns such as narratives or types of argumentation explicit, the students produced longer stretches of language which were more complex, more fluent and more accurate.

In participatory ESOL we also assume that when learners speak from within, discussing issues that are relevant to their lives, they produce richer, more complex language which is more likely to lead to language development. However, we go one step further than this by expecting students to engage in discussions about social and political issues which spring directly from their experiences in the world outside the classroom. We believe, in fact, that learners' broader social lives are an under-exploited resource in ESOL. In previous projects we have experienced what happens when students have a deep personal investment in the content of a discussion and in the potential impact of what they are saying. In these discussions we have seen that students strive to find the most effective

ways to use their linguistic resources and they make attempts to express themselves in an effort to reach understanding.

In the next section we look more closely at the series of discussions about the political and social questions which emerged during the project. First we describe the project design, give some details about the students and an overview of the lessons themselves.

2. The ESOL class and the research design

The research was designed, analysed and written up by ESOL teacher-researchers Dermot Bryers (DB) and Becky Winstanley (BW), and Melanie Cooke (MC), an ESOL researcher. The lessons were taught by Dermot and Becky, with Melanie visiting the class on five occasions. We followed up each lesson with a reflective meeting in which we planned for the following session. Our data consisted of the lessons plans and audio recordings of six 2.5 hour lessons, observation field notes, reflections, students' written work, visual documentation of tools and other classroom work and the postings by students and staff on the class blog and Twitter account.

The research took place in one class at Tower Hamlets College, east London. The class was an entry level 2 class which met three times a week for an academic year; this research took place over a period of six weeks between November and December 2013. The 16 students were from Bangladesh, Somalia, China, Brazil and Portugal and had been in the UK from between one and ten years. Most of the students were not in paid employment and were either dependent on their spouses and/or receiving welfare benefits. In a discussion on social class before the start of the project, many of the group felt that their socioeconomic status had declined as a consequence of migration to the UK.

First of all we established with the group what we meant by 'discussion': a meaningful exchange between at least three people which involved a degree of formality and seriousness. We therefore didn't analyse chats, small talk and one-to-one conversations. In line with our commitment to participatory ESOL we were particularly concerned with social and political topics that had important implications for the group. For this reason we started out by asking students to share what had interested them recently, either stories from the mainstream media or news picked up from neighbours and friends. We then selected topics from that discussion which seemed to generate the most interest to take the project forward. We used a process of "conscious listening" (Auerbach; 1992) in which we stepped back from the students' discussions and listened carefully for possible generative themes emerging from the discussion. In this way our first topic, immigration status, emerged. Our second topic, action against poverty, came out of similar conscious listening to students discussions during the first three lessons.

The next consideration was course planning. In keeping with our previous work, (see Bryers, Winstanley, Cooke; 2013)and (Cooke, Winstanley and Bryers; forthcoming) the teachers did not plan lessons far in advance and there was no scheme of work. Instead, the teachers worked with a three-stage process 1) 'making meaning' in which the group explores the basic terms of the theme; 2) 'going deeper' in which the group explores the theme in depth and 3) 'broadening out', the final stage in which the group analyse and critique 'expert' opinions on the theme.

There was a strong commitment to start in an open way and to avoid overloading the students with texts and 'expert opinion' when they were beginning to explore a topic. We used various tools go deeper into a topic, for example the problem tree and problem-posing. The problem-tree is a graphic tool where students construct a tree on a large sheet of paper. The roots of the tree represent the causes of the problem, the branches, the consequences and the fruit, the action. The tree then exists as a *living* text that can be added to and revisited. Problem-posing (see Bryers, Winstanley, Cooke; 2013) is an exploration of a problem shared by the group. The teacher facilitates a sharing of personal experiences relating to the problem, then an analysis of its causes and consequences

before encouraging the group to think of possible solutions or action that can be taken to combat the problem.

In section 3 we discuss in detail the way these topics emerged and what happened in the discussions. We also give our reflections on the pedagogy, i.e. the techniques we employed and our roles as teachers.

3. Participatory pedagogy

In this section we focus on our participatory approach to: a) topics: finding them and sustaining them, b) making participation more equal, c) the teacher's role and d) explicit language work.

Topics

The critical linguist Alastair Pennycook9 (1994: 132) states that 'the search for content in language teaching is a contentious one'. English language teaching has been called a 'blandscape' (Clarke and Clarke 1990:39) and 'a subject in search of subject matter' (Harrison 1990:1). Pennycook criticises language classes for maintaining a dichotomy between linguistic structures and social structures and thereby failing to link the language being learned to the lives of the students (ibid).

Finding Topics

In participatory ESOL we attempt to address this divide by ensuring that both the language being learned and the content of the classes are directly relevant to students' lives. For this reason we believe it is important to begin without a list of topics or set of activities chosen in advance. This allows students to find topics that relate to their own lives and experiences and produces a more urgent need to communicate. At the start of the project we opened out the first session using a tool we have labelled What's New?

Tool: What's New?

Students work in three groups. One group focuses on local news (Tower Hamlets or London), the second on national news (UK) and the third on global news. The prompt is simply 'What's new? What have you heard in the news or from your friends?' Students have 30-40 minutes to have a discussion and record their ideas on a spider diagram. One member of each group then takes the spidergram and summarises it for one of the other two groups. After 10-15 minutes, a new spokesperson from each original group moves onto the second group. The teacher listens, monitors and finds out where the students' interests lie, what issues are igniting discussion and which are left to the wayside.

At first, in one of the groups, the students did not immediately have much to say and they needed time to think and warm up. However, after five or ten minutes the students came across a topic they were able to exchange opinions on – the health service and 'health tourism' – and the discussion took off. We reflected later that during these initial phases it can be very tempting for the teacher to abandon the activity or take it over, but the ability to 'hold your nerve' is important in participatory ESOL and, as we have seen, in this case it paid off quite soon. It is very common for a more open activity, an unfamiliar activity or a new game to take a while to work. This 'warming up' is necessary and probably feels more uncomfortable for the teachers than the students.

From the What's New? tool we generated themes for future discussion. Initially one of the salient themes which emerged was 'immigration' and specifically 'illegal immigrants'. There had been a large immigration raid in Whitechapel a few days earlier which the students had brought to our attention and were anxious to discuss. Then, at the end of session 3 we consulted the students and the consensus was to move on to something different. We decided to move onto the theme of poverty because it had emerged during earlier discussions. Although at first, the topic did not take off

quite as we had hoped, after changing the angle from a more philosophical discussion around poverty to a more practical focus on what action can be taken to combat it, it was far more successful. The students were re-energised, had more to say and the mood was lighter. We are not suggesting the hard, difficult subjects should be avoided, but that if a topic seems wrong it may need to be adjusted rather than abandoned.

Sustaining topics

We chose to work with one theme over a number of classes so that students had time to go deeper into complex debates and issues. However, in the time that elapses between classes it is normal for students to forget what has been said or to lose interest in a topic; bridging the gap between classes therefore becomes crucial and the teachers often had to help the class remember what had happened previously.

Revising the previous lesson allows students to remember together what was said and why it was relevant and can reignite interest and allow the class to go deeper into a topic; it also gives people a second chance to have their say if they missed out the first time. Students have had a chance during the week to think about the issues and maybe talk them over with friends and family before expressing themselves in class – and importantly for language learning, remembering previous sessions allows for language and ideas to be recycled and revised. In session 5, one of the students who hadn't spoken much in the previous class said, referring back to the previous debate on the causes of poverty: "can I say something? Population, we need everyone have two babies. We can control poverty.' She had clearly been thinking about the issues during the week and had had the time to form an opinion which she hadn't had time to think about the week before."

We employed many different ways to keep topics going, drawing on our whole teaching repertoire of tools and activities. This relates to 'holding your nerve' and not moving on at the first flat moment. On more than one occasion during the project, a change in dynamic or activity re-energised the group. A good example arose when the group had been discussing action against poverty for around half an hour. The students had brainstormed a variety of actions against poverty. We wanted to evaluate the efficacy of these but there was a dip in pace and a sense that the group wanted to move on. We quickly organised a *spectrum line*, where students physically position themselves along a line in response to how strongly they agree or disagree with a statement. The discussion became lively and funny despite the seriousness of the topic and we were able to successfully evaluate the actions.

We also used social media (Twitter and our class blog) to sustain discussions over a longer period and take our discussions out of the classroom. Students mainly used the blog in their weekly IT session. It was interesting for students to be able to comment on the issue after they had a discussion. It was a form of consolidation, an opportunity for students to comment when they had missed their chance the previous day, and it also allowed students to change their mind, or express something more effectively. For example, after session 2 the students reflected more deeply about the reasons migrants might be undocumented. Here are some examples of sentences people added to the blog when working on it in class:

> *People understand the issue but they are a shamed to go home.*
>
> *People come to help families but no documents means later no access to work and benefit.*
>
> *Some people are afraid to go back home because there is too much conflict and violence.*

Sometimes students reflected and used the blog from home, further evidence that students were genuinely engaged by the topics. Here D engages on the blog with the two questions we had discussed that day in class:

> *Maybe on the health tourism the government is right to worry, because have to a great control for medication to able the people who live here and those who visit. I agree.*
>
> *I believe many people change their country for to have a better live, maybe one research with these people to know the reason for change of country and that really is a strong reason this country can help and not arrested. Disagree*

Using Twitter in the classroom: @DiscussionPower

Twitter takes a while to get going and the more you tweet the more followers you get and the more interactions it is possible to have. It would be interesting to observe a classroom Twitter account over a longer period of time. In the short amount of time we used Twitter (we tweeted 12 times and only had 15 followers) we were able to observe its potential as a motivation to the students. At one point, after our classroom discussions about action against poverty, we tweeted a group of students and migrant workers campaigning for a living wage at London University(@3cosas):
@3CosasCampaign @dermotbryers @ESOLNexus @melocoton61 We support you because you are right! Clever strike.

On two occasions we used Twitter as a way of summarising a discussion. It worked as a feedback activity. After a discussion about poverty the class tweeted David Cameron and Boris Johnson to say what we thought:

@Number10gov @MayorofLondon Poverty is not having enough money at the end of the month, higher rent, energy costs and prices every year.

Making participation more equal

As well as the vital issue of topic, we found that ensuring equal participation of students during discussions was key to the project.

One of the chief barriers to a successful discussion is domination by one or two people with the result that other students disengage. We observed this at several stages during the project, with one student particularly prone to holding the floor for too long. It seemed that the rest of the class, particularly at the beginning of the course, did not have the ability to interrupt, ask for clarification or move the discussion along. Instead they tended to stop listening and the student increasingly addressed his speech to the teachers. This happened far less by sessions 5 and 6, as students developed the skills to keep the discussion on track and to ensure more equal participation.

The barriers to an equal discussion are complex however, and relate to societal inequalities as well as language skills. The ability to interrupt or invite other people to have their say are clearly vital, and we spent time developing these skills, but barriers also include discrimination in terms of gender, race, age and/or other identities. Individual personalities of course, can also have an impact on the group dynamic. In participatory ESOL all these barriers are addressed and not just the purely *linguistic* ones.

We addressed the issue of unequal participation through having a discussion with students about their own perspectives on the problem. In session 2 some students had said: 'what we want in our discussions is for it to be equal' and 'we are trying to get it more equal'. As sensitively as we could, we compared the quiet and the more dominant students by doing a *speaking line (*see box below) in which students positioned themselves according to whether they had spoken a lot or a little. In this way, everyone was drawn in to the problem and shared responsibility for the solution. The problem was addressed in a gentle and good-natured way and the students responded positively. Discussions cannot always be equal, but it should not always be the same people who speak the most. This was an important meta-discussion in which the *features* of discussions were the *object* of discussion, and we believe it had a powerful impact on the group dynamic. After this point, the question of equal participation arose on various occasions and for the rest of the project students appeared to be mindful about ensuring greater equality in their interactions.

Tool: Speaking Line

We used the 'speaking line' tool in session 3 to nudge the students towards making participation in the discussions more even. After a group speaking activity, the students lined up in a line according to how much they spoke, with the person who spoke most at one end and the person who spoke least at the other.

This activity necessitates negotiation among the group and often provokes fierce debate. This tool is effective because it places the responsibility for making discussion more even in the hands of the whole group. We used it after a discussion partly to assess whether raising the issue of speaking equally in the previous session had had any impact and partly to provoke further change in behaviour.

The teacher role

As we have seen, the role of the teacher in participatory ESOL is significantly different to the role in traditional approaches to language teaching as there is much greater awareness of the power dynamic between teachers and students and commitment to challenge hierarchy. We do not pretend that teacher power does not exist but we recognise it and attempt to make it explicit both to ourselves and to the students. At times this means deliberately step back to encourage more equal participation and at times it means making the teacher role transparent.

We experimented with at least five distinct teacher roles during the discussions:

1. The teacher stays out of the discussion and only keeps time and listens.

2. The teacher stays out of the discussion but provides students with individual feedback on post-its to encourage them to use new language or a skill we have worked on.

3. The teacher acts as a facilitator, working to repair, summarise, clarify and bring in quieter students.

4. The teacher acts as an 'equal' contributor and gives opinions.

5. The teacher uses problem-posing question to lead the group through an examination of the causes, consequences and potential solutions of a shared problem.

The teachers reflected at various points during the project that it is important to decide which role to play before and to be clear about this. Here is an example of one teacher making her role explicit before problem-posing questions in session 3:

I'm going to try and get you to think about this picture. I'm not going to part of this discussion. It's going to be you. My role is going to be asking questions. So, I'm not going to say what I think, I'm not going to give my opinion. I'm just going to ask more and more questions to try and get you to think more, to think more deeply.'

If the teacher always plays the classic role of 'chair' it can encourage students to speak to the teacher. This is a common reason teachers cite for classroom discussions not working. During one discussion one teacher deliberately avoided eye contact with a student who was directing all his comments at the teacher forcing the student to turn to the group to find an audience. On the other hand, if the teacher is *in* a discussion they can use personal anecdotes to help the discussion along and to encourage other students to disclose.

Developing Language

Although participatory ESOL may be freer and less tightly controlled by the teacher than traditional language teaching, it is not characterised by the absence of explicit focus on language development. In this project we spent a lot of time developing students' skills and this included some controlled language practice, alongside discourse level work.

Working with students' existing skills

We began this project with the idea that we would work with students' 'output' (the language that learners produce when speaking, in this case in a discussion) and we wanted to set up the conditions in which students would strive to communicate using their existing linguistic skills and knowledge. We avoided 'input' in the form of stimulus texts or recordings as we did not want to influence the content of what they said. The language input came from the students themselves and what they said during the discussions and also from the teachers, when they played an active role in the discussions.

Sometimes the fear that students are not going to be able to say anything they lack the language skills leads us as teachers to want to feed in ideas and language to get them started. The problem with this approach, however, is that it prevents the students stretching themselves to exploit their own linguistic resources and moreover it sends the message to students that the teacher's input is the *right* answer to be copied.We have already noted that at the beginning of our project students were using language that would be considered beyond the level of E2, and that by the end of the six weeks this was even more noticeable. We suggest that creating the conditions in the classroom for discussions to take place in an open participatory way – even if at first it seems too challenging – can help to unlock existing skills which may not come to the fore in a more controlled language lesson. It is significant that, despite the relatively "low" level of the group, they became increasingly comfortable with open-ended discussion. This is not to say we wanted to avoid explicit language

teaching, however. On the contrary, we observed the language emerging from the discussions and employed explicit teaching strategies to stretch and develop it.

Meta language: discussions about discussions

At the beginning of the project we spent considerable time discussing discussions. We posed questions for collective consideration as follows: what does a discussion look like? What are the components? What makes people speak during a discussion? What makes them silent? Is discussion different in different languages? We asked students to think of examples of discussions they had had in any language and describe the context and the purpose of these discussions.

As well as being productive for language work discussions *about* discussions were also interesting from the point of view of classroom content, and we heard several examples from students about discussions they had had. One of these was a group of friends who had been saving a small amount of money for many years. Recently they had amassed enough to be able to begin a small business. They gathered together to discuss the type of business they would set up. We used this example each time we spoke about an action planning discussion. Using students' own rather than teacher examples sent a strong message that the language used in the classroom was theirs, not given to them to use by the teacher. Talking with students in this way helped to demystify the language work on discussion skills and to share the expertise and challenge the usual role of the teacher being the keeper of the expert knowledge about language.

Explicit language work

Alongside this meta-language work we focussed on particular discourse strategies to make discussions successful. We asked students to think about discussions they had had, in any language, list strategies they felt were important. Their suggestions included taking the floor, asking for clarification, asking for more information, checking you have been understood, inviting others to speak, agreeing and disagreeing, making, accepting and rejecting suggestions. We then asked the students to work together to come up with possible ways of giving voice to each strategy working with two or three at a time; for example, for making suggestions they suggested, *let's, we could* and *what about* ? We spent time practising these before re-incorporating them back into the discussions. One example was an activity where the teacher said something completely incoherent and each student had to use a phrase to ask for repetition.

In this way we took students' own words and tweaked them where necessary and devised practice activities around them. As each student had different strengths, sometimes they were consolidating existing skills, and sometimes they were developing new skills which were initially part of another student's repertoire. In this way we were creating a kind of linguistic pool that all the students could draw upon.

As the project progressed we found that time spent on language practice became the fun part of the lesson where students could have a rest from serious issues. We found the combination of the two aspects refreshing and productive. In the post lesson reflective log after session 2 we observed,

Language work in participatory ESOL can feel like a break, whereas normally, the opposite can be true, with an overload of grammar it is the speaking task that is light relief. Our speaking activities

stretch students so much that language work can seem easy. Language focus ended up being somehow funny, a laugh (post lesson reflection 2).

We also found that students almost immediately started to incorporate the language we had practised into the discussions. In one session, for example, we discussed the government initiative to use an advertising van to 'invite' *illegal* migrants to go home. In the post lesson reflections we observed: *students used several of the realisations to good effect e.g. What do you think? Can you say a bit more?*' It appeared that students felt that the language practice was of immediate use in their discussions.

Participatory language work is a powerful collective experience that tends to create a community of practice and the development of a shared lexicon (see Bryers, Winstanley, Cooke; 2013). This was also evident here with, 'Can you elaborate?, becoming an 'in joke', often used playfully to pass the buck or put someone on the spot. Similarly, students repeatedly used 'I'm not so sure' as a way of rejecting a suggestion.

By the final lesson the students were skilfully embedding new phrases and expressions into their discussions. Perhaps the best example is the use of modality for making suggestions which was one area we focussed on explicitly. In the final discussion of the project we saw students had incorporated it into their repertoires:

'*We could go to Poplar College and ask for some questions.', 'What about we could boycott, what do you think?'*

4. Results

We have often observed in our previous participatory research projects that over time students produced complex language and began to speak with increasing sophistication. However, as our focus in previous work was primarily on content, we did not systematically research language use and the tentative conclusions we drew relied more on our reflections and impressions than on concrete data. In this project, we continued to keep meaning at the fore of our pedagogy but shifted some of our research focus from *what* the students were saying to *how* they were saying it. We recorded all the discussions the students had in the six sessions, listened carefully to their language use at each stage and noted their development over the six week period.

Language of discussion

Using the transcripts we looked possible impact of the six weeks on the students' ability to engage successfully in discussions. We now focus in more detail on two of these discussions to give a sense of the changes which took place during the project. The first occurred on the first day of the project and shows a discussion about immigration. The second took place on the final day of the project and was a discussion about how students could take action on unfair changes to the application process for the college hardship fund.

These two examples are different types of discussion. Using Carter and McCarthy's (1997:10)

categorisation of spoken texts we can say that the discussion types were respectively *debate and argument* in which 'people take up positions, pursue arguments and expound on their opinions on a range of matters' and *decision making/negotiating outcomes*, i.e. 'ways in which people work

towards decisions/consensus or negotiate their way through problems towards solutions'. These two discussion types provide opportunities for students to practise strategies which are essential in the world outside the classroom – the first type because highly political topics do not always lend themselves to easy consensus so students need to be able to express opinions, listen to those of others, possibly modify their views and live with disagreement and compromise, and the second type because they also need to be able to work effectively with others when attempting to effect change.

After listening to the recordings we were impressed with the progress the students made and were able to observe a marked difference in complexity, coherence and collaboration between the first and the final discussion. Initially students made good points and there were some impressive individual contributions but there was limited *dialogue* and the discussion as a whole lacked key features of the genre, such as responding to and developing other people's ideas. In one exchange, which was typical of the first discussion, one student makes a point about some of the problems faced by migrants with student visas: '*Bangladesh coming student apply this college then two three months close college. Very big problem*'[1]. Although students show signs they were listening, the point is not developed or taken up and is followed by another individual contribution which does not acknowledge or build on the theme of the previous utterance but goes back to the general topic: '*Nobody knows what happened when you go to another country. Same same everybody same. I don't know anything'*. Students displayed limited awareness of co-operation strategies in interaction, talked over each other and interrupted each other frequently.

However after six weeks of group discussions the strategies displayed by the same students were noticeably more effective and the discussions contained considerably more features of the genre. In contrast to the first session, the final discussion flowed smoothly and it was easier to follow the various points made by the students and the overall development of the discussion. The students can be observed exploring, challenging and even co-constructing their ideas. In the following extracts from the final discussion, we can observe students discussing the difficulties of fulfilling attendance requirements in their ESOL class and we can see more evidence of development and follow up.

1. **R:** Can I say something? My attendance is very low 75% because my son every time nose operation, check-up hospital appointment, everything headache my life. Sometimes coming sometimes not
2. **D:** ok, but when you don't coming school, you need prove?
3. **R:** Yes, I need letter, every time text Becky

Later on in the discussion the students turn to possible solutions and again we see them developing and following up on each other's points.

1. **R:** What about we could boycott, what do you think?
2. **D:** I think it's hard but maybe it can work…Maybe not all students accept this, what do you think? I think it's [it'll] work.

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[1] Examples of students' spoken language has been transcribed as near as possible to the original utterance, i.e. the grammar has not been altered. Where this interferes with comprehensibility we have indicated the probable meaning in brackets.

There are no examples of students talking over each other without listening and there is evidence of a high degree of coherence. The teachers felt no need to intervene or chair as the discussion was run and managed by the students themselves and there are many instances of co-construction of meaning i.e. students working out their ideas in real time during the discussion.

The college hardship fund discussion

As we have said, this discussion was a planning discussion which focusses on the new college procedures for applying for hardship funds available to students. Accessing the fund depends on having a 90% attendance record and many students have been affected by this and consider it unfair. The core content of the discussion centres on two threads running in parallel: firstly students discuss the reasons for low attendance and secondly they engage in a collective decision making process about what action they could take to protest against the system.

During this discussion, which lasts twelve minutes, students exhibit a range of linguistic and discourse strategies. We can see 1) lexical, syntactic and discourse features evident in the discussion 2) how relationships are created and maintained during the discussion and 3) the view of the world reflected in the discussion[2].

What lexis, syntax and discourse strategies are evident in the discussion?

The students exhibited a large number of strategies and, as we have already pointed out, the overall discussion was a cohesive piece of jointly produced discourse with no instances of communication breakdown. The recording and transcript show students initiating discussion, agreeing, disagreeing, maintaining coherence, taking the floor, making suggestions, weighing up suggestions and using a range of syntactic structures and lexis. In the following excerpt we can see the students embarking on the discussion:

Extract 1

1. **B[3]:** We could make, how is it, a petition
2. **R:** we could write a letter
3. **D:** students could make one petition
4. **A:** 90 % no one attendance because everyone child, sometimes appointment, housing, school
5. **R:** is closed.
6. **Z** : so many problems
7. **A:** No 90 % attendance because problems.
8. **B:** It's hard many many students has got the childrens

In the first three turns the students begin to brainstorm some possible solutions as a lead in and as they start to engage in the debate we begin to see them involved in jointly keeping the discussion going and ensuring it stays on track; from turn 5 we see evidence of co-construction. A then repeats

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[2] In this section we draw loosely on the work of Halliday's three functions of language
[3] Students are referred to here by the initial letter of their first names.

her point, picking up the word problem from the previous turn, and B continues Z's 'problems' thread.

Throughout the discussion we see students trying hard to maintain coherence in this way. There are strong lexical links throughout, with words such as petition, strike, collect signatures, and boycott being used and reused. We also see students trying to manage the parallel sub-topics of the discussion. Some students want to talk about their reason for low attendance and therefore highlight the injustice of the new rules, and others want to focus on planning to protest against this. They successfully manage the two topical strands by employing different strategies to keep on track, as extract 2 shows:

Extract 2

1. **A:** housing problems
2. **B:** leave the problems relax (laughs) what about we could boycott, what do you think? what do you think about this M?
3. **M:** [*long turn in which M talks about her own problems in attending 90% of the classes*]
4. **D:** I understand, sometimes you have problems with your family you can't come in school but if all students make one strike you can accept this and you can do this?

In line one we see A wanting to repeat her contributions about the various problems that prevent students from achieving the required 90% attendance. B uses humour to prevent this (turn 2) quickly followed by another suggestion (turn 3) and a move to include another student (turn 4). Unfortunately student M also wants to pursue the problems aspect and this time another student, D, intervenes and gently and respectfully guides the discussion back to action planning (turn 6).

In other parts of the discussion we can see students successfully using strategies for claiming the floor.

Extract 3

1. **R:** Can I say something? My attendance is very low 75% because my son every time nose operation, check up hospital appointment, everything headache my life, sometimes coming sometimes not.

In this example we see a very quiet student successfully employ one of the strategies she has learned for getting the floor ('can I say something?') in order to contribute a longer turn to the discussion. In total there are four separate instances of this, all involving different students.

How are relationships created and maintained during the discussion?

The discussion shows considerable complexity from an interpersonal point of view and shows students using their linguistic knowledge to maintain and develop relationships within the group. In extract 2 above we have already seen different strategies employed by the group to keep students from repeating points already made, e.g. when one confident, dominant member of the group (A) attempts to take the discussion back to her own problems, another student (B) interjects quite directly to bring the topic back to the plans for action ('what about the boycott?'). Later on however,

in extract 3 an attempt by a far less vocal and less confident student to mention her own problems is accepted by the other students. Extract 3 continues as follows:

Extract 4

1. **R:** Can I say something? My attendance is very low 75% because my son every time nose operation, check-up hospital appointment, everything headache my life. Sometimes coming sometimes not .
2. **D:** ok, but when you don't coming school, you need prove?
3. **R:** Yes, I need letter, every time text Becky

Throughout, speakers are seen to strive to ensure equal participation; there are several instances of students inviting others to contribute and almost no instances of people talking over each other without listening. Most contributions are taken up and responded to and there are examples of the use of modals to offer suggestions. The use of modality allows for disagreement within the group without this becoming acrimonious**.** The suggestions at the very beginning of the discussion set a collaborative tone which encourages all students to contribute:

1. **B** We could make, how is it, a petition
2. **R** we could write a letter
3. **D** students could make one petition

How does the language used link to the world around us?

In the debate about the hardship fund and what action to take, we see many examples of students negotiating and weighing up the various possibilities open to them. This is an example of the kind of debate which will be familiar to anyone who has tried to organise politically. Would students take the risk of strong direct action? Would the less risky petition actually have an impact? These discussions show the students operating with an understanding of the potential power of student action in relation to the college authorities. In extract 5 they are weighing up how to protest:

Extract 5

1. **R:** What about we could boycott, what do you think?
2. **D:** I think it's hard but maybe it can work…Maybe not all students accept this, what do you think? I think it's [it'll] work.

The deliberation continues and other forms of action are considered e.g. a strike, a letter to the local MP, a letter to management and visiting senior management. Later the students agree not on the boycott option but to organise a petition.

What is interesting for us from a pedagogical point of view here is that we can see students engaged in a real life discussion, rather than a classroom activity. Had it been a classroom activity and not something the students were really planning to carry out then the consideration about whether students would really take part would have had no place. Frequently, the students refer to the 'common sense' view that their power to act on this injustice is limited. This prevents the students from opting for the more radical boycott but it is important to note that the discussion doesn't merely show the students resigned to their social roles but shows them contemplating this and challenging it.

The wider world: strike while the iron's hot!

The hardship grant is an example of an event outside the classroom that we could have either ignored or have brought into the classroom. Both are political choices and neither choice is neutral. Very often teachers do not engage with events, however relevant they are to students, because they do not fit into the lesson plan or the scheme of work or because the topic is difficult or awkward. However, if everyone is talking about something outside of the classroom, whether it's gay marriage, the bedroom tax or the Bangladeshi factory disaster, it makes little sense to ignore it inside the classroom. In the case of the hardship grant, the issue was a pertinent local example of a recent classroom topic, action against poverty. Sometimes the connection between inside and outside the classroom will not be so immediate but choosing not to engage with an issue that's on everyone's minds can have a silencing effect and make the activities that have been planned seem irrelevant. Having discussion as a fundamental feature of the learning will allow teachers to exploit emerging events and see where they lead.

After just six weeks students were producing language and engaging in discussions which would appear to be far in advance of their ascribed level, ESOL entry level 2. This suggests not only that the initial assessments did not take into account their actual abilities, but also that the work done in the six weeks of the project allowed students to extend their range of skills and abilities and incorporate new lexis, grammar and discourse strategies into their repertoires.

5. Conclusion

The first conclusion we can draw is that working almost exclusively on discussion for a period of six classes was effective. Not only did students successfully employ their existing linguistic resources and strategies, but they also seemed to develop new ones. The comparison of one the earlier discussions with one of the final discussions, (see section 4) shows that on a number of levels the students were using language more effectively by the end of the project. From the perspective of the teachers and the students it was an overwhelmingly positive experience. In their final evaluation, students said that they thought the classes had been unique and, importantly, they were aware of a sense of a development and learning.

Secondly, the experience of working with real, serious topics was not easy, but there seemed to be something productive about the difficulty. There were periods of silence, awkwardness and occasional discomfort. As we have shown, the work was tiring, to the extent that the controlled language focus felt like a break. The students recognised that the classes had been difficult too. One student stated that sometimes she felt "sad" and another wrote that "when we don't understand we're nervous". At the end of session 2, we reflected that students were 'really struggling to express complex ideas'. This urgent desire to find a way to communicate difficult ideas seemed to drive the students to progress and speak beyond their ascribed level.

Thirdly, we felt that the amount of time we spent on explicit language work and the meta-language work we did around discussion itself were crucial ingredients in the students' success. In particular, working with the class to make the discussions more equal had powerful results during our project and beyond. Also, talking about the importance of discussion can help to persuade any sceptical students that discussions are a crucial element in their learning. In terms of the explicit discussion skills work, the power of learning how to take the floor ("can I say something?" etc.) and cede the

floor ("what do you think?" etc.) should not be underestimated. Working with two or three discussion strategies in the way we describe above transformed the discussions in a short space of time.

Finally, in addition to the power of discussion to develop language, it is also fundamental to the principles of dialogic teaching that participatory ESOL espouses. Dialogic teaching is regarded not only as an effective means of learning, but also as essential for citizenship; in a democracy citizens need to be able to participate in discussions about the issues which affect them and their communities (Alexander 1998, 2010). Michaels, O'Connor and Resnick (2008: 283) summarise this point as follows:

Dialogue and discussion have long been linked to theories of democratic education. From Socrates to Dewey and Habermas, educative dialogue has represented a forum for learners to develop understanding by listening, reflecting, proposing and incorporating alternative views.

Throughout the project, but particularly towards the end, we saw the language learning and the students' lives interact in a powerful way. The combination of real-life, collaborative learning and democratic, collective action we saw in session 6 is testimony to the power of ESOL and the power of adult education in general.

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22

Discussion Skills

Asking for clarification

Sorry, say that again?

Sorry, I didn't catch that.

I didn't follow that sorry.

Checking others understand you

Does that make sense?

Sorry, I didn't catch that.

Do you know what I mean?

Inviting others to speak

What do you think Becky?

You're very quiet. What do you think?

Getting space to speak

Can I just say something?

Can I interrupt you a minute?

Dermot, Did you want to say something?

Asking for more explanation

Can you elaborate?

What do you mean?

Could you say a bit more?

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Discussion Skills

Can I suggest something?

Why don't we ….

Making suggestions

We could

Let's……..

Great idea!

That's perfect

Accepting

OK, why not?

Yeah, that could work

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country nationals.

I don't think we can do that

Mmm I'm not so sure about that

Rejecting

Maybe next time

I don't think that would work