

Is a democratic ESOL class, a reality or an oxymoron?

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ABSTRACT

ESOL practitioners find themselves at times in contexts that limit the opportunities to provide the right conditions for learners to engage with second language acquisition in meaningful dialogue.

Based on preliminary findings, this paper argues that ESOL Conversation Clubs offer a vital alternative capable of accommodating inclusive, democratic and participatory strategies to support second language learning, as advocated by Freire (1972).

This is not to argue, however, that ESOL Conversation Clubs should replace formal ESOL provision, but rather that lessons learnt from their practice may be useful to inform wider ESOL practice, including the one delivered formally in colleges.

Our findings show strategies to improve ESOL practice in the classroom

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2003 the new skills strategy meant a reduction of 70% of the ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) funding for adult learners. From 2009 there is no longer funding for adult community teacher training. At the same time, the 2011 census shows that there are 850,000 people living in the U.K that cannot speak English. This double sided reality brings a tension in the ESOL classroom, language to achieve a certificate and trigger funding or language to function outside the classroom?

Parallel to the classroom experience, in some pockets in the communities, ESOL conversation clubs have bloomed and engaged the out of reach learner from settled minorities. These are weekly free lessons for beginner speakers of English run by volunteers which focus mainly on speaking and listening skills.

The aim of this research is to increase understanding of the strategies that foster ESOL learners' participation and retention and to disseminate the findings to volunteers and teachers in community colleges and academics.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

In this study data is collected from observations of ESOL Conversation Clubs sessions and informal reflective interviews with the volunteers that lead them in the local community.

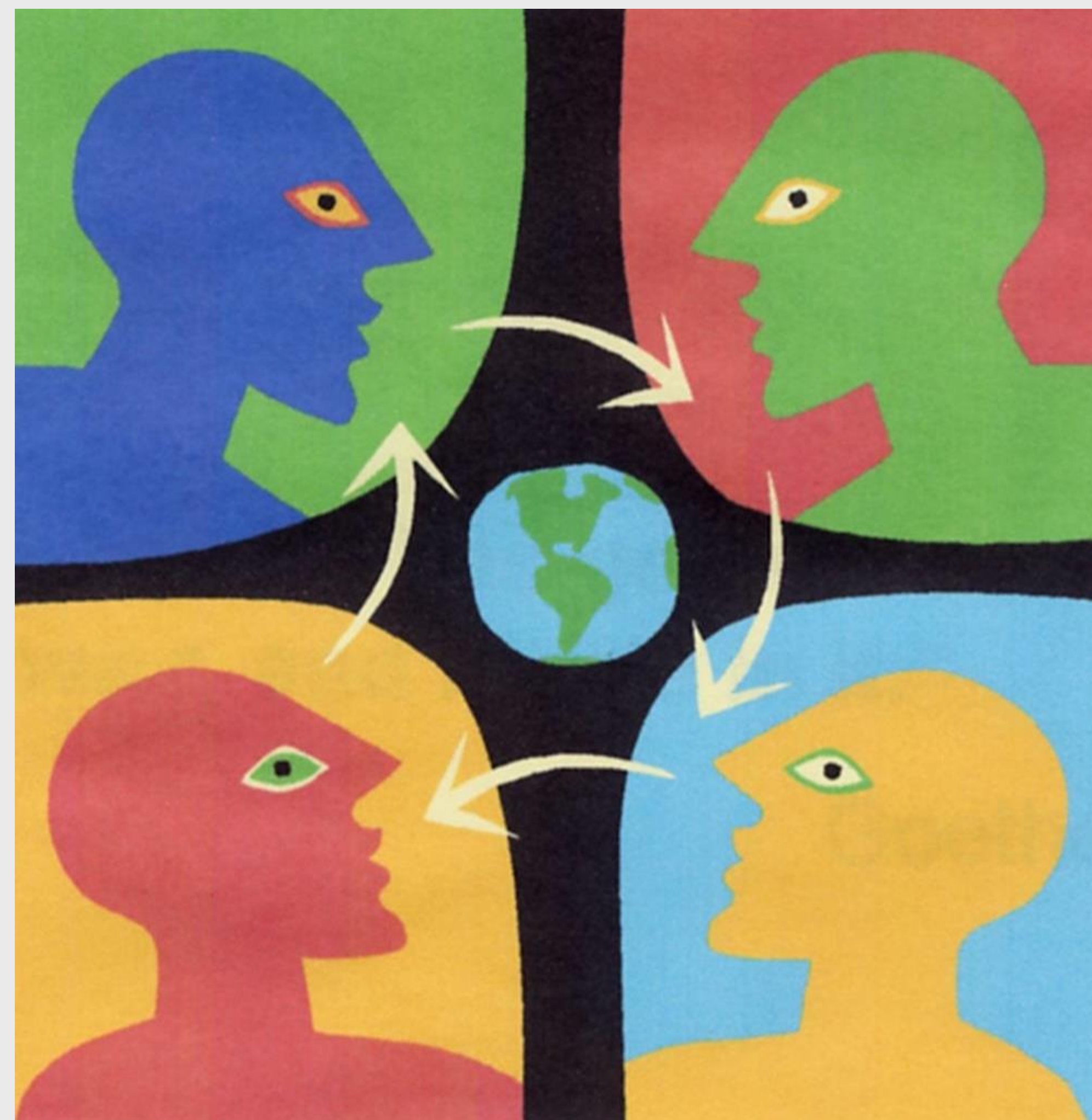
The project follows a bi-fold theme analysis: zooming in, the focus looks at the learner/volunteer interaction in the learning experience; zooming out the volunteers reflect on the lessons learnt from their practice.

The themes are evaluated in the light of Bernstein (2000)'s democratic pedagogy and the opportunities that they give to develop learners' critical 'consciousness' (Freire, 1972)

FINDINGS

ESOL Conversation Clubs take a participatory approach to second language learning where learners are encouraged to take an active role.

In this democratic classroom learners develop not only language skills but also confidence in themselves as speakers of a second language that is functional in their everyday lives outside the conversation club.



Learner engagement is linked to participatory strategies in a democratic classroom

INSIDE THE TOOLKIT

The strategies used foster language and metalanguage development, i.e. as learners' acquire English as a second language, there is a relationship between language development and other cultural factors in their society.

Examples of good practice are:

- The use of linguistic resources from the multilingual speaker's repertoire which are encouraged in individual and group work.
- Club leaders integrate democratically oriented strategies developed to foster a positive perception of themselves as an ESOL learner and second language speaker with a variety of multilingual competences
- Conversations prompt spontaneous language practices with authentic linguistic and cultural inclusion.

CONCLUSIONS

ESOL Conversation Clubs offer a vital alternative capable of accommodating more inclusive, democratic and participatory strategies to support second language learning.

Working in partnership with local colleges, these clubs can be invaluable to complement language learning particularly at low level. They can act as a bridge between the outer reach minority learner and formal education.

REFERENCES

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