



Report

2017

MANCHESTER
1824

The University of Manchester

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**Mapping ESOL provisions across Manchester:
ESOL courses – effects and attitudes towards learning
the language**

Antonia Oana Hetes

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ESOL courses – effects and attitudes towards learning the language

Research questions

The linguistic diversity of Manchester demands accessible language provisions that allow individuals from a vast variety of backgrounds to integrate and “survive” in the English-speaking community. This research investigates the efficiency, motivations and students’ attitudes towards some of the existent ESOL provisions (English for Speakers of Other Languages), spread across the city of Manchester, designed particularly for those who wish to improve their everyday English language use or to progress in employment. The primary focus of the current research is on the learner needs and language use and how these reflect in the English-speaking environment.

With ESOL classes stigmatized as mainly addressed to the lower working classes of immigrants, as previously observed by Hamilton and Hillier 2009, there appears to exist not only a language barrier between these ESOL learners and the English-speaking community but also a racial, ethnic and cultural one. Often, incapacity to use Standard English leads to marginalization and social differences (Hamilton and Hillier, 2009), but being unable to communicate to at least a basic level of English, could represent a “road” to complete exclusion. Precisely to avoid this possible exclusion, ESOL classes are designed to equip individuals with more than just a “survival English,” that is, courses were recently developed (on different levels) to provide the necessary skills to find employment, as well as to progress in further education.

The freely accessible data sets and reports, published in 2016 and January 2017 respectively, by the Manchester City Council on ESOL policy and planning, confirm the crucial need for such provisions in a city so increasingly diverse. With an approximate of 153 different languages being spoken at present in Manchester (2011 Census), local authorities have employed the “Manchester ESOL strategy”, which is intended to grow the existent provision -of almost 4,000 adult ESOL places available- by 25%, so that the relationship between supply and demand is a balanced one (MCC Report for Resolution, 2017).

Methodology

The research tool chosen for conducting this research was the survey-type questionnaire and a short interview with the student (when given the opportunity), to capture further aspects being an ESOL adult student entail.

Questionnaires were proposed to be self-administered, filled in by the participants, and then returned to the researcher, but this method was substituted by verbally administered questionnaires, due to reasons explained below.

Changes to the planned research method had been made regarding the data collection strategy. Although firstly (due to informal confirmation from learning centres), “in-class,” self-administrated questionnaires were the proposed method of collecting the data, an alternative needed to be found given the dispreferred formal reply from ESOL centres. Considering that ESOL provisions in Manchester are an insufficiently explored resource, learning centres are nowadays being overwhelmed by groups of researchers who want to fill in this “research gap”; therefore, in order to avoid their students to be disturbed more than necessary, most of these centres are starting to refuse to participate in this type of research.

Initially, e-mails were sent out as a request to conduct an “in-class” survey to gather the data, but no positive response to the e-mail was made. As a further attempt, phone calls were made to request for the same “in-class” survey to be conducted; however, due to this being unsuccessfully again, and due to ESOL centres being not responsive, an outside field-survey had to be conducted to gather the necessary data. Appropriate steps were taken as a measure, to maximize the amount of “informally” collected data, within a short-time “window,” as participants needed to be caught going in before the class as well as coming out of the class. Therefore, to maximize the productivity of this “window,” more than one person was employed to conduct this survey – they were given clipboards and pens and were rigorously instructed how to verbally conduct the survey, and work with the questionnaires. External factors, such as bad weather, low amount of class attendance, traffic, and other commitments of the participants, were all taken into account and have all influenced the way the research was carried out; this method, therefore, required patience and perseverance, and was less successful in terms of the number of participants. An appropriate number of 25 participants was examined. Therefore, this is considered a rather brief research.

Participants enrolled on an Entry 3, or Level 1 were mainly targeted, as those were expected to have a B1/B2 level of proficiency in English. Having said this, centres targeted were: Abraham Moss, Greenheys, Longsight, Forum and Withington. However, questions needed to be re-explained in simplified terms to a good amount of the subjects, to receive an actual accurate response.

Findings

In this section, results and statistics are presented descriptively by using numbers rather than graphs and percentages, as the number of participants is not very much appropriate for such analysis. The use of percentages and graphs was considered as potentially misleading and that it could affect the way data is translated in this instance.

Findings show that people who choose to study for an ESOL qualification, have different motivations behind their choice. In this study, 12 of the participants named the need to find or progress into work as the main reason, followed by 8 of them stating that they want to improve their confidence in communicating to other English natives, while the remaining 5, chose to enrol so that they could progress in further education/study.

A majority of the participants - that is 22- declared they find the ESOL course helpful in achieving their goal. However, the remaining 3, believed that the course is not helpful enough. Those who did not find the course useful enough were struggling with conversing with confidence to other people and were interested in continuing studying after the course completion.

Moreover, aspects of language such as speaking and reading were perceived as presenting the highest level of difficulty. These were followed by listening, confidence to use the language within the community and lastly by writing. The two learners who considered writing as the most challenging aspect were the ones who took the course to prepare for further study.

All the participants declared they can confidently use English in shops or on public transport without any problem. In contrast, in a more formal context, such as when talking to a doctor, teacher or other professional, participants (12) said they would need assistance - such as an interpreter or a friend, do not feel confident at all (4), while the remaining (8) believed they could communicate confidently with professionals without needing any assistance or help.

Most of the adult learners said they were directed by the local authorities to enrol on the course (Manchester City Council, Job centre plus), to avoid being employed below their professional level, or simply to facilitate finding a job. With learning English seen as an essential necessity, the majority of ESOL students started off on a very limited (9 of them) or basic (12) level of English. Therefore, after completing an ESOL course, students expect to have only an intermediate level of English rather than being fully proficient, or even advanced (9).

Interestingly, when asked about issues encountered in the dominant English community, ESOL students correlated the inability to speak English with issues such as racism, discrimination, and stigmas. They believe being a migrant worker or an immigrant in the city of Manchester or England, considerably lowers your chances to integrate and become part of the community. Some of them see English as the only way of “surviving” in this type of community, while the others believe that issues as such will be persistent permanently regardless of the level of English one has. Also, some of these students stated that they find harder to use English beyond the classroom environment, as they believed it is a lot harder to put English into practice with native speakers than it is to practice in the classroom.

A correlation between gender or age is not made in this study. For one, the number of participants did not seem appropriate for such analysis and was not considered as too helpful in offering a wider picture of the situation. Secondly, the data collection strategy did not facilitate getting a balanced mixture of male/female adults students.

Discussion

This study confirms at first glance, that being enrolled on an ESOL course, equips students with the capacity to become intermediate users of English. Speakers can confidently use

English in casual contexts such as daily activities, or when talking to their neighbours. It is regarded as a lot more difficult for learners to use English in a more formal setting such as when talking to a doctor or other professional.

With learners regarding English as an obligatory necessity- as previously mentioned- we distinguish a similarity between participants' views and attitudes towards learning English and what Gonzales (2006) referred to as "second language learning motivation." In this process, a motivated language learner is characterized by firstly "motivational intensity," followed by the "desire to learn the language" and lastly by learners "attitudes towards learning the language." Moreover, a second language learner in a foreign country is considered as always having an interest beyond the "system of rules or grammar and vocabulary" of the target language; showing an equal, if not greater interest in the community where the language is spoken, people who speak the language and the tasks associated with learning the target language (Gonzales, 2006).

As the research shows, students enrolled in an ESOL course have very limited understanding of the language at the beginning of the course. This very limited level is often viewed as an impediment in language acquisition, given the widely-accepted fact that an adult student will find more challenging learning a foreign language than a young student for instance. However, it has been previously demonstrated that motivational factors, can "make up for the low level of language aptitude of the language learner" (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). The need to work, communicate and integrate into the society will entail greater achievements which are highly dependent on how subjects make use of their ability to speak English in this case.

Furthermore, it has been observed that students' attitudes towards learning the language, are linked to society's attitudes towards them. For this reason, it is believed, ESOL learners lack "in the area" of confidence to talk to other people, considering themselves discriminated by the society and subject to racism. ESOL provisions seem to encourage and take into account the "integrative factor" of language learning (Gonzales, 2006), as students adhere to affiliating to the society through language. The better the level of English, the higher the chances to progress and climb the society ladder. Of course, this is dependent on the academic level as well, but migrant workers and immigrants are often employed below their professional level, specifically due to their incapacity to communicate in English. As observed in this study, learners who wished to find a new or better job, stated that they lack the ability to perform writing, reading or listening skills, skills required in jobs of almost any sector. Even though students come in the country with an excellent academic background, they can only secure low regarded jobs, or minimum wage jobs (e.g. warehouse or factory). Many companies do not offer a fixed term contract to workers without any language qualification, and for this reason, some of the adult students reported that because of their job, they struggled even to find rent. These difficulties reinforce the importance of ESOL courses concerning the learners' needs and goals. A further study on differences between individuals who have an ESOL qualification and those who do not could offer a wider and much detailed image of how having a language qualification aids in developing on a societal, cultural and educational level.

As mentioned by Simpson (2016), ESOL courses are closely linked to “consequences of migration and globalization,” therefore, the level of awareness is present, concerning the need for integration and “survival” in the community (on different levels). Perhaps, the design of the courses (for jobseekers or everyday English), tells alone why speakers mainly seek to improve their confidence and skills required for finding work or to conduct themselves in the society. Local authorities such as Manchester City Council or Jobcentre Plus, direct people to enrol on ESOL courses, to improve their work perspectives and even offer financial help while these adult students are enrolled on the course and are looking for a job. Thus, foreigners are encouraged to learn the language even more, while having the benefit of receiving additional financial aid for the duration of the course. Out of the total of 25 ESOL students who participated in this study, 7 of them reported that they receive additional financial help for the duration of the course (known as Jobseekers Allowance) as well as constant support in finding appropriate work.

The effort authorities make to integrate migrant workers into the community, is highly successful – leading to an increasingly unbalanced offer – demand situation. The motivation exhibited by immigrants to learn English is clear and can further be explored and applied to this study by seeing it through what Gonzales (2006) called the “six-factor” model. According to this theory proposed by Gonzales (2006) these six factors are: factor 1- desire for career and economic enhancement/career-economic need; factor 2- desire to become global citizen/need for cultural understanding; factor 3- desire to communicate and affiliate with foreigners/ communicative-affiliation need); factor 4- desire to self-satisfaction in learning/need for self-satisfaction); factor 5 - self-efficacy; and factor 6 - desire to be integrated with other cultures/need for cultural integration. Examining each of this factors in detail, not only offers an insight as to why individual choose to attain language skills but also gives a chance to the researcher to predict the possible outcomes each one of them entails. These factors have not yet been linked to the current research in much depth, as this would require a different strategy, regarding data collection methods, as well as a higher number of participants, to add value and credibility to this theory.

This presentation, suggests that ESOL provisions are still a rich resource that requires further investigation, with many aspects remaining unexplored. One of such desired research is proposed by the Manchester Adult ESOL Strategy executives (2017), and it is concerned with the improvement of “data collection and analysis on ESOL demand.”

Seeing that they have an impact on learners’ lives, socially, culturally, and even psychologically to some extent, offering the hope for a brighter future, the future of ESOL classes appears to be a bright one as well.

Bibliography

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Appendix

1. Blank copy of the Questionnaire used for data collection

*Completing this questionnaire does not require the disclosure of any personal information (e.g. address, name, date of birth, postcode etc.)

*Language proficiency, acquisition and use is the only object of interest

*Questionnaire will be destroyed shortly after data analysis has been performed

Questionnaire on **ESOL course efficiency**

Gender: Male / Female **Age:** _____ **Occupation:** _____ / Unemployed / Student

1. Why did you decide to take this course?

- a. To find/progress in work
- b. To improve your confidence to talk to other people
- c. To prepare for further study
- d. Other (specify)

2. Do you think this ESOL course is helping you to achieve this goal?

- a. Yes
- b. Not enough
- c. Not at all

3. What aspects of the language you find the most difficult?

- a. Reading
- b. Writing
- c. Speaking
- d. Listening
- e. Confidence to use the language within the community

- 4. Can you confidently use English in shops or on public transport?**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I need assistance
- 5. Can you confidently use English to speak to your neighbours?**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I need assistance
- 6. Can you confidently use English to speak to teachers, doctors and other professionals?**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I need assistance
- 7. Your level of English at the beginning of the course was:**
- a. Very limited
 - b. Basic
 - c. Intermediate
 - d. Advanced
- 8. After completing this course, what level of English do you wish to have?**
- a. Very limited
 - b. Basic
 - c. Intermediate
 - d. Advanced
 - e. Fully Proficient
- 9. What you learn in class is useful in the community:**

- a. Most of the time
- b. Not enough
- c. Not at all

- Notes on the short interview:

