



Book review:

Brokering Britain, Educating Citizens Exploring ESOL and Citizenship. (2019)

Melanie Cooke & Rob Peutrell (Eds); 264 pages; Bristol: Multilingual Matters

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1. Review

The authors of *Brokering Britain, Educating Citizens: Exploring ESOL and Citizenship* (2019) usefully consider a set of ideas and discussion points, that will suit any contemporary practitioner, who feels that their values and ethics are in conflict with Government policy; furthermore, they consider the extent to which the profession of ESOL is built on a set of humanistic principles that contradict or even seem to work directly against the agenda of the current government? With a primary focus on ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), the book focuses on the areas of citizenship, language, and agency, and considers the classroom as a site of potential resistance in relation to the non-progressive Governmental regime.

An edited collection, the structure of the book offers a coherent and cumulative argument as a whole, as well as a series of episodic chapters, that operate effectively

on their own. Generally, the authors suggest that ESOL can be a site of resistance, which is a refreshing and critical alternative to more mainstream (media-based) narratives around citizenship and migrants. The argument is agentive, in that the ESOL classroom can allow both ESOL practitioners and students to engage in – and develop – an empowered agency, capable of resisting the mainstream narratives of ‘swarms’ (David Cameron) and ‘hostile environments.’ The book offers hope, in the suggestion that such freedom can still occur, due to the complex and imperfect relation between policy initiatives from Government and their everyday application in specific ESOL classrooms. In this critical sense, ESOL tutors can act as ‘brokers’ mediating the space between policy initiatives at the strategic level, and the everyday environment where the students learn English. The book suggests that it is because of the ambiguity around the concepts of, (and, the relationship between), citizenship, language, and belonging, that a space is opened for teachers and their

students to develop and exert their agency. Clearly, adapting and implementing the principles of policy in this way, is not what the Government intends – nor would necessarily support.

The book's editors, Melanie Cook and Rob Peutrell, between them, they have significant experience of ESOL; with over 60 years' in the sector. Melanie Cook is a lecturer in ESOL at King's College London and has published numerous books and journal articles on the subject. Rob Peutrell is also an ESOL lecturer in further education and has also worked in learning support, which I suspect, has informed some of the useful insights and unique features of the book.

For the most part, the text employs an ethnographic approach. It is concerned with the meanings generated by social actors in their settings. The ethnographies take place in several settings including classrooms, neighbourhoods, and communities. There are two exceptions to this, the first being chapter 1, which provides for the reader a vital background in the area. It gives a brief history of Government approaches to 'immigration.' The other chapter that deviates from the ethnographic approach, is chapter 10, which explores several seminars on intersectionality and ESOL run by academics, practitioners, and students. Usefully, the text also addresses and engages with Queer theory.

Of particular interest was chapter 6 that questioned the logocentric (language centred) approach usually found in academia. It engaged with visual ethnography and visual participatory methods. It was also one of the chapters to develop the idea of 'dis' citizenship. An idea taken from the Disabled people's movement that focuses on differing embodiments in disabling environments. The dis-citizen disabled by a 'hostile environment.'

The text has many strengths. I was made to think about ESOL, language, and practitioners in a new way. Much of the book chimed with my own experience working in adult social care and later in the neighbourhood department of the local authority tutoring basic skills. I was impressed with the way the text addressed the obvious potential for logocentric approaches that are inherent in ESOL. It addressed the embodied experience of the students and this made its

approach significantly more inclusive and again chimed with my experience working for a local authority.

I also liked the way in which the text engaged with 'dis' politics. This enabled it to explore how a disabling environment can disempower people by ultimately making them dis-citizens. The disabled people's movement has struggled with the idea of the 'body' for a long time. For much of its history, the Disabled people's movement has tried to make a clear distinction between an individual body and the disabling environment (or society) the body finds itself in. The body was left to what it called '*the medical model*.' This was done for specific political purposes, to make the environment disabling for people. Most critical Disability theory wishes to problematise that hard distinction between the body (individual) and the disabling environment (society) and so, for me, the text gave an extremely useful social account of both the body and its dis-empowering environment.

However, there is also a weakness with the book, and that is how it relates – overall – to the tension between the individual and the dis-empowering environment (society). A closer look at the Disabled people's movement could have helped navigate this tension; by inadvertently blurring this distinction, the text seemingly led down a number of political dead ends. As Jenny Morris (*Rethinking Disability Policy*, 2011) has pointed out, many of the concerns of the movement played directly into the hands of a Government that was concerned to reduce costs, cut funding and then blame individual disabled people for the ensuing mess.

Giles Deleuze is very fashionable at the moment, and the authors may well have benefitted from utilising this framework. In his book '*Foucault*' (Deleuze, 1986) Deleuze notes that the paradigmatic form of power in our society is to 'see without being seen.' He uses the metaphor of light, in that we can see something / someone when they are lit up. The opposite of this is anonymity. People who are anonymous, live in the shadows, are hidden, and are not held to account. The goal of power, therefore, is to shine a light on those that they wish to control whilst avoiding scrutiny themselves.

The book shines a light on the agency of ESOL tutors and their students. It opens them up to our scrutiny. However, its beam is less potent where the wrecking ball of a Government – that can, in one evening pass the first reading of an immigration bill, that identifies foreign, low pay, low skilled workers as not being wanted in this country – is concerned.

Overall, I think that the book will appeal to, and have something to say to, anyone who hankers after a more progressive politics, especially in relation to the notion of citizenship. And, as I noted above, one particular strength is how it informs writing on ESOL by incorporating ideas of the dis-citizen and socially embodied approaches. It is well written and reasonably easy to read. It would be of great use to practitioners, academics, and students. I personally will be asking my undergraduate students to read sections of the book. As a text, it is a valuable contribution that focuses on the agency of ESOL teachers and their students.

2. Disclosure statement

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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