Ten years after the ESOL Manifesto: protest, pedagogy and professionalism

It's now ten years since Action for ESOL published its ESOL Manifesto.* Rob Peutrell and Melanie Cooke *consider why the manifesto still matters.

***'From all of us taken together something of size results'* Aristotle**

There haven't been many successful campaigns in further and community education in recent years. The 2011 *Action for ESOL (AfE)* campaign is one that was. *AfE* brought together ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teachers, researchers and students, along with supporters outside the sector, in a struggle against funding cuts announced by the coalition government the previous November that radically threatened ESOL provision.

AfE was bottom-up, practitioner-led and lively. It was a campaign to protect funding but it also raised important questions about what ESOL was for and what being an ESOL teacher was all about. In doing so, it brought out the tensions between ESOL as a mandated preparation of migrants for inclusion in the national 'community' and participatory approaches to ESOL pedagogy.

Discussion of post-16 education and its future is typically top-down and dominated by civil servants, sector managers, corporate 'leaders' and selected academic experts. *AfE*'s *ESOL Manifesto* (1) of 2012 was different. It showed - albeit on a small scale - how grassroots practitioners can produce serious policy ideas that are pedagogically sound and ethically grounded. Contrast that with the commonplace frustration felt by FE teachers today at their lack of autonomy and at policy that is indifferent to the 'real needs' of their students.

As participants in *AfE*, our views are not disinterested. But we do think that both the campaign and manifesto are well worth revisiting, not only by ESOL teachers but by teachers and activists in other sectors of further and community education. Readers will decide whether the manifesto has merit, but we can think of no other struggle in further and community education in recent years that produced collaborative statements of this kind. In that sense, *AfE* is . . . well, a little bit unique.

Action for ESOL

The most pressing - but by no means only - threat to ESOL in the November announcement was the plan to end fee remission for students on income support and other 'inactive benefits' not dependent on claimants actively looking for paid work. Losing this fee remission would have devastated the sector; around 74 per cent of women ESOL students were on 'inactive benefits'. In one city, it was calculated that the loss of this fee remission would have reduced ESOL funding by 60 per cent; national estimates were similarly stark.

Reversing the decision to cut funding was crucial, and *AfE* made use of many of the tools familar to grassroots campaigners: a national petition and letter-writing campaign; personal testimonials from students; rallies, demonstrations and lobbies; building local and national alliances; producing local impact studies; speaking on local radio and television; and social media. John Hayes, the minister then responsible for further education, received thousands of letters from individuals objecting to the planned cut. The campaign was

urgent but also celebratory. It included picnics, teach-ins, silent protests, noisy protests, and sharing food - a traditional feature of ESOL classrooms.

A national Day of Action on 24th March saw rallies and other events in Bradford, Bristol, Leeds, Halifax, Nottingham and elsewhere. In London, hundreds of teachers and students marched to Downing Street to deliver a national petition objecting to the cuts. A post on the *AfE* Facebook page from teachers in Halifax captures the campaign's sometimes folksy grassroots radicalism:

> *Brilliant day at Parkinson Lane School in Halifax yesterday. WEA learners made samosas and handed them out, with publicity leaflets to members of the public and parents at the end of the school day. Chaotic and noisy with lots of singing and chanting - all with the support of the wonderful headteacher there.*

In August 2011, after several months of campaigning, the government announced a near U-turn, albeit quietly. There was no admission of error. Indeed, the late announcement felt almost intentionally disruptive. Curriculum plans and timetables had to be redrafted in days.

If campaigns are mostly transient, networks often continue, and *AfE* drew on connections made in the earlier UCU-led *Defend ESOL Campaign* of 2008. These networks were mobilised again in August 2015 after the announcement of a £45 million cut in funding for mandated ESOL classes for job seekers. Importantly, *AfE* benefitted from a very active professional culture among ESOL teachers and researchers that included a well-established professional association, the *National Association of Teachers of English and Community Languages to Adults* (NATECLA) and the electronic *ESOL Research Bulletin*, which, at the time, had some 800 subscribers. It was within these networks that news of the November announcement first spread, thoughts about its implications were first shared, and the first impact briefing was hastily drafted.

Local networks were also important. *AfE* varied from place to place, but the campaign reached beyond the college and community sites of ESOL provision to refugee and migrant organisations, community networks, voluntary groups, trade unions, local politicians and community media.

Importantly, *AfE* was practitioner-led, with practical support from UCU, particularly its then national policy officer, Dan Taubman. Many participants were union members, if not necessarily union activists. Arguably, *AfE* remains a valuable case study of effective collaboration between a sector-based, community-focused campaign and an educational union. UCU gave the campaign access to crucial resources, including meeting spaces, contacts and knowledge of the policy-making system, but it was the participants in *AfE* who developed the strategies and arguments grounded in their knowledge of the sector and its local connections. Through UCU, NATECLA, and the then *National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education* (NIACE), the campaign connected with the college employers' body the Association of Colleges, with civil servants, and a number of sympathetic MPs. The campaign was radical but pragmatic. *AfE* kept the issue visibly (and audibly) public, but pressure on policy insiders was crucial to its success.

But what about the students whose education *AfE* was set up to defend? *AfE* was practitioner- not student-led. But in different ways many ESOL students did participate in the campaign - marching, writing letters, petitioning, making videos, posting on social media, speaking, and joining delegations to local MPs and to Westminster, or simply by taking part in classroom discussions on the importance of ESOL and what losing it might mean to them (2).

The ESOL Manifesto

The idea of a manifesto was first mooted during the summer term. It was recognised not only that funding was at risk, but with it the integrity - even the existence - of ESOL as a sector. If implemented, the cuts would have put ESOL back in the margins and risked all that had been gained over the previous ten years of relatively well-funded expansion: increasing student numbers, a growing research base, a national curriculum, teacher qualifications. It felt crucial, therefore, that ESOL teachers put out a statement of our own priorities and a shared vision of ESOL that might help mobilise the sector in the future.

We understood from the outset that not everyone would agree with the manifesto in every detail. Nonetheless, it was important that ESOL teachers (and students) were encouraged to discuss what they thought ESOL should be about and what its core beliefs should be.

Around 80 to 100 participants took part in drafting the manifesto, attending one or both of two seminars and contributing to online discussion. The first seminar, in June 2011, focused on four themes: the heritage of ESOL, the impact of recent policy, the

likely future of the sector, and our vision of what the ESOL sector should be like and what its values should be.

The seminars were organised using participatory tools developed by the Freirean-inspired project, *Reflect for ESOL* (3). Seminar notes were circulated through social media, and the first draft of the manifesto was written. At the second seminar, in September, participants worked on this draft, and suggested changes to wording and content. A small group then produced the second draft, which it shared for comment through the campaign's Google group. After some rewording (and occasional tension), the final draft was produced, and the manifesto designed, laid out and printed. It was launched at the UCU offices on March 3rd, 2012.

The process was as inclusive and democratic as we could make it. We hoped that the document reflected the views of all who had wanted to contribute. Of course, collective writing is challenging. How do you reflect the collective voice of a large group of people with differing views? How explicit should the manifesto be in highlighting the racist, classist and sexist effects of ESOL cuts? Should it risk alienating some readers and possible allies with critical comments about work-based ESOL? These and other tensions were not entirely resolved; the manifesto was a work-in-process. The hope, however, was to encourage debate and to help teachers (and students) to feel better able to respond critically and openly to policy measures, whilst inviting ideas of how the manifesto might be used in future campaigns.

The manifesto is short: eight pages, thirty paragraphs, just over 2,000 words. Its seven sections cover: funding; the right to learn English; language, community and identity; ESOL as a distinct area of post-16 education; teacher professionalism; and ESOL pedagogy.

Five themes stand out.

First, it states that '*the opportunity to learn the language of the community in which you live is a human right'*, its denial '*a fundamental barrier to participation in society'* (para. 7). Much is said about migrant responsibilities, less about their rights. The manifesto proposes an entitlement to a reliably-funded language education but notes that language '*often serves as a proxy for race*' in immigration and citizenship policy (para. 10). In contrast, the manifesto links the right to language education to multicultural and multilingual citizenship and '*the right to cultural and linguistic identity'* (para. 11).

Second, it argues that '*(l)anguage education is a public good'* and that ESOL should be '*accessible, comprehensive and integrated'* (para. 4), reaching out into communities and providing well-considered routes into vocational and academic education.

Third, it recognises that good language education is crucial not just for 'getting by in everyday life - '*finding work; socialising; continuing education, retraining or seeking re-qualification*' - but for '*participating in civil society and political life*' (para. 12). ESOL, it argues, is concerned with the capacity of both teachers and students '*to take charge of our lives individually and collectively, and to participate actively and critically in all aspects of our world' in and outside the classroom* (para. 35).

Fourth, it promotes a participatory ethos through which students and teachers '*collaborate in developing appropriate curricula*' (para. 34). This means strengthening the links between teaching, learning and empowerment, and, where appropriate, as in the AfE campaign to defend provision, action. ESOL students, it states, '*should be encouraged to question and speak meaningfully, and to understand the issues that affect their lives and society in order to shape or change them*' (para. 34). Thus, in many clasrooms during the campaign, students and teachers engaged with pressing contemporary issues using language and literacy beyond the students' designated 'levels', and arguably students learned more and thought more critically than would be possible in conventional ESOL classes. One example of participatory pedagogy from the campaign was the student-produced video on the LLU+ '*Welcome to the UK*' project about the May 19 demonstration in London. In making the video, students engaged with video-making from story-boarding to interviewing, whilst extending their communicative skills (4).

Finally, the manifesto addresses the matter of teacher professionalism. ESOL teachers, it states, should not see themselves as compliant curriculum operatives but as activist professionals with '*both a right and responsibility to engage with politics and policy that affect students and ourselves*' (para. 23). On this point, the manifesto clearly speaks to educators in all sectors of further and community education.

Participatory policy-making and collective intelligence

Policy deliberation is almost always top-down. Appointed committees process submissions from interested parties (but not normally grassroots

teachers). The manifesto was different. It shows how through dialogue around common problems grassroots practitioners themselves can produce coherent, critical visions of policy and provision - collective intelligence, not just practical know-how.

It is in the light of the manifesto that we might consider, first: the proposal for radically reorganising education into a non-competitive, comprehensive and lifelong National Education Service (NES), a key element of the Labour Party manifestos of 2017 and 2019. And second, the aspiration of many post-16 practitioners today to take control of their own professional learning and to be knowledge-makers not merely implementers of other people's knowledge. Both are important.

The NES was proposed as a way of bringing coherence and equity back into an education system fractured by academisation, league tables, edu-business interests, and, in further education, college incorporation and chronic underfunding. The proposed NES had broad, radical appeal even if its details were missing. However, the proposal also reflected a rather traditional leftist managerialism; it was not a prompt for mobilising the collective intelligence of teachers from all sectors in a process of collaborative policy-making. Under new leadership, the Labour Party has returned to a timid conformity that rejects on principle radical change to our education systems. Against the low aspirations of Labour's political leaders, working on what that change might be is as crucial as ever.

And the demands of FE practitioners to control their own professional learning? The manifesto was an act of collective autonomy that went far beyond the matter of professional learning. It was drafted without permission sought from college managers. Interestingly, some principals opposed staff getting involved in the campaign. It is not hard to imagine why.

How we engage post-16 educators as participants in bottom-up, shared policy deliberation not limited by institutional high-ups is something seriously to wrestle with. But the ESOL manifesto is a modest testimony to its possibility.

References

1. Action for ESOL (2012) The *ESOL Manifesto* http://actionforesol.org/action-for-esol-manifesto

2. For one example of such student activism and its links to language and literacy learning, see Winstanley, B. and Cooke, M. (2016) *Emerging Worlds: the Participatory ESOL Planning Project, Paper 4 'Literacy'*, available at: www.efalondon.org.uk/research/

3. Reflect for ESOL Resource Pack (2007) https://www.reflectionaction.org/library/documents/18/

4. ESOL Day of Action 24 March https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q73Dmy6mpz8.

Where we stand:

***Post-16 Educator* seeks to defend and extend good practice in post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.**

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.