

# A new curriculum for ESOL? Reviewing the review

*With a DfE review of ESOL thought to be likely soon, John Sutter critiques some assumptions behind a recent Bell Foundation survey.*

There has been talk of a new national curriculum for ESOL for a good while now, so when an email arrived asking for my response to a consultation it was not entirely out of the blue. There was, as one might expect, an attached 'review paper' and a link to a form, where one could respond to a set of questions (with a very short time window to reply). It wasn't entirely clear what the provenance of the review was, or who its official source was, but I was immediately struck by how narrow in scope it was. And there wasn't any indication of any larger scale review process involving the wider professional field (what remains of it after years of effective de-funding and de-professionalisation by central government). Nor any call for ideas or input. Reading through was a depressing experience. The entire starting point seemed to be based on a set of ideological assumptions around what a curriculum is, who gets to write it, and what sort of thing goes in it. It is in this regard that I think that the ESOL experience may strike a chord within education more broadly, and with teachers in other subject areas.

A key assumption that very much limits the available possibilities is that a curriculum needs to

be a top-down prescribed list of skills and structural items, arranged over a series of 'levels'. This very much contrasts with (what I was taught in my own teacher training) that a curriculum should refer to the *entire educational experience*, not just the content of what is learnt. A holistic curriculum would place learners and the lived experience at the centre of the curriculum, not just the items and skills to be learnt. This has the effect of immediately limiting any discussion to a closed set of menu choices (in this case grammar versus vocabulary or listening versus reading skills), shutting down any notions of wider changes in structure. It is very easy for hard-pressed, time-poor practitioners to get drawn into narrowed down 'consultations' like this. It also fails, as one colleague has pointed out, to recognise the possibility of any power to decide curriculum locally being devolved to either teachers or even learners themselves.

Then there's the specification of 'knowledge', which in many cases is so generic and context-free as to be meaningless in terms of real-world experience and use. In language terms, this means that 'knowing stuff about language' (e.g. grammar

rules) is privileged over actually being able to communicate. This results in the teaching (and sometimes learning) of prescribed chunks of 'target language' that may or may not have relevance to a learner's real life-worlds but which are conveniently assessment friendly and easy to test. However, some of the most interesting and engaging approaches and developments that have been happening in ESOL in recent years - such as participatory and learner-led approaches, or conversation/communication based approaches (e.g. 'teaching unplugged' and 'emergent language' approaches) reject the 'target language' model and instead build on what learners can do, and what language relates to their real lived experience. Such approaches are much less prescriptive about 'what should be learnt' and instead work outwards from the learner. These approaches are themselves supported by much of what we know from language acquisition about the inconsistencies and individual nature of what and how learners learn.

But probably the worst aspect of all this is that this view of curriculum perpetuates many embedded values and myths that have their roots in colonial ideologies. These can be loosely described as beliefs and practices that have an inbuilt opposition to forms of diversity (in language itself or its users). So particular 'facts' and perspectives are granted high status in the curriculum: in the area of English language teaching this would be things like the privileging of so-called 'Standard' English, and the notion of 'correctness' which effectively sidelines all deviation from the 'rules' - and most, if not all, real world spoken language. It means a curriculum that is monolingual in outlook in a multilingual world, a rejection or sidelining of any socially situated understandings of language and language learning (e.g. a social practices or multiliteracies approach based in real world language use). It uses language like *native speaker*, *first language*, *second language*, betraying its monolingual roots. It promotes a curriculum that is hostile to change, based too on notions of 'tradition' and inward-looking histories, which fails to recognise the massive changes in communication over the last twenty years or so (e.g. how we can 'write' by speaking into our phones, or generate whole passages of text by giving an instruction to an AI language model).

Finally, it fails to acknowledge how language (and literacy) are always political, and that therefore a curriculum is itself a political position. With the recent tragically early death of Benjamin Zephaniah, whose work across many fields campaigned against linguistic discrimination and the racism often embedded within language attitudes (and policies), it is particularly sad to see how little note is still taken of the need to place a curriculum review within a

much broader debate around (linguistic) social justice, diversity and equality. Perhaps a deliberate and desired aim of the last few years' culture wars has been a dimming down of 'critical approach' thinking - or at least any recognition of it - but without this, we education professionals are further recruited, to put it bluntly, as instruments of injustice.

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