

ESOL, language learning and Citizenship

In the last decade the ESOL world has been transformed. Government White papers, reports on social exclusion and research into the impact of poor literacy language and numeracy skills, which found that the UK had the lowest LLN skills in Europe. This led to the Government Skills for Life Strategy (2005) which drove through changes in teacher training and adult learner support with increased levels of funding for Skills for Life programmes. It was decided that, by raising the standards of teacher training requirements and, at the same time, attaching achievement of a qualification as a measurement of success for the learner, the skills levels of the population and workforce would naturally rise.

How does this directly impact on ESOL teachers? Well, living in the community are many fragmented groups from migrant workers and their families, to refugees and asylum seekers who, in the past, derived little benefit from the mainstream education system. The Government's aim was to transform their chances of achievement by accessing free ESOL courses run by a more professionalized and highly qualified teaching workforce.

Within this thinking process developed the concept of 'the citizen'. Originally introduced into mainstream schools for children's education, this concept came to be embodied in the ESOL world as of relevance to the non-native English speaker, who was in the process of integrating into society and was planning to apply for naturalisation as a British citizen: a person who ideally should know how this society works. It became the responsibility of the Home Office to instigate materials to use when learning about the British way of life and to develop a procedure for prospective citizens of the UK to follow.

As a result, British citizens-to-be must now take the 'Life in the UK Test' at one of the registered centres across the country if their English level is at Entry 3 or higher. For learners at Entry 1, 2, or undertaking an Entry 3 learning programme, the requirement is to show that they have attended a course in ESOL, themed around citizenship, and have passed a test, for example a Cambridge ESOL test, which shows a language progression of at least one level.

These requirements are for all would-be British citizens wishing to settle permanently in the UK and an appropriate certificate needs to be shown at the time they apply for naturalisation. For asylum seekers, this would be when they gain indefinite leave to remain. Most local Further Educational or Community Colleges now run ESOL courses themed around citizenship and they are becoming increasingly popular with learners from all backgrounds.

Although some providers are now designing courses in a more formalised way around citizenship, resources have mostly been developed by individual teachers using materials from traditional courses on living and surviving in Britain. The Home Office "Citizenship Materials for ESOL" pack has helped to provide teachers with some badly needed resources and the new Cambridge ESOL teachers resources at Entry 1, 2, and 3, themed around citizenship, are also in the process of being developed.

The topics covered in citizenship centre around an understanding of the fabric of everyday life, such as housing, education, work and leisure. But they also extend through to the structures of life in Britain; political power and social conflicts, migration, the rights of women and children, equality and diversity and into the realms of human rights, international charters and responsibilities within our communities. At its best a citizenship course can offer the learners a forum for discussion and debate about the core issues surrounding them from within their social grouping and from outside. It can enable them to gain a voice and greater insight into the society in which they are living and can open the door to a greater sense of inclusion within an unfamiliar world.

For those teachers coming into ESOL from other language learning worlds there is a tremendous reward in working with the range of learners within ESOL classes and their mature attitudes to participation. There is now a greater expectation from the Government for teachers to show a range of teaching qualifications from subject specialisms to generic certification. For more information on the new changes to teacher training look at the www.lluk.org website. For more information on citizenship go to www.lifeintheuk.org

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