



Participatory approaches

English My Way (EMW) uses Participatory ESOL approaches to develop the English language skills of beginner ESOL learners with basic literacy needs.

Participatory education

The inspiration for Participatory ESOL is rooted in the work of Paulo Freire (1921 - 1997), a Brazilian educator and philosopher who used his experience of teaching literacy to Brazilian workers to form radical and innovative ideas about teaching and learning. In his famous work, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argued against what he saw as the traditional form of education 'a banking system' in which,

"Knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing".

(Freire, 1996: 53)

For Freire, there was a need to move away from this model to one which would empower learners. Teachers needed to see themselves as part of the learning process, and as learners themselves. Freire advocated a critical pedagogy, where learners were transformed and empowered by the learning they are involved in. Participatory educational approaches are emancipatory.

English My Way advocates the use of a *Participatory Approach* to English language learning. This approach has been used successfully in a number of educational settings including ESOL. The approach puts the learner very much at the centre of their own learning and recognises what they bring into the classroom in terms of life experiences and identities. The learners are viewed as part of a community, and it is their voices, ideas and identities which are of greatest importance in the learning environment.

What is Participatory ESOL?

Participatory ESOL is an eclectic approach to ESOL learning and teaching. The approach recognises the wealth of experience that learners bring into a classroom, and it is through working with the learners to 'speak from within' ([Effective teaching and learning: ESOL](#) NRDC) that language learning emerges.



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Participatory ESOL should:

- Give learners choices in what and how they learn
- Be empowering in its teaching approaches
- Encourage learners to fully take control of their learning
- Allow for negotiation, rather than being fixed and inflexible
- Be responsive to learners' needs and to local issues

The EMW classroom should provide a safe, comfortable and language-rich environment for learners to use the language they have, experiment with language, and develop new language.

Participatory ESOL recognises that language is 'dialogic' and 'co-constructed' in social settings, i.e. language development will take place by sharing our ideas about issues that are important and relevant to us. The language will come from the learners and they will create learning opportunities through talk. The teacher provides support for this 'dialogue' or 'conversation' to take place by helping the learners with the language they need to achieve what they are trying to say or write. The teacher then becomes the person who scaffolds the discourse, rather than the one who dominates or 'inputs' the language.

In a participatory session, much of the language will happen 'on the fly': it is emergent. It emerges from the messages the learners are trying to convey.

Dogme teaching

Another teaching approach which links to participatory ESOL is Dogme. Dogme teaching is based on 3 main tenets. Teaching should:

- Be conversation driven
- Use emergent language
- Use a 'materials light' approach

As Scott Thornbury points out, teaching and learning needs to be locally relevant to the learning:

"Teaching – like talk – should centre on the local and relevant concerns of the people in the room, not on the remote world of coursebook characters, nor the contrived world of grammatical structures" (Thornbury, 2000)



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Techniques and strategies to support participation:

Some strategies include:

- Providing a supportive environment where the voice of each learner is valued.
- Providing opportunities for learners to use the language that is within their linguistic repertoire, and space for them to explore and expand its range.
- Using methods, tasks and activities that give learners the opportunity to own the language used in the classroom and feel empowered as they do so.
- Providing opportunities to take risks with language in a relaxed, safe environment.
- Using a problem solving approach – topics for study emerge out of the learners' expressed needs related to their everyday lives.

Opportunities which allow the learners' voices to be recognised, heard and used purposefully within the language learning framework can be viewed as participatory. Some techniques and strategies which fit within this framework and are explored in greater detail in the EMW CPD programme are:

- Language experience
- Using narratives
- Using differentiation strategies
- Group and pair work
- Using oral language to develop literacy practices.

Participatory ESOL in the EMW programme

In addition to embedding participatory approaches throughout the programme, dedicated Participatory sessions are provided in each topic.

- It is suggested that these sessions are used towards the end of the topic in order to allow the learners to build upon the topic-focused language that they have worked on in previous sessions.
- These sessions often use 'tools' (e.g. flower diagrams, trees, rivers, ladders) as a focal point for the learners to explore and develop language.
- The sessions focus on emergent language that comes from the learners themselves. There may be some initial input from the teacher, usually as a stimulus for the work that will follow.
- The final output of a participatory ESOL session culminates in a physical representation of the work that the learners have been involved in.



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Teaching tip!

At the end of a participatory session, it is empowering for learners (or teacher) to find a way of accentuating the collaboration and learning that has taken place:

- Making a short video of the activities in the classroom for learners to review what has taken place. A learner confident in using video (e.g. on their phone or on an iPad) could take responsibility for doing this.
- Taking a photograph of the finalised version of the 'participatory tool'. Learners can be given a copy to keep in their files, or to include in their learner notebooks. This then becomes a reminder of what the learners have achieved as they worked collaboratively, as well as a record of learning.
- To enhance digital literacy skills, learners can be encouraged to take their own photographs with mobile phones.

Teachers and Participatory ESOL

- The teacher adopting a participatory ESOL approach should be mindful that they are also participants in the learning process. They not only teach but also learn.
- The teacher is a co-facilitator in the process along with the learners.
- The experiences, life stories, feelings and ideas of the learners are as of as much value as those provided in the formal teaching programme.
- The teacher can scaffold learners' language contributions to increase communication. This is not a one-way street but a myriad of collaborative, co-constructed events.

Issues for teachers to consider

- Using a participatory ESOL approach can be quite revolutionary for some teachers. Often when working with low-level language learners, the learning is highly teacher-directed. Adopting a participative approach may require a radical rethinking of the methods and ways we work.
- Teachers need to find a way to balance providing new language with giving learners the space to share the language they already have.



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- Teachers may need to become comfortable with allowing for silence, non-verbal communication (such as mime and gesture), and use of learners' first language when it is appropriate.
- There will be EMW learners who have had very little, protracted or disrupted experiences of formal educational practices. They may be surprised or uncomfortable with being encouraged to take control of their own learning.
- Some EMW learners may have had very 'traditional' educational experiences. Again, it may appear that this type of collaborative and co-constructed learning is of little value. It may take time to make the learner feel comfortable.
- Others will not be used to being given a voice, they may have suffered from a lack of emancipation and feel that what they have to contribute is of little value.

Find out more:

Participatory ESOL has been used successfully in a number of programmes in the UK, such as Reflect ESOL. A more recent programme has been delivered by Rewrite (which uses creative approaches, especially drama, to work with migrant children in the UK).

Here are links to the websites of these organisations:

Reflect ESOL

<http://www.reflect-action.org/reflectesol>

Rewrite

<http://rewrite.org.uk/>

You can read more about the work of Rewrite in this book (chapter 7)

http://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/sites/ec/files/C328_Innovations_book_FINAL%20web.pdf

A recent workshop also highlights their work:

<http://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/seminars/creative-esol-power-participatory-arts-english-language-learning>



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This report looks at using Freire approaches:

<https://esol.britishcouncil.org/content/policy-and-research/new-research/research-awards-2012/whose-integration>

To find out more about critical pedagogies:

An article by Scott Thornbury

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/dogme-nothing-if-not-critical>

A CPD module on Dogme teaching on the ESOL Nexus website

<https://esol.britishcouncil.org/content/teachers/staff-room/continuing-professional-development/dogme-esol>

Key reading texts

Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Thornbury, S. (2000). A Dogma for EFL. *IATEFL Issue*, 153.

Tasks

When you have done some reading on participatory approaches, take some time to reflect on this and make some notes in your CPD diary. Here are some questions to help you in your reflection:

- Is this approach new to you or have you already been using the ideas above?
- To what extent does this fit with your own philosophy towards teaching and learning?
- What do you want to try out in your classroom?
- What worries do you have about using this approach with your learners?