Content in ESOL: What do learners find 'useful' and 'important'?
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Abstract

This research investigated course content in ESOL classes by asking ESOL learners to evaluate the usefulness and importance *to them* of a range of topics which they may encounter in their language class. A survey was administered to 117 learners ranging from 16-60 years old at ten locations. The results showed that these learners identified as '*most* useful' and '*most* important' content which was of immediate practical application in their daily life. In contrast, content which appeared to be of less immediate utility was ranked 'least useful', and 'least important' to ESOL learners. These results have implications for the design of classroom materials in contexts where policy mandates (associated with employability, citizenship and integration) require the incorporation of specified content.

Introduction

This article investigates 'content' in ESOL classes through an approach which combines a review of theoretical a description of Government position on content in the ESOL classroom and classroom research. The classroom research investigated course content in ESOL classes by asking ESOL learners to evaluate the usefulness and importance *to them* of a range of topics which they may encounter in their language class. In this article 'content' refers to the subject matter of texts, or the topic of a class and the research sought to investigate whether learners evaluated content they may encounter in class as 'useful' or 'important' to *them*. In ESOL classes, as in all forms of ELT (in this article ELT is understood in its widest sense, as an umbrella term to describe the teaching of English as a language in all contexts and for all purposes),   the content learners encounter in a class is not the result of happenstance; content is *selected*, usually on the basis that it is relevant to learners. The idea that content should be relevant to learners is largely based on theoretical perspectives on 'learner needs'. However, the question of 'how' needs are identified, and 'who' controls the processes through which content arrives in class is not straightforward, particularly in ESOL where Government policy intervenes heavily. This paper takes the position that 'content' cannot be fully understood without considering the theoretical and political context of ESOL. Accordingly, the first section of this article is a review of the theoretical 'consensus' on needs analysis (NA). The second section describes the uneasy relationship ESOL has with content, and examines an argument that ESOL is largely constituted as a form of English for General Purposes. The third section discusses my exploratory research which examined content ESOL learners may encounter, and in discussion explores the relevance of the research to the design of ESOL courses and reflects on the idea that policy supports approaches to 'content' in ESOL on the basis of assumptions, rather than evidence, about 'learner need'.

The 'consensus' on Needs Analysis

The concept that language courses should be designed so they are relevant to the needs of learners is familiar to ELT practitioners (Songhori, 2008, Seedhouse, 1995) but it is worth

briefly reviewing the theoretical basis for 'needs analysis', the principle tool for ensuring relevance in course design. Needs analysis involves specifying the "identifiable elements" of a target situation (Benesch, 2009 pp 723), that is "what language is used, for what purpose, by who" in a specific discourse community (Long, 2005 pp 1-2). If learner needs are identified precisely, courses (including course materials) can be designed to be relevant to the needs of learners. If courses are relevant to the needs of learners, NA theory suggests that teaching and learning will likely be more effective (ibid p1). The importance of relevance to language teaching is more than an assumption. It rests on a canon of diverse research that identifies a number of factors important to learning including, motivation (Masgoret and Gardner, 2003) and interest (Wisniewska, 2013), as well as a body of SLA research which highlights the importance of making language comprehensible (eg Canale and Swain, 1980, Krashen, 1981). The conclusion of this canon is that a "one size fits all approach has long been discredited" (Long, 2005 p1) because the target situations vary considerably, and is possibly the closest that the fragmented field of applied linguistics approaches to consensus. Under the fundamental principle of relevance, it is not just grammar and vocabulary that should be relevant and appropriate, but also content, so that a 'one-size fits all' approach to content should also be discredited. Many ELT courses are designed to include specific content for specific contexts, following the principles of needs analysis. For example, Cambridge Academic English (EAP) draws on the Cambridge Academic English Corpora to identify grammar and lexis most frequently used in academic contexts, *and* presents students with content they will encounter at university in the form of authentic texts, transcripts from lectures and extracts from text books and academic articles (see Hewings, 2012 p6). Hence grammar, lexis *and* content are highly specific to the 'target' situation and needs analysis is a vital component in achieving specificity (Shing and Sim, 2011).

However, beyond the consensus that needs analysis (NA) is integral to course design, there is an active debate in applied linguistics about 'who should lead the process of analysis', 'what should be the scope of analysis' and 'how should the results from analysis be applied' (Benesch, 2009). A full discussion of the debate is not necessary here but it is relevant to note that theoretical perspectives on NA can be described as descriptive or critical (ibid). Under the descriptive approach, expert linguists specify the target situation for teachers and learners and describe the language learners are expected to gain proficiency (see Long, 2005, pp19-67). Under the critical approach, teachers and learners identify the target situation from the perspective of what learners want to know about it, and maintain that courses should be designed from the bottom-up (Benesch, 2009). Critical and descriptive linguists have debated their respective approaches on various issues associated with language teaching, but in respect of needs analysis, it is not the concept that courses should be designed specific to the needs of learners that is at issue, but who controls the process of course design. For example, Hyland (2002) noted that EAP has been critiqued as an approach which supports and accommodates dominant ideologies and discourses, but such critiques do not discount the fundamental theoretical principles of needs analysis and the need for specificity; rather, the debate concerns who should control the process of designing courses (see Benesch, 1996, 2009 for critical approaches to EAP) .

ESOL as a form of English for General Purposes.

Despite the apparent consensus on needs, relevance, and appropriateness (Long, 2005, 19) in many ELT contexts, the approach is not specific. Where language courses are non-specific, they are best understood as English for General Purposes. Master (2005) defines English for General Purposes (EGP) quite simply as any course not designed for a specific purpose. Long (2005 p 19) is less neutral, identifying General courses as "language for no purpose". Both definitions leave a lot of scope for interpretation, so for the purposes of this article illustrative examples are more helpful in identifying how EGP may be understood, than attempting to define something that is by nature ill-defined. Therefore, EGP can be understood as approaches to ELT which are designed to improve a learner's "everyday English" (UCLES, 2013a), and/or where content for learners is "a diversity of materials" (UCLES, 2013b) to cater to an assumed heterogeneous learner group. The nature of General English, designed for global consumption, means that content, while diverse, may be fairly generic, for example in addressing the topic of education, New Inside Out suggests "My Life as Geisha" (Kay et al., 2008) while Breaking News English suggests "Finland has the world's best education system" (Banville, 2014). In this article, there's no challenge to these materials per se, but their titles do illustrate that a kind of "doctor's waiting room" approach to content underpins much English for General Purposes.

In the UK, much of the provision for adult migrants – ESOL – is based around English for General Purposes qualifications or approaches (see Home Office 2014 for list of approved ESOL qualifications). The identification of a course, curriculum or qualification as EGP often lies in how the course is described and what it does, as opposed to what it is called. For example, ESOL Skills for Life guidance notes for teachers suggests that the following topics may be covered:

> "personal details/experiences, work, education/training, housing, family and friends, health, transport, weather, buying goods, leisure, UK society"
> (UCLES, 2013b)

On one hand, such a list may appear to be a checklist of essential survival content and so useful for adult ESOL learners, but it also contains the potential to be a 'catch-all' list with little specificity. And while not all ESOL learners take examinations, ESOL provision does generally conform to this generalist model supported by ESOL qualifications frameworks. A further example comes from the list of topics on a typical ESOL course at a local FE college:

"-Listening and Speaking
- Reading and Writing
- Grammar and Vocabulary
- Education, Health or Housing
- Citizenship and Culture
- Knowledge related to living and working in Britain"

(HC, 2014)

In the case of ESOL, there is a plausible rationale for taking a generic approach which is that ESOL 'learners' are characterised as 'heterogeneous', not only demographically but in their aims for language learning (Ward, 2007, 16-30). Given the supposed difficulty of designing

courses for such a heterogeneous population, the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum (AECC), was introduced as a framework that was not prescriptive with the intention of enabling teachers to address 'needs' locally and contextually while maintaining effectiveness based on best practice(see Rosenberg, 2007pp 221- 261 for a full account). If teachers had been allowed the freedom to operate within the framework (and allowed the time and resources to consider needs locally and contextually) general purpose English may well have acted as a foundations for an emerging UK specific ESOL curriculum. However, there has been a directive pressure applied to ESOL since the introduction of the AECC, which has constrained teachers' capacity to act autonomously within that framework The directive pressure originates in policy makers' view that ESOL learners are a specific group consisting of asylum seekers, refugees, members of isolated communities and low income economic migrants with specific needs (Ward, 2007,31-31). A consequence of this is that a reified approach to needs has developed in policy: employability, integration and citizenship have been identified as the 'needs' of ESOL learners and these 'needs' have emerged as clear agendas of government *for* ESOL (Cooke and Simpson, 2009).

The extent to which policy agendas have supported specific content has varied over time and between agenda. For example, that ESOL *should* support employability is an expectation of Government, although what content should be used in class is not specified:

> "We expect ESOL courses to support employability, particularly for those learners referred for training by Jobcentres. We will work with Ofqual, the Skills Funding Agency, awarding organisations and other partners to ensure ESOL qualifications are rigorous, stretching and fully support our priorities"
> (BiS, 2013 pp13)

In contrast, citizenship courses approved for accreditation *must* contain highly specific content and material. Whether Government mandates highly specified content or expresses an expectation that courses support employability, policy clearly seeks to direct what is taught in the ESOL classroom. Furthermore, as Government also defines closely who policy is targeted toward, the top-down policy perspective is that ESOL in the UK *is* for specific learners and that specific outcomes are expected. In other words, learner needs are identified in policy before learners enter a classroom. The overall effect on ESOL of combining an English for General Purposes structure with the intent of addressing specific needs results in ambiguity: some the content in ESOL classes may be highly specific and relevant to some learners some of the time, while other content is not (Ward, 2007 pp76-77). The effects of policy also mean there is a degree of theoretical incoherence inherent in the ESOL framework before the product of that framework (courses and content) arrive in the classroom, because, drawing on NA theory, "every course should be considered a course for specific purposes" (Long, 2005, p1) and identifying the needs of learners cannot be based on pre-emptive global assumptions.

Teacher and Content in ESOL

In practice the content that learners actually encounter in a classroom is probably not entirely dependent on either theory or the dictates of policy, but emerges after top-down courses have been modified, from the bottom-up, by teachers in practice. This is because

while most language teachers work within a framework that has been developed without reference to their specific class (by 'experts'), they approach content and materials delivered to them – courses, curricula, schemes of work - as templates rather than scripts (Tomlinson and Masuhara, 2010 pp6-8) and draw on their experience to modify, adapt or replace suggested content. Effective ESOL teachers have been described as working in this way; they are 'bricoloeur', creatively adapting and designing materials so they are suitable for their specific class or context (Baynham et al., 2007). The modification of top-down content through teacher-led bottom-up processes may appear to be a pragmatic solution to the challenge posed by NA to EGP, as it could allow generic courses to be made more specific to a particular class through careful selection of content. However, whether depending on teachers to make the best of materials is the best solution to ESOL's policy led incoherence, or entirely effective, is open to question. Firstly, while a teacher's experience is invaluable in assessing course content, implementing modifications to courses solely relying on experience and reflection may not be wholly reliable, as it is the teachers' *own* assessment of what has worked in the past that is the reference point (Day, 1993). Thus this pragmatic solution may still bypass the learners. Secondly, there is a circular problem associated with pragmatism. If a course is *conceived* as a General Purposes course, the needs of individual learners or classes may not be assessed with for precision and specificity (required by NA) because of the erroneous belief that it is not possible, or worthwhile, to conduct full NA in EGP courses (Seedhouse, 1995). Finally, there is also a problem associated with the practicalities of teaching and the availability of materials for ESOL. Elizabeth Harrison's (2013) article on Listening Activities for Low Literate ESOL students reports that all the teachers in her study used *EFL* listening activities and there were only five (very familiar) sources commonly used for Listening content – Cambridge, New Headway, Cutting Edge, Listen Carefully and Skills for Life materials resources. Harrison's findings – that there is a lack of up-to-date 'ESOL friendly' listening materials available for teachers - principally focused on the design of available materials rather than content. However, her observation - that ESOL teachers do not have the time to adapt the procedural design of available listening materials – equally applies to content. Thus teacher's bricolage may be limited by time: when addressing the topic of 'Education' in class, a busy teacher may find that a text about 'Geisha education' is the best procurable content in the time available.

The study

Sample and procedures

The sample consisted of 117 learners in 12 classes in an English city. The classes were spread across 10 ESOL providers who offered both accredited and non-accredited classes, although the majority of participants (>60%) were engaged in formal accredited provision. Participant ages ranged from 16 to 60+ yrs with the largest age group 30-40 yrs old. Participants were asked to state their first language, which resulted in (self) identification of 31 first languages within the sample. The survey was piloted and designed in consultation with ESOL professionals to be comprehensible at Level B1 (CEFR)/Entry 3.

Participants were asked to complete the survey during their English class. While the majority of surveys were conducted in English (n=96), there was also provision for the

survey to be completed in Polish, Farsi, Russian, French, Portuguese, Arabic, Mandarin, Turkish and Hungarian. All translations from the original English version were by native L1 speakers who were also bilingual English. The rationale for providing the survey in languages other than English was twofold. Firstly, this was a matter of principle and access: within classes pitched at a specified 'level', literacy in L2 varies, and I wanted to include access to the survey in L1 so that participants could check meanings by comparing the L1 and L2 version. The second reason was that completion of the survey in L1 by some learners allowed a post-hoc check of reliability through comparison of response patterns in L1 against English-only response patterns. The rationale for this post-hoc check was that the survey items are interpretable constructions whose meaning can vary. Anomalies in response patterns may have indicated that meanings were varying to an extent that conclusions could not be drawn from the findings. As such anomalies were not in evidence, there was a degree of confidence that the meaning of items was broadly shared. The survey investigated various aspects of ESOL learning, which in addition to the investigation of materials and content reported here, included demographic information and separately a section on integration which is not discussed in this report.

To investigate content, learners were presented with two survey items. The first (Item 1) asked learners to evaluate how 'useful' a 'topic' was to them in their learning of English. In the survey, the word 'topic' was chosen in place of 'content' as it was considered more likely to be familiar to learners and teachers. There were eleven 'topics' presented in a list with responses requested in the form of a Likert-like scale which ranging from "very useful', 'useful, 'neither', 'not very useful' and 'useless'. In the second item (Item 2), learners were asked to evaluate how important it was to *them* to know about specific 'topics' to help them settle. The range of responses was again a Likert-like scale which included 'very important', 'important', 'either', 'not very important' and 'not important at all'. The list of suggested content is displayed in Table 1.

(insert Table 1 here) Table 1

Item 1: Useful topics	Item 2: Important topics
Healthy eating	Where migrants have come from and why
Hobbies and sport	Rights of women in the workplace
How to get a job	Children's education
News and current affairs	Different regional accents
Numeracy	English Kings and Queens
Socialising	The census
UK education system	Religion in the UK
How to access health and medical services	English history
English custom and manners	Sport
Dealing with officials in the UK	Your legal rights and responsibilities
Personal finance	Where to get help and advice
	Cultural life in the UK
	Famous English people
	NHS

Selection of content the learners were asked to evaluate was informed by observation of
ESOL classes, a review of course books and material commonly available to teachers,
analysing the current requirements of the UK's Life in the UK test, and through reflection on
the author's own practice as an ESOL teacher. The list of content is not claimed to be
exhaustive, and does not describe a particular ESOL course. However, for the purposes of
this exploratory research, the list is representative of the way chapters (or units) in General
English course books (including SfL – see UCLES 2013b) are themed and reflects content
required under consecutive versions of the Life in the UK test, employment-related content
from the AECC, and content identified through observation of course modules and classes.

Results

The aggregated results of responses to "How useful is [topic]? are displayed in Figure 2. The
evaluation of to each topic as 'very useful', 'useful',, 'not very useful' and 'useless' have
been converted to percentages. For this item, the results for 'not very useful', 'useless'
responses have been assigned a negative value. This has been done for ease of display in the
table. The results show that learners evaluated all content as more 'useful' than 'useless'.
Furthermore a broad trend appears so that   the fewer evaluations of a topic as 'very useful'
the greater the tendency of other learners to evaluate that topic as 'not very useful' or
'useless'.

(insert Figure 1 here)
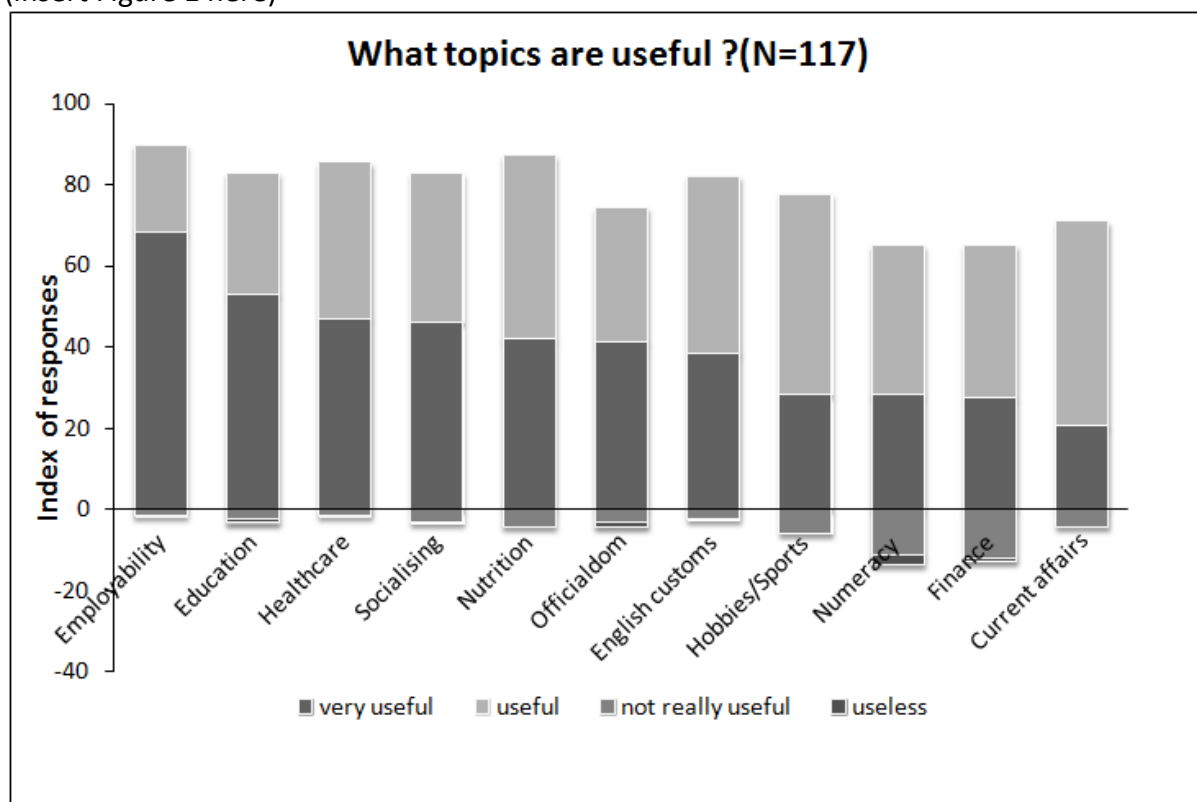
Item 2 asked 'How important is it to know about [topic]?' The results of responses to this
item are displayed in Figure 2. Learner evaluation of each topic as 'very important',
'important', 'neither', 'not really important' and 'not important at all' were converted to

percentages. For Item 2, 'not really important' and 'not important at all' were assigned a negative value for ease of display., Overall, learners evaluated all content as 'important' (to know about), but as with item 1, fewer evaluations of a topic as 'very important' broadly corresponded with a greater number of evaluations of that topic as 'not very important' or 'not important' at all.

 (Insert Figure 2 here)
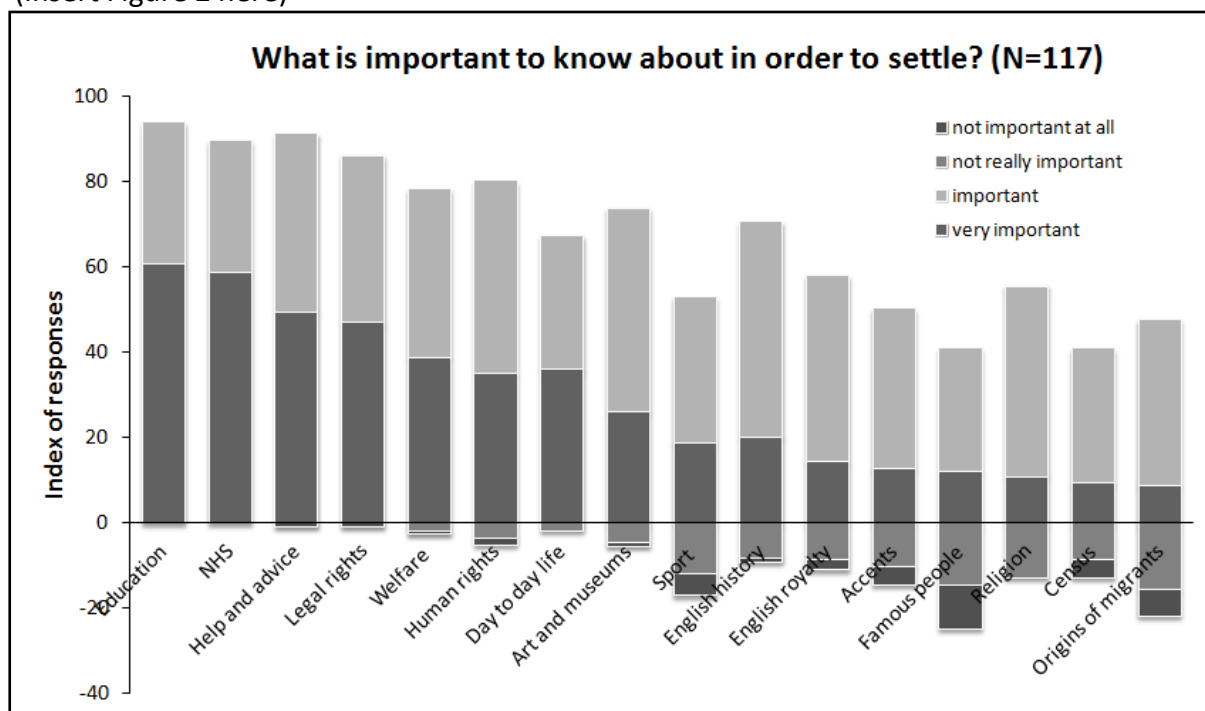
As this research was exploratory, a further analysis of the results was conducted which sought to interpret the pattern of responses. For each topic in Item 1, positive values were assigned to the percentage scores for 'very useful' and 'useful', and negative values to 'not useful' and 'useless'. The same procedure was conducted for Item 2, with positive values assigned to percentage scores for 'very important' and 'important' and negative values assigned to 'not really important' and 'not important at all'. Positive and negative values were then added for each topic to produce a score. This procedure maintained the quantitative findings in that it reflected which content was evaluated as 'most useful' and 'most important'. However it also   enabled interpretative analysis of the results through consideration of the characteristics of each topic and what those characteristics suggest about the type of content ESOL learners may prefer. The results of this interpretive analysis are summarized in Table 2.

(Insert Table 2 here) Table 2 : Ranking of Topics as 'useful' and 'important' with qualitative characteristics.

Topic ('useful')	Topic ('important')	Characteristics
Employability and how to get a job	Children's education	**Essential 'survival' information. Locally**

Local,

applicable

,

Access health	Help and advice	**applicable in the immediate context. Negotiable - learners can contribute e.g. 'Where's best local food shop?'**
Healthy eating	NHS	
UK education	Rights and Responsibilities	
	Welfare benefits	
	Women's rights in work	
Socialising	Cultural life	**Understanding 'culture' on a 'day-to-day' basis. Some local applicability and negotiation possible e.g. shared experience of bureaucracy.**
English customs	Day to day life	
Hobbies and sport	UK History	
Dealing with officials		
Current affairs		
	UK Kings and Queens	**Learners as receivers. Nation-level or generalized. Little negotiation possible.**
	UK Religion	
	Sport	
Personal finance	Regional accents	
Numeracy	Census	
	Where migrants come from	
	Famous English people	

'Grand narrative' – national, 'factual', non-

The interpretive analysis of results (Table 2) are suggestive of (to paraphrase Maslow) a hierarchy of usefulness and importance. Generally, content which addressed immediate 'basic' or survival needs in a new country – getting a job, education, and health - were evaluated as most useful and important. In addition to supporting basic needs, this type of content also contains information learners could operationalize immediately, outside of class and which would be applicable in daily life. Such content does not only have utility in the classroom as sources of relevant grammar or lexis, there is also a degree of negotiability and legitimacy in this kind of content, as learners could offer opinions which may inform their peer group in class, and can contribute as experts to discussions about, for example, local schools, local hospitals or where to look for a job locally. The next preferred content is associated more directly with interpreting processes of migration, such as the need to understand a new social or cultural landscape and how to relate to it. For example, 'socialising' (as 'useful') and ' English customs' (as 'important') fall readily into this category and retain the potential that learners can contribute to the discussions based on direct personal experience. Least preferred content tend to be fact-based and contain less potential for negotiation or the expression of personal expertise or experience of the learners. This least preferred content tends toward ones involving the linear transmission of information, where questions are about 'facts', with answers to those questions non-negotiable – a learner can be either correct or incorrect but someone else is usually the authority.

Discussion

This research applies the principles of needs analysis to content and focuses on what the texts and materials are about, not the level of such texts. The results show that ESOL learners differentiated between content which they may encounter during an ESOL course. These findings have implications for ESOL courses where it is assumed that classes are too heterogeneous for full needs analysis to be effective and therefore not worthwhile. The learners who participated in this research were a heterogeneous group yet the findings show that they evaluated some content as more useful and important than other content. Identifying what content is useful and important to learners could lead much greater relevance, and specificity, and ultimately effectiveness of ESOL than the catch-all 'English for General Purposes with some Specifics' approach   that has evolved since the introduction of the AECC, and which is largely driven by policy. This is not to suggest that the content identified as relevant to learners in this research should replace the content privileged in the policy agenda. On the contrary, it suggests that for any given context, no matter how heterogeneous learners are, it is possible to identify content a specific group of learners consider relevant. This research achieved a degree of specificity using a simple methodology which could be adapted for use in contexts where teachers and learners are potentially faced with a catch-all list of content, and a large array of source materials from which to choose in support of learning. A simple survey such as this is not suggested as a replacement for ILP's, learner needs or individual assessments required of ESOL under inspection regimes, but it may inform teachers about the priorities of groups of learners in a given context, so that it is not only the 'Level' that is relevant but the content as well. General Purposes approaches, generalised by definition, are organised on the principle that it is the 'level' of a learner from which a classes specificity arises, but the content of classes organised around levels in this way is, inevitably, only relevant some of the time, to some of the people in a class. Classes simply organised around level, which is an individualised cognitive construct, effectively by-pass contemporary perspectives (see Breen's (1985) identification of social contexts as neglected and Norton and Toohey's (2001) re-visitation of 'the good language learner') that identify language learning as a social *and* cognitive process and the most effective language learning and teaching takes account of this by addressing content in course design. An example of this is participatory ESOL (Bryers, Winstanley and Cooke, 2014) which is based on the "fundamental principle" (ibid p11) that the specific "concerns and issues which affect students in their daily lives should be the driving force behind the curriculum". Even in classes which don't wholly embrace the critical approach of participatory ESOL, the 'social turn' in applied linguistics suggests that the specific social and contextual concerns of learners should be understood when designing a curriculum, for much the same reasons that needs - related to 'level'- should be understood. And the logical conclusion of these understandings is that content cannot be generalised and should be generated, as far as possible, from the 'bottom' up. However, policy has a strong influence on how ESOL is delivered in the UK in the classroom. Ultimately, the capacity of teachers and learners to act autonomously and hence design the content of their own courses is constrained by policy, so the final paragraph of this article addresses the assumptions of policy about ESOL.

The research has implications for the generalised assumptions of policy about ESOL in the UK, because while the Government agenda of employability appears to coincide with

learner needs, the current direction of other agendas, particularly the citizenship agenda, appears on less certain ground. Policy approaches to citizenship in ESOL have changed direction recently away from a practical approach towards a 'grand narrative' approach focused on "Putting our culture and history at the heart of the citizenship test " (BBC, 2012). However, in this research, it was the practicalities of living in England – content which recent policy changes have sought to de-emphasise - that were rated among the most important and most useful. After practicalities, these results also suggest that social processes of understanding a new culture were important to ESOL learners. This finding has implications for integration and its relationship to the citizenship agenda. While the scope of this paper does not allow full discussion of this emergent result it does provide some counterpoint to the theme that has emerged in UK political discourse suggestive that migrants are somehow unwilling to 'integrate', a narrative that has grown since David Blunkett's problematization of 'mother tongue' language use at home (see BBC, 2002), and that has continued to the present day as a theme of the current Prime Minister (Watt, 2011). The evaluation of 'UK customs' 'day to day life', 'socialising' and 'Cultural life in the UK' as second only to topics and themes essential for survival suggests that contrary to that current political and media narratives, migrants are interested in the social and cultural life of the UK. Given this, it is possible, that the 'problem' of integration lies in a different place than ESOL learners as it is unlikely that learners would identify as 'useful' and 'important' content which brought them closer to the 'mainstream' if they were not going to use it in some way. This is not simply a heuristic interpretation but is supported by the canon on needs analysis, not least of which is research on integrative motivation. The evaluation of content drawn from current citizenship materials as 'least useful' and 'least important' has implications for the 'grand narrative' approach to citizenship of recent years. If the rationale for associating 'citizenship' with ESOL is to foster 'civicness' in some way, then needs analysis perspectives suggest that the most effective way to support *both* language learning and 'citizenship' would be through content learners find relevant to them. However, learners appear to find the fact based content of current citizenship materials least relevant to them. Even if it is accepted that it is desirable to teach 'citizenship' to adults, the findings described in this report, considered in the context of the canon of research on needs analysis, suggest that making teaching and learning (of language learning and/or citizenship) more effective may involve a reconsideration of the content currently proposed under policy. Such reconsideration could still acknowledge the agendas of Government but the key to these policy agendas is what happens in the classroom, namely effective teaching and learning in shared languages.   Given this, a truly evidence based approach to policy would seek to take, as a starting point, evidence from local, contextual classroom based research on the needs of learners, not assumptions about ESOL learners needs that draw on that grand narrative.

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