

Immigration law and adult migrant language education

What this research was about and why it is important

This research considered how multilingual migrants navigate an immigration legal system, with the help of a supportive lawyer. The study informs an argument for a critical approach to the language education that many newcomers rely upon to support their settlement – that is, an approach that relates teaching to the social and political life of students. The communicative challenges faced by adult migrants when attempting to settle in a new country are profound. This is very much the case in the domain of immigration law, which many have to engage with, where interaction is complex and unfamiliar, and which happens in a policy environment that is ever more volatile. This could be – but rarely is – acknowledged in language education classes for migrants. Drawing upon data and analysis from an ethnographic study of an immigration law advice service, the author argues that the demands faced by multilingual students in institutional encounters generally should be recognised in language education. This would encourage practice and practitioners to address the complexities of everyday interaction in their teaching.

What the researcher did

- As part of a larger project, the AHRC-funded *Translation & Translanguaging* project (www.tlang.org), the author and colleagues investigated how people communicate when different languages and cultures come into contact.
- One of the project’s teams was based in Leeds, in the north of England, a city with a population of around three quarters of a million, where one of the Key Participants (KPs) was Lucy, an immigration lawyer.
- Between April and late July 2016, either side of the Brexit vote in the UK, the team observed and recorded Lucy in interaction with her clients at a free immigration law drop-in consultation service.
- The data which inform this paper are from a research interview carried out with Lucy as she describes her work, and from consultations between Lucy and her clients recorded for the project. The analysis examines how Lucy and her clients’ linguistic and communicative behaviour relates to broader social meanings and social life.

What the researcher found

- Interaction in Lucy’s consultations, as with other institutional encounters, is replete with examples of shifts from specialized language into everyday English. Lucy uses her language resources in many other ways, all designed to set a positive and welcoming tone for her relationship with her clients.
- Where she herself cannot do the interactional work needed to make complex (and monolingual) legal processes comprehensible, interpreting is called upon in an attempt to make meaning. This is often done informally and even more often using the emergent technology of machine translation, with the tool Google Translate.

Things to consider

The findings were discussed in relation to practice and policy in the field of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), that is, the language education for adult migrants in English-dominant countries. Five implications for ESOL formed the basis of this discussion:

- *Reflect domains of practice and topics in ESOL pedagogy*: A responsive approach to adult migrant language education would reflect the realities of interaction in the places and spaces outside classroom where migrants are actually present. This is often absent from ESOL practice.
- *Understand but do not simplify interactional complexity*: Students’ needs are not adequately met by denying the complexity of interaction through the use of oversimplified content. Teachers could highlight inequalities in knowledge, examine how these are typically lessened, and – with students – develop strategies to address them.
- *Recognise inequalities in knowledge of specialised discourses*: Attention should be paid to empowering students to develop resources for the navigation of an unfamiliar discourse (such as immigration law), not just a new language.
- *Acknowledge multilingualism as a learning resource*: Students’ out-of-class experience is often heavily multilingual. Any teaching approach, critical or otherwise, which claims to attend to the realities of interaction outside the classroom to inform what happens inside class, *de facto* implies incorporating multilingualism.
- *Pay critical attention to inequalities of power*: Students should be encouraged to not only develop an awareness of language but a critical understanding of practices in the contexts within which they interact, and – by extension – of the socio-political circumstances that those practices relate to.

Materials, working papers and other resources are available from <https://tlang.org.uk/>

