

Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

Paper 119

Collaborative Community Research: How is English learned by adult immigrants in the classroom used in a super-diverse community?

by

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December 2014



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Abstract

This study applies the methodology of collaborative community research to the field of sociolinguistics. It considers how English learned, by adult immigrants in the classroom, is used in the wider superdiverse ward (Vertovec, 2007) of Burngreave in Sheffield, South Yorkshire. The research was initiated in reaction to cuts to adult education provision. It reflects community concerns, involving community members at each stage of the research process. At the planning stage a questionnaire was developed because this was considered a familiar and transparent tool by community members. A consideration in the use of a survey questionnaire was the diversity and dynamic environment we were investigating “If social and cultural environments are marked by complexity, mobility and dynamics, it means that very little can be presupposed with respect to the features of such environments.” (Blommaert, 2013). The data production in this study, conducted between November 2012 and February 2013, involved considerable teamwork, multilingual peer support and collaboration from community members. There is a qualitative element to the research because I have visited each venue, met the teachers and students and was present when the questions were asked. The data analysis was conducted with groups of students, tutors and other stakeholders and was supplemented by interviews. In this super-diverse community visual presentation of the data was crucial so that everyone involved understood the information and was able to talk about it. Discussions were multi-lingual and collaboration has been facilitated by resilient community education networks in the area.

The research agenda

This is an area study involving a census of community English language classes in the Burngreave Ward. In the words of Berg and Sigona, (2013) “geography matters fundamentally”. In my reading of research about other super-diverse areas: Harehills in Leeds (Simpson et al 2011), Antwerp (Blommaert , 2013) Southampton (Cadier and Mar-Molinero, 2012) It became clear that none of these areas was “emblematic” of ours and that English language provision in Burngreave which is coordinated at a community level was not adequately represented by research that I had read about English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) provision in other areas.

“If we take seriously the multiplication and increasingly complex intersection of axes of difference, we need to understand how it plays out differently in different conditions, at different scales, in particular places.” (Berg and Sigona, 2013 p.7)

To be able to represent this complexity I argue that a collaborative community approach offers a step towards broadening our understanding of what is there in terms of services and how these services are perceived by community members.

“Unlike traditional approaches to research in which researchers generate research themes and interpret findings, the community research approach aims to empower community members to shape and have some ownership of the research agenda.” (Goodson and Philimore, 2010. p.489)

The research agenda in Burngreave can be represented in Burngreave by a photograph of students demonstrating on Sheffield Town Hall steps and an article published in 2010 in The Burngreave Messenger, a local community newspaper, written by Amal Ahmed, one of the many collaborators in this study.



“For the last three months we have been fighting to keep our ESOL classes. At last we got some good news this month from the Council. Our classes will now be able to run twice a week as normal. There were a lot of people who stood with us and gave support, thank you to everyone who came with us and helped us. Thank you also to the Council for returning our classes. We hope the Council will never cut or reduce our classes again. English classes are very important for parents and their children. We gladly accept the good decision that the Council has made and we say to parents – be strong and never give up.”

This successful campaign marked a change in people’s attitude to their community classes and the initial data which began the study was a collection of letters and reports written by students, school governors, children and teachers to support the

provision. Our research question became 'How is English, learned in the classroom, used in the wider super-diverse community of Burngreave?'

Constructing a model for research

The first phase of the research involved constructing a model for research with two adult students (who decided to adopt pseudonyms): Muna and Sara, and Lisa, the editor of the Burngreave Messenger. We had two group discussions about how the research should be conducted and what aspects of the provision we should investigate. We all agreed that education was important.

Lisa said "I value education for the simple fact that people say they want it"

Sara said "It is the most important thing in life I think. Now I have children I can help them."

Muna said "It is everything for me. It is useful to be an educated person, to help your children with their homework, to communicate with society, your neighbours. If you don't know any word of English you can't do anything you can't go to the GP, you can't help your children. You become hopeless like that. It is everything for me."

Through discussion we developed themes for investigation. We valued both quantitative and qualitative aspects of research. We considered the quantitative element of research to be important to build an argument about funding or policy as the research was rooted in community concerns about cuts to funding. Lisa in the focus group said "you need to do both things: ask lots of people and get lots of information from different people" She also expressed a sense of urgency: "It is almost urgent really because things are changing. The schools are being asked to make cuts, getting less money to do things, the schools are having to choose...they think 'we'll ditch the adult stuff' because they have forgotten what it was like before"

We decided to use a mixed methodology, gathering baseline information with a census questionnaire then collecting stories related to issues that were raised. The themes which were identified as important from our focus group discussions were health: physical and mental, access to housing, access to money and benefits, family life: relationships with children, neighbours, and school. These were all

problematic areas and potential crisis points if people did not have sufficient proficiency in English to be understood. When the research first began community cohesion was a policy 'buzzword' and so we selected the themes which we could relate to cohesion. We asked questions about neighbours and friends as well as other courses volunteering and jobs. Because the schools were involved in hosting provision we decided a focus on children and links with school was important as well as information about education, language and literacy. We discussed the situation when people needed to use English and developed a list for a survey questionnaire. We also discussed progression. Sara said

“Ask the teachers. When I came to class I couldn't even speak one word. Slowly, slowly I improve.. the teachers know how the students improve”

Muna argued against this approach saying:

“but some people don't improve. I know a lady who started in 2005. She passed entry 3. I saw her a few days ago and she said to me she just got the exam for entry 2. She stopped she got the idea that it was quite too slow...people are different”

In the discussions Muna and Lisa focussed on the crisis points and Sara and myself tended to focus on the positive aspects of what had been learned. Collaboration broadened the discussion and reflected different perspectives.

Philimore, (2010) writes: In practical terms the move towards community research has come about from a recognition of the skills and knowledge contained in the community being researched and from a theoretical point of view challenges traditional positivist approaches to research.p. 490

While it is true that participatory research does challenge some positivist ideas, it can also be true that community researchers as non-academics might be more supportive of traditional research methods and more familiar with quantitative methods. In the Birmingham research, mentioned above, qualitative in-depth interviews are used but community members consulted in Burngreave thought that

quantity was important to establish some baseline information about the individual experience and about the provision. They favoured the use of a survey questionnaire at first and then interviews to collect stories. An important point that Philimore (2010) makes throughout her work is the recognition of the skills and knowledge contained in the community being researched. This knowledge is important at every level in the research process and it was crucial that the research methods promoted transparency so that community skills and knowledge could be utilised. At this early stage it was apparent that some visual way of representing our data would be needed to analyse the data together.

Developing a survey questionnaire

The second part of the research involved developing a questionnaire. Using the focus group findings and a survey questionnaire from Harehills Methodological Toolkit (Simpson et al 2011) as a starting point, I made a draft questionnaire for a meeting with 2 students, 2 teachers, 2 extended schools workers and the editor of the Burngreave Messenger. We discussed what we were trying to find out and how the questions should be organised and categorised. This was the first of many drafts before the questionnaire was piloted. The questionnaire reached its final stage only after the first real en-masse attempt and by then much had changed including the way we planned to administer the questionnaire.

Burton et al (2010) stress that it is not only important to measure relevant dimensions of a question in a survey but it is also important to

“consider the practical impact of acceptability, phrasing, position, mode and the wider context in which the questions are being asked.” (p.1345)

From the outset, we had decided to conduct the survey as an interview so that the questions were asked aloud. The reason for this was to allow time for thought and to air both the question and the answer. The wider context of the survey was interest in the English language provision, but the immediate context was that of an “ESOL” classroom where adults were used to practicing questions and answers in pairs, asking for and sharing ideas about meaning and talking about language and

education. By working with a team of students, they would be questioned by their peers.

In the focus group, both students commented on how they were familiar with making themselves understood with people who had limited English. Translation remains crucial in legal and medical contexts where precise and technical language is employed and professionals may not have the requisite communication skills but teachers and students in language classes are largely experienced communicators familiar with a multi-lingual context.

The plan initially included using a small multi-lingual team of researchers, who would be trained in research methods: how to conduct the survey as an interview and how to record and input the data. Between them they had the ability to speak Arabic, French, Somali, Amahric, Deri and Farsi. The aim was to build a course for the researchers which included an English language qualification with research as a practical application. The team were from a class I had worked with over a number of years who were all keen and had been active in the campaign against the cuts. But by the time I was ready to collect data, the team had all moved on and though we were in contact, no one had the time anymore to commit to the project. Time is a major factor in collaborative research and academic timescales and restrictions lengthen the process which can mean that people have moved on but conversely research relationships cannot be manufactured quickly.

“Time is always needed to develop relationships, create common working practices and build trust between the organizations involved, or between a researcher and an organization” (Demange et al. 2012 p.40)

As a person who has worked for a long time in Burngreave to develop provision, relationships were already developed. But to involve different students meant that their stake in the research was less because there was no immediate threat to provision and there was less history of working together. I needed to consider what skills and knowledge the team had had and consider how this could be recreated without expectations of high levels of commitment and time.

I began the survey in the class I taught, explained the background and purpose and asked permission to conduct the survey. I modelled the process of asking the survey

questions with one student. We had a brief session about how to introduce yourself as a researcher and ask permission and how to ask questions in a polite and friendly manner. Most students had answered a survey before and enjoyed doing it as a researcher or as a subject. One of the difficulties of survey research

“is that there is no opportunity to interrogate responses and so it remains important to avoid arbitrary responses or leading respondents to particular responses”. (Burton et al 2010)

Because the people being surveyed in the first class were known to me, I was able to interrogate responses, gauge which questions were problematic because I knew some of the answers and could check the ones I wasn't sure of. I changed the wording of some questions as a result. In a super-diverse community with different language skills in different languages, consistency in approach was not what was crucial but *appropriacy of approach* to enable understanding of the question and to facilitate clear logging of the answer. In classes where students could read the questions, the students themselves conducted the interviews while I listened and acted as troubleshooter. In classes where students could not easily interview each other, other students from the same centre came in to interview. Sometimes volunteers and extended school workers and the teacher interviewed too and whenever possible, I began by modelling the questionnaire with a teacher or a student so that the students heard all the questions before they answered any. In this way they had a better understanding of the English but also a more informed consent.

From an ethnographic, sociolinguistic perspective, there are many problematic issues associated with survey questionnaire research which Monica Heller (2011) outlines below.

“Questionnaires for example may help generate data for a large population, but it is difficult to be present when participants fill them out. As a result, we have little way of knowing how our participants interpret either the communicative act of filling out a questionnaire (for many people it is reminiscent of complying with state bureaucratic procedures of social control, and may be more or less welcome as a result; other people may have no frame for understanding it at all) or the questions themselves (for example,

does “What language do you speak with your children?” mean what the language would be called if it were the standard version? Or what I call it? Do you mean my biological children or the ones I take care of? And so on..” p.43

In Burngreave, I was present when the questionnaires interviews were conducted and the questions were asked out loud. In this way everyone had the opportunity to ask questions and both the questions and the answers were aired.

The questionnaire was piloted on students with very limited levels of English language. The key to the ease of asking and answering questions, was that everyone involved was practised in making themselves understood and understanding people who were learning to speak English. The questions were mostly understood straight away and if a question was problematic then I changed the wording of it to make it clearer. The importance of this is that someone was listening, able to comment and answer questions. As an English teacher I was used to this role of listening and checking.

There were issues as Heller anticipates, about language. When a person from Angola was asked about her first language and replied ‘Portugese’ this was queried by a student who was from Congo (DRC) and the first student said “We are terrible because we have so many European ways. It is not just language but also the way we dress, that is why we settle well in Europe”. A huge discussion followed about African dress and about language The questionnaires often generated considerable discussion.

Heller makes a point about interpreting and understanding questions and she uses an example about language. Because there was room for talk in the way the survey was done, people were able to indicate that the languages they spoke were mixed. When identifying their first or second language this seemed to be clear for most people. When asked what language they spoke to their children what became interesting wasn’t the name of the language but whether children were speaking the same language or mixture of languages, as their parent and this became a point of discussion too.

Later when I came to inputting data, the discussion in the classrooms influenced the way I logged the data, I inputted the answer above, in line with the parents issues ie:

in response to the question “What language(s) do your children use to speak to you?” instead of naming a language or mixture of languages I inputted “same” when that was the case, as it was clearly the salient point for parents. I only categorized the differences.

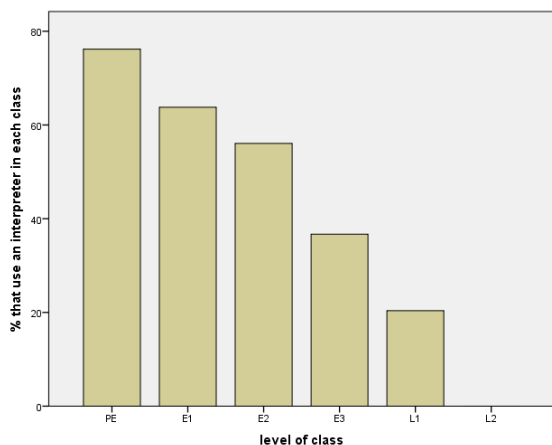
Because of my experience of working in Burngreave, I had visited every centre before in various capacities: sometimes as parent, as teacher, for meetings and sometimes to observe teaching. I knew most teachers and in the instances where I had not met the tutor before I knew someone in the class. In this way and because other students were involved the association with bureaucratic control which Heller was concerned about was considerably lessened. The factors discussed above indicate that the tool crucial in a research project and the way it is used and considered. It was important that the process was positive and did not disrupt learning.

The survey was conducted 325 times and involved every community English language class in Burngreave being visited once. We visited 9 centres and involved 24 teachers in the research and many of the 325 students who responded to the survey also conducted the survey. The next phase was inputting the data which I did myself and then organised the data for analysis.

Data analysis

The data was analysed in three stages. The first was with the Burngreave Adult Learning Working Group which is a bi-monthly meeting to co-ordinate adult community learning provision across the area. It comprises providers and host organisations and funders and members of that group came to analyse the data. Everyone commented and made notes on the tables, graphs and charts I presented. I later presented the same data to students at a separate meeting. Their responses were very different and more critical than the provider group and one person suggested that I take the data to her school parents group so that more students from different levels of classes could consider the data as a group. In this section of the paper I will present two samples of data we discussed which raised different concerns with adult students and the provider group. Both groups were community

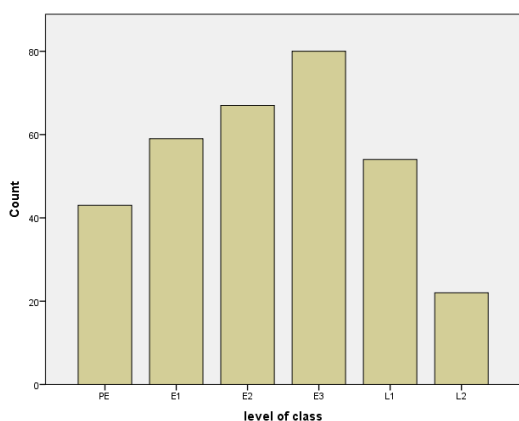
members, Burngreave residents and supporters of the provision but had different perspectives.



This graph shows from left to right percentages of people in different levels of English class who use an interpreter. The column on the left is the lowest level of class: PE is pre-entry, E1 is entry level 1, E2 is entry level 2, E3 is entry level 3, L1 is level 1 and L2 is level 2. This is what the levels are known as in government funded “Skills for Life” provision. All the classes in our study come under this funding regime.

The providers were pleased with the graph in fig.1 because it shows that as students progress through English language classes, their need to use an interpreter decreases. The use of interpreters though crucial in many instances is expensive and in short supply. The ability to communicate without interpretation is a mark of independence and confidence. From a provider’s perspective it is a mark of the success of the provision.

When I showed this graph to the students, I had no misgivings at all but they were less impressed than I had anticipated. They said firstly; ‘That’s exactly what should happen. What is the point of learning if we don’t improve?’ and secondly “Who gets to level 2 anyway?” They acknowledged that the data was good evidence in a negative climate that English classes were value for money but their main point was many people did not achieve that level. Why was this?



I had another graph at the meeting which I thought could provide some explanation.

graph. 2

This graph shows the class levels as in graph 1 with the lower level classes on the left. There is a rise in the number of people from the lowest level class to the entry 3 class then the numbers in level 1 and 2 decrease quite sharply. The provider group considered this graph

and said that demand falls off at entry three as people learn what they need and

there is less demand as people get jobs or find that they can manage with a certain functional level of English. One member of the provider group said “Not everyone is academic”. The student group said there are not enough classes above entry three with crèche and in the local venues. They also agreed that people did stop studying as they gained a functional level of English.

Philimore et al (2011) discuss different categories of learners: communicators, improvers and higher level learners and cite communicators as the most satisfied with the provision as the pace and style of learning suits them. Most dissatisfied are the people with higher education in other countries who wish to move back into their former profession or into higher education. These are the people who cannot access higher levels or do not feel progress is fast enough.

Students in our study said that for some, progress was too fast because they had had little schooling in the past. Entry 3 is considered equivalent to the end of primary school and those with little or no literacy skills and only primary level schooling or less, did not have the skills to progress. They had to complete longer tasks in the entry three classes and examinations, which required reading and writing abilities. There seemed to be a ceiling where 4 hours a week in an English language class could not compensate for missing out on full-time education as a child. The students who had not had a full-primary education could rarely progress with the style and amount of input the current funding regime allowed. Our discussions and our data indicated that “one size does not fit all”. A three tier system is needed to address the issues raised here. Firstly, a fuller literacy and study skills development approach, secondly, courses based on the current system and thirdly, a fast intensive approach which links to HE and career development.

In our provision in Burngreave many adult students are parents linked to school and other services, who have time while children are young to work on their English at a pace which is supported by crèche and a couple of hours tuition twice a week. They fit into the category of communicators, as they are not seeking work while their children are young. This may be one of the reasons why there are high levels of satisfaction with the provision, another reason is that the provision is linked to services and networked through a series of “connectors” and “super-connectors” (Calderelli and Catanzaro 2012). These networks facilitated the research.

This is a small sample of the findings of the initial research which seeks to illustrate how collaborative community approaches open up the possibility of discussion about provision around data specific to the provision. The type of data and the presentation of data are very important in a super-diverse community where people are often able to discuss and comment as a multi-lingual group. In the parents' group, the discussion was informal and translation and explanation went hand in hand, with people contributing words, explanations and opinions. Within the group were speakers of many languages who could explain what the graphs meant to each other.

In conclusion a collaborative community approach to research can involve adult students from a super-diverse community to generate new and important knowledge. Quantitative data, which can be an important tool when engaging with funding bodies and inspection regimes, is a useful departure point for collaborative analysis as it has the possibility of multiple interpretations and can generate fruitful discussion. In Burngreave, the data we generated clearly highlighted and validated different perspectives and interpretations. Visual presentation of data facilitated understanding and discussion. Visual tools have been further developed in this study with network diagrams used to record and analyse how classes are networked to the wider community.

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