

# Learning through Art: ESOL Program in Museum in London

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(Received 2017.1.5)

In the global age, as international mobility increases and the society faces the complexity of multicultural society, it is essential to promote and foster intercultural dialogue. The objective of this research is to investigate practices of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) programs in museums. In this study, the education program in the museum that enhances intercultural dialogue which leads to cross-cultural understanding for diverse populations will be examined.

The significance is that the museum is a space of learning where learners make meaning from their own experiences. Through the ESOL program, the museum illustrates the importance of cultural institutions to increase educational roles to the diverse population. This paper will begin with a review of literature that discusses the role of museum and then continues with a discussion of ESOL programs in England. The paper concludes with the observation of ESOL program in the British Museum and how the museum has provided learning to the diverse population.

**Key words:** International Migration, ESOL, Museum, Cultural Institution, United Kingdom

## 1. Introduction

In the global age, the increase of international mobility has caused various motivation of migration. These significant changes in migration trends have influenced the role of museums. Today, museums have taken on the challenge to engage in diverse communities and to promote intercultural dialogue through the use of art and the educational programs. In this study, practices of ESOL programs in museums will be investigated. The education program in the museum that enhances intercultural dialogue which leads to cross-cultural understanding for diverse populations will be examined. The importance of ESOL programs in museum will be discussed in detail through the practices of British Museum. The data was collected from the fieldwork which includes class observations and interviews to ESOL coordinator in March 2015.

This paper will discuss the role of museum and then continues to look into ESOL programs in England. The paper concludes with the observation of ESOL program in the British Museum and how

the museum has provided learning to the diverse population.

## 2. Learning in the museum

This section will explore the literature that states the role of museum. Research such as David Carr (2003) suggests the importance of museums that ‘open possibilities to learning’ (p.xiii) . Other studies such as Hooper-Greenhill (2007) introduces the concept of “post-museum.” Hooper-Greenhill describes the term as follows;

One of the key dimensions of the emerging post-museum is a more sophisticated understanding of the complex relationships between culture, communication, learning and identity that will support a new approach to museum audiences; a second basic element is the promotion of a more egalitarian and just society; and linked to these is an acceptance that culture works to represent, reproduce and constitute self-identities and that this entails a sense of social and ethical

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responsibility (p.1).

The author discusses that museum's role is to foster knowledge among visitors and the educational programs have an influence on learning of culture and society. The 'post-museum' approach proposes ways for museum to engage audiences who are culturally diverse in the program. The museum's practices to provide services to diverse populations are also written in the *Code of Ethics for Museum*.

The Museums Association's *Code of Ethics for Museums* which provides the ethical standards of museums is reflected in the practice that accepts cultural diversity and promotes intercultural dialogue. *Code of Ethics for Museums* was first introduced in 1977 and updated in 1987, 1991, 2002 and 2007. The most recent version was updated in 2015, and established three principles: public engagement and public benefit; stewardship of collections; and individual and institutional integrity. The first principle, public engagement and public benefit, states that museums and those who work should; "actively engage and work in partnership with existing audiences and reach out to new and diverse audiences: treat everyone equally, with honesty and respect: provide and generate accurate information for and with the public: support freedom of speech and debate: use collections for public benefit – for learning, inspiration and enjoyment (Museums Association, 2015)." This statement is important since it defines whom the museum is for and emphasizes the museum's responsibility to new and diverse audiences. This attitude of accepting diverse audiences has influenced educational practices in museum.

The first principle, public engagement and public benefit, suggests the necessity of engaging in working for both existing audiences and new audiences. Since museum has many collections, the ESOL program in museum can use them for public benefit to foster learning opportunities for the diverse population.

### **3. ESOL Program and Adult Learning**

Adult immigrants, refugees, migrant workers, and asylum seekers whose first language are not

English are increasing in England. It is reported that over 50% of the country's provision of ESOL program is held in the capital, where large migrant and refugee population and asylum seekers are settled (*Greater London Authority*, p.3).

Ward (2008) explains the motivation of those who want to learn English as follows:

Refugees and asylum seekers, migrant workers, family migrants and members of settled communities want to learn English... Their circumstances affect both what they want to learn and where and how they want to learn it. They rarely want English for a single purpose and have many different motivations for learning English. These are usually related to securing or progressing in sustainable employment, supporting their children, accessing services and taking up opportunities to participate in community, cultural and political activities (p.3).

This motivation of English learners relates to characteristics of adult learning. Jensen (1994) states that museum programs must consider the life-experiences of the audiences which they want to engage in and create programs accordingly (p.110). According to Jensen, adult learning in museums is different from children's learning. Jensen explains the reason adults participate in learning as follows.

Adults...are independent learners and search for education programmes that answer their own questions instead of those of someone else...Adults enrol in classes or participate in programmes related to personal interests or to acquire skills and understandings that will help them answer immediate questions (p.114).

As the literatures states, adults enroll in the education program to solve their problems. So, it is essential that the ESOL programs in museums help participants to discuss and share their ideas about many themes including culture. This act is highly important since communities today are increasingly diverse. Programs that stimulate the non-traditional audiences, the population who was underrepresented in museum in the past to attend are in need of

offering by museum professionals.

#### 4. ESOL Program in British Museum

The British Museum has a program for ESOL students. Many of the participants in the program are migrants, refugees or asylum seekers studying at further education college in London. The ESOL program started in 2003 as a pilot program and officially started in 2005. The museum, works with 2000 students a year. The ESOL program provided by the museum is a short-term program for which students are brought to the museum once during the curriculum.

There are seven different ESOL workshops provided in the museums and these are; General Introductory Tour; Citizenship— Making of the UK; The Origins of Writing; Development of Writing and Scripts; Word in Islamic Art; Nebamun: Life and Afterlife; What Makes Us Human? 40,000 Years of Human Artistic Endeavour. The museum provides material online for pre-visit preparation such as background information of the gallery they are going to visit, list of vocabulary that will be used in the session, and possible themes that can be discussed, before, during and after the visit. Also, the museum provides worksheet for planning a museum visit to ESOL tutors such as floor maps, directions to museums and general information. Providing these materials makes the ESOL programs more accessible since participants will be able to know what the class will be about in advance.

The objective of practicing the ESOL Program in the British Museum is described in the European Institute for Comparative Cultural Research (2007).

The workshops and tours aim to reflect themes and ideas which will be familiar to the students, encouraging them to make connections to their own experiences, to share these ideas with their classmates and to increase their confidence in learning English, using vocabulary that they may know and introducing new words and ways of expressing them (p.15).

This suggestion emphasizes the idea that the role of museum is to assist and offer not only language

support, but provide an environment where participants can express their ideas freely. The following section will describe the actual ESOL program offered in the British Museum.

#### 5. Class Observation and Findings

The class I observed was the program of “The Origins of Writing.” Here, the class explored the history of ancient Mesopotamia from the museum’s permanent collections where participants discover the origins and development of writing in the middle East.

On the day of the visit, the British Museum’s ESOL tutor briefly talks about the history of the museum and take students to the selected gallery. Communicative language teaching was used, and the tutor addresses questions such as “when did people start writing?”, “what are different forms of writing?”, “what do you see and what does it say?” to participants. This leads up to discussion on how they learned their own language, the difficulties about learning English, and how forms of writing are different among various cultures. From the students’ activity of writing using cray and wood to understand how to write in cuneiform, a Mesopotamian style of writing, they learn how their alphabets are different from English and Mesopotamian writings.

What is evident from observing “The Origins of Writing” workshop is that the workshop stimulates learning and discussion. Participants are involved in intercultural dialogue and by experiencing this process they make sense of the world, others, and themselves. As Falk and Dierking (2000) states,

People make meaning through a constant process of relating past experiences to the present. This process is at the root of all learning— learning is about meaning-making. People constantly attempt to place what they encounter in the world, whether it is a person, a place, a thing, or an idea, within the context of their past experience: “How is this like what I’ve seen before, how is it different?”...“Meaning” is always relative to the individual, relative to self (p.61).

Dialogues about cultures and customs that are

different from those of other participants lead to cross-cultural understanding since the participants start to understand cultures that are different from themselves. From discussion through arts and objects, participants of the ESOL program start to understand the diversity surrounding them.

From this practice, it can be stated that the ESOL program in the British Museum emphasizes intercultural dialogue. The definition of the term is the following:

Intercultural dialogue is a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange or interaction between individuals, groups and organisations with different cultural backgrounds or world views. Among its aims are: to develop a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and practices; to increase participation and the freedom and ability to make choices; to foster equality; and to enhance creative processes (p.xiii).

As the ESOL coordinator states “the ESOL workshops are all constructed from different time periods and different cultures,” the workshop has created such an opportunity where participants can understand various cultures which are different from the culture which they are engaged in now and have been in. From this interaction and the process of using art as the tool of learning, the students can discuss about themes such as where they come from, what it is like to live in different countries, and about belonging to multiple cultures. Since the ESOL program introduces the opportunity to exchange and interact with different cultural backgrounds, these programs are enhancing cross cultural understanding among various groups.

Another important role the museum has taken on is to improve civic engagement in society. The ESOL program coordinator has stated, the importance of visiting museums through ESOL is to understand culture and cultural representation, which leads to the participation in society.

Museum visits and cultural visits are really important for groups. It is about seeing what is out there, it is about participating in culture. For

a lot of the groups, even though they don't live far away, it is their first time in central London.

As stated in the quote, ESOL programs in museum have helped participants to be more involved in the society. For many participants, this visit to the museum is not only their first experience but also their first visit to central London. The experience of learning in the museum empowers participants to achieve better understanding of foreign cultures and also to find ways for connecting to their native culture. This suggests that museums today are fostering intercultural dialogue that leads to cross-cultural understanding.

However, there are still challenges for ESOL programs of museum to face the needs of diverse population. As stated before, museum today not only has to work for existing audiences but also has to reach out to diverse audiences. However, due to the budget cut that is the result from changes in provisions related to government initiatives and legislation, diverse population that cannot have access to ESOL programs are gradually increasing.

As the ESOL coordinator in the British museum have stated, “when ESOL program in British Museum was first introduced, it was designed to reach Somalian communities, Bangladesh communities and communities which are harder to reach. Unfortunately, what happened is... those who are most vulnerable, women and the marginalized communities are now restricted from funding.”

The policies of the labor government have a strong influence on ESOL programs in London. The change of ESOL policy strongly influences ESOL funding by government. Research such as *English Language for All* (2012) identifies the groups excluded by recent policy changes as follows; low-paid workers, people with very low levels of language and literacy skills, and women with child care responsibilities (p.6). Thus, this challenge in the change of policy is an important issue to consider. Without government involvement in the project, it is difficult for museums to contribute to the development of museum programs. The support from the government is essential for the museums to improve and enlarge the educational role for the diverse population. As the number of program is

still limited and the demand exceeds the capacity of ESOL program in the museum, more support and maintaining close coordination between museum and government will be required.

## 6. Conclusion

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the migration flows have changed the population diversity in England. This study shows that ESOL programs in museum are not only for learning language but for providing the space which enables participants to learn and explore the culture and society which they live in. Participants can have better understanding of the diversity surrounding the individual by expanding their boundaries of knowledge and stepping out of their comfort zones. Additionally, the practice in the museum emphasizes intercultural dialogue which supports participants improve their understanding of various cultures. The dialogue and active communication among participants provide them the understanding of their social context and the culture they are engaged in and foster mutual understanding among participants by dialogue using art.

The development of museum services that meet the needs of diverse population is required. Although some approaches of ESOL programs in museum are already taken place, the number is still limited, and as the research suggests, those who are the most in need have not been able to receive ESOL. These programs that are addressed to the multicultural population in museums and an effective way to improve intercultural dialogue in the community are urgently in need. In future studies, I will compare and contrast the ESOL programs in the United States and the United Kingdom by examining how policies and social trends have changed ESOL programs in cultural institutions.

## Notes

This paper was originally presented at the 75<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of Japanese Educational Research Association at Hokkaido University, on August 23-25, 2016.

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