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Exploring the Information Literacy Experiences of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) Learners: A Discussion of Methods

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Abstract. The paper shares the early stages of doctoral research; discussing the research questions, methods and pilot study findings. The full research will be a longitudinal case study of three community ESOL classes in England. ESOL learners are adult migrants who are learning English and are typically very different from the higher education student who is the focus of much information literacy research. The paper discusses the challenges of the pilot study and looks forward to the full data collection which will use a range of participatory methods.

Keywords: Information literacy, ESOL, adult education, participatory methods, language learning.

1 Introduction and Background

There has been little previous research on information literacy in the context of the ESOL classroom in the United Kingdom or more generally on information literacy and lower level language learning. The study is informed by existing research that suggests that there is a relationship between language learning and information literacy [1-2] as well as research that looks at the information literacy practices of immigrants and more widely at their information behaviour which suggest that social exclusion can be seen as an information problem [3], transferring information practices is a significant issue [4], and that there is an association between immigrants and information poverty [5].

ESOL learners are adults living in the UK who are learning English as part of adult basic skills provision. They are heterogenous but it is possible to see them as potentially disadvantaged by several measures: they are immigrants and they are more likely to be women, BME (black, minority or ethnic), underqualified, and unde-employed or unemployed [6]. There is ESOL research in digital literacy [7], on the ESOL classroom as a significant information site [8], and on ESOL learners as potentially experiencing information poverty [9]. However the concept of information literacy has gained little currency within ESOL or community learning more widely.

The research is framed by an understanding of information literacy as a social practice and is interpretive and emergent. The findings of this research are likely to be particular rather than generalisable and the researcher will take a reflexive approach to give her research rigour [10]. The initial research questions ask: what is the relationship between the development of English language capabilities and information literacy; how are participants interacting with information at the start and end of their studies; and what impact do the changes in participants' information literacy have on their everyday lives. The aim of the pilot study was to explore how far rich data could be collected about the information experiences of learners with limited English, sensitise the researcher, and collect initial ideas from participants to shape the research.

2 Research Methods

The full research is a case study of three community ESOL classes over the academic year 2015/16. The researcher plans to use constructivist grounded theory [11] as a method of analysis rather than a methodology. The research will use a range of methods, negotiated with participants, which are intended to be participatory [12], capture holistic experience and support participants with limited English to express themselves.

ESOL learners can be seen as a challenging group to research. Firstly there are important questions around the relative privilege of the researcher and her difference from the participants [13-14]. Secondly the participants have limited proficiency in English. In this project the researcher will conduct her research in English rather than use interpreters. This means the research will exclude those who are at the very early stages of learning English. However participants may welcome the opportunity to practice their English and within the context of the ESOL classroom they are familiar with working to express themselves in English [15].

Visual methods are an integral part of ESOL teaching and offer a useful way to communicate with ESOL learners. There is also a growing body of information literacy and information behaviour research that uses visual methods [16-18]. At the simplest level, this research will involve photo elicitation as part of focus groups but this may be extended to using techniques such as photo voice, drawing or mapping. The researcher notes that visual methods have the potential to be participatory as part of an overall research design such as photo voice [19] but that this is not an inherent quality.

An early stage of the research includes one-to-one semi-structured interviews with ESOL teachers and managers. It is also planned to carry out one-to-one longitudinal interviews with the ESOL learners over the course of the academic year. The frequency and design of these interviews will be negotiated with the individual learners and may include, for example, the participants keeping journals and the researcher accompanying participants on visits. In this research, interviews are seen as a practice and this is guided by Holstein and Gubrium's [20] writing on the active

interview. In this way the researcher and the participants construct meaning with the interview as a negotiated text.

Within this research, focus groups and group interviews are seen as a way to explore interaction and knowledge formation rather than as a way to canvass opinion. A focus group is planned as an initial and final activity for the ESOL classes in combination with group interviews as negotiated with the learners. Focus groups can be seen as more likely to be participatory as they shift power away from the researcher and as conducive to working with participants who lack voice as they allow for mutual support. However, there are also difficulties in using focus groups; in particular they will not capture the full range of participants' subjective experiences and so in this research they are used together with individual interviews [21].

Classroom observation is a central technique for research in ESOL and education more generally [22] and has also been used in information literacy research. Angrosino [23] argues for a position of cultivated naivety and this ethnographic approach is the starting point of conducting observation in this research. Observation is then seen as a way to understand practice in context and build description as well as potentially overcome language barriers [24]. However it does not meet all the research objectives as it does not seem to capture participants' conceptions of and reflections on their information literacy practices, particularly in relation to their lives outside the classroom.

3 Pilot Study

The pilot consisted of an observation of an ESOL and Art workshop, discussed below, and two focus groups. The focus groups were held in existing volunteer-led English conversation classes. In these groups the learners were shown a selection of picture prompts and realia, for example, a smartphone, an ESOL class flyer and a photograph of a library, and asked questions about their information experiences. As a final activity the researcher introduced the concept of information literacy and discussed this in relation to her research plans.

In both focus groups the participants ranged from beginner to upper intermediate in their level of English and had been resident in the UK for between a few months to over twenty years. However the groups were very different in composition. In group one there were four participants, all women, most of whom had come to the UK for spousal reasons, two of whom had no literacy in their first language. There were five participants in the second group, one man and four women. Three participants were partners of PhD students and all had a relatively high level of education.

The most significant findings of the pilot were methodological and are discussed below but several areas of interest, albeit local and limited, emerged. The diversity of the participants' information experiences was the most significant finding. In group one, they told stories of finding it difficult to get information about how to find a job, join the library or visit the doctor, while the second group challenged the researcher's expectations by telling more positive stories. The difference between the two groups

was also reflected in the fact that while information literacy was a new concept to all participants, the second group was able to engage in a discussion about the proposed research. Other findings related to diverse use of digital technologies from those who identified themselves as proficient users to those with very limited confidence. Language and literacy were significant barriers to the use of digital technologies, with video and VOIP the most used applications. All the participants discussed the importance of people to find and share information. For group one, family assumed a central importance, while for the second group, friends were more significant. For both groups interactions with people from the same community who spoke the same language were significant. Finally the participants discussed keeping in touch with “home” countries; participants found and shared information in variety of ways but within the context of these groups this seemed unproblematic.

The observation took place in an ESOL class where a print-making activity was taking place. A narrative account was written after the observation and this was used as the basis for analysis. The researcher occupied an ambiguous role: she was welcomed as an invited guest but also performed as a quasi-teacher. The findings from the observation were very limited but showed the complexity of the ESOL classroom; it was not just a site of cognitive learning but a place of intimate relationships where the visual, tactile and affective were important.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

In practical terms, the pilot showed that learners with pre-intermediate English or above could, with appropriate support, meaningfully discuss their information experiences, and that observation and focus groups were potentially useful methods. However it also demonstrated that more sustained research relationships would be needed. In the focus groups there was little discussion of the participants' information literacy as opposed to their information experiences. Information literacy was a new concept for all the participants and a single encounter did not enable the participants to engage with the concept in a meaningful manner. The participants were well disposed to the researcher as an individual but did not show a significant level of engagement with the research. Substantial efforts will need to be made during the main period of data collection if the participants are to become co-researchers in any meaningful sense [12]. The complexity of the role of the researcher was clearly shown in the pilot. There were important differences between her and the participants in terms of ethnicity, religion, citizenship and linguistic capital. This can be seen in terms of the challenges of outsider research, however, as Bridges [20] suggests, this is not always a helpful distinction as both researcher and participants have a multitude of selves. Finally the pilot problematised the proposed method of analysis and particularly exposed the power relationships inherent in research; during the data collection the researcher was a guest, but when alone with the collected data there was a significant shift in power [10]. It is anticipated that the richer, fuller data collected during the case study will in part redress this balance [11]. Nevertheless the researcher is keen to

consider the process of knowledge creation more closely and explore how and whether this can be participatory.

The lessons from the pilot have then informed the next stage of the research in terms of suggesting further reading but more significantly in encouraging further consideration of how to manage the researcher's relationship with participants in the field but also in design, analysis and writing of the research.

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