

Language and Employment

A SKEIN Pilot Research Report

How English is used in the workplace by people who speak languages other than English and whose English is not their first language

Nick Melliss

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*There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold
And she's buying a stairway to heaven
And when she gets there she knows if the stores are closed
With a word she can get what she came for*
Page and Plant – Led Zeppelin (1970)

1. Introduction

This research project was completed for a pan London capacity building project run by the London Voluntary Sector Training Consortium, and funded by the European Social Fund. The Project was called the Skills for Economic Inclusion Network (SKEIN). Its aim was to work with and support small voluntary organisations who were working in the field of economic inclusion - that is they worked to improve the employment opportunities of their clients, the people who used the voluntary organisation. The Network did this by creating a membership base across London of community and voluntary organisations, providing courses and workshops for members of these organisations, and improving communications between these organisations through a website, e bulletins and newsletters. The participants in the research project were identified through the community and voluntary organisations engaged in the project, or through my work with my employer at the time, the Workers' Educational Association. Many interviews with participants were held in my office at the Workers' Educational Association. In other words this research on language and employment was related with my own situation as an employee of a community and voluntary organisation. I would not have been able to interview the participants, or make contact with the participants, or pay participants, and translators, without that involvement.

2. Research Aims and Objectives

The main aim of the research was to contribute to the understanding of how English is used in the UK workplace by people who have little knowledge of English.

The research objectives were to:

- uncover how much English is really necessary for working in certain employment areas;
- discover how non English speakers cope and get by in the workplace with little or no English;
- develop a methodology, using language assessments, questionnaires, interviews and workplace observations, that is capable of producing useful evidence that might be used to inform judgments about the requirements of learning and teaching ESOL both in the workplace and elsewhere;
- find out how the workplace serves as a language learning environment for people who know little English.

This aim would be achieved by firstly identifying a small group of people whose first language was not English, and who were currently working in some capacity in the London area. These people would have their knowledge of English assessed, using a convenient and widely used scale such as the National Literacy Standards, and then interviewed on two separate occasions. I wanted to assess my participants because I thought it useful to have a rough guide, and it certainly wouldn't be anything more than a rough guide, as to how much English they might know. This assessment would tell me whether I needed to use an interpreter to carry out the interviews, but it would also provide a linguistically defined context for the interviews. Further context would be provided by an employment questionnaire, which the participants would complete after the language assessment. My main concern was to attempt a description of the language world they inhabited when they were at work. A starting point for that description would be to gain an idea of how much English each participant knew, although I was aware that any such starting point would be transient and incomplete, in the sense that the language knowledge that might emerge from the use of a general assessment tool would not uncover the range of language skills the participants might be using in the workplace.

As the research progressed I realised it would not be possible to carry out any workplace observations or recordings. The relationship between participants and their employers was too fragile and I didn't feel I should or in fact be able to trespass into that particular territory. This gave the research project a different shift in emphasis from what had been my original intention. Whereas I had thought I would be observing and recording actual speech as used in the workplace, which would be further developed through the use of interviews and employment questionnaires, the focus of the research now became the recollections and reflections by the participants on the language they used in the workplace. I was in fact asking the participants to recall and reflect on their own language experiences. In that sense the research activity became a language event which might contribute to their own use of English; it was a language learning activity. The research itself became a reflection on the reflected experiences of my participants.

3. Methodology

The data I have collected here is taken from a series of interviews held with 16 participants over a 8 month period in 2005 -2006 in London. My aim was firstly to identify at least 15 people who had been working in the UK for about 3 months, and who had only a very basic level of English. I made no distinction in terms of gender, age, or ethnic group. I didn't want to focus on any particular kind of job; I wasn't, at this stage, either more or less interested in the language used in particular trades or vocational areas, for example the use of English in the construction industry, or in the Health service. I also wasn't particularly interested in the circumstances that had brought them to London and I didn't ask any questions about that.

Selection of participants

Participants in the research came from three sources:

Two participants came from a small Somali Community organisation based in Woolwich that I had identified as part of the SKEIN project. This organisation, one of several in the area, was run by someone who came on a short course I was running in Community Leadership. This person acted as a translator in my interviews with the two Somali women.

Five participants were identified through a larger community organisation who were also in SKEIN. A colleague at the WEA had worked for this organisation, and used his contacts with this organisation to identify these participants. Three participants were identified through the colleague's own connections, he is from a Latin American country, with Latin American communities in London.

Four people were friends of one of the other participants from the large community organisation.

Two further people were identified through another colleague at work who taught an ESOL class at a local Further Education college. These two participants were in the colleague's own class.

A further 7 people were identified but either declined to take part in the interviews or never turned up to scheduled meetings. In all I identified 27 people for the research, and conducted language assessments, employment questionnaires and interviews with 16 participants. All participants formally consented to take part in the research. The consent form was orally translated for the participant, so they could understand what they were being asked to do. The 11 people who were identified but who didn't take part, were people who were unable to come to preliminary meetings that had been set up with them. Meetings that didn't take place were in Croydon Public Library, Durning Hall in Forest Gate, East London, Burger King at Euston Station, London, and Old St Underground Station.

There were several practical difficulties in setting up the interviews. Interviews with people who had only a small amount of English, equivalent to Entry 1 on the NLS scale, could only be arranged through a third person who could act as a translator. My initial attempts at making contact with potential partners all failed because I found it difficult to make myself understood to the participants. My main contact was by mobile phone. Phone conversations are difficult for people with only a minimal level of English. Thirteen of the sixteen people needed a translator to arrange a meeting. Of the three others I interviewed without a translator, one was able to make arrangements, whilst the other two would only agree to be interviewed once. One person made three appointments, but could only make one of these. Eight other people, who I never managed to interview, made arrangements but weren't able to keep the appointments.

The reasons for this difficulty appeared to be:

1. Suspicion - very few interviewees could understand at first why anyone wanted to interview them about their use of English, when they only knew a little English. It was very difficult to explain the reasons for the interviews over the phone, to people with only a small amount of English. Four participants who I later managed to interview by using an interpreter, thought I came from the Home Office and was trying to check up on their employment status.

2. Language barriers. Making appointments with people in a language that is not familiar to them is difficult. Times, dates and locations can be muddled. For example, arranging to meet at a London Underground station, the most convenient location for everyone, with eight exits is complicated.

3. Finding a time and a place. Finding a location and a time to meet was also difficult. I wasn't able to meet at the participant's workplace. Participants were based across London and worked in different locations across the city. Ten people were interviewed in my own office in Central London. Two people were interviewed in a community Centre in Woolwich; two other participants were interviewed in public libraries in Greenford and Tower Hamlets ; one person was interviewed at a specialist university library, one other person was interviewed and her English assessed in a Burger King restaurant in Wembley, another was interviewed in the staff canteen of the West Middlesex Hospital. For six people, all who knew each other, I had to arrange a preliminary meeting in a coffee bar at Oxford Circus, where we could discuss the research. The consent to research forms were signed in the coffee bar. Only one person in all refused to take part in the interviews after I had explained the purpose of the interviews.

Arranging a time for interviews was problematic. All participants worked at different times of the day, and, given their work status, it was not possible to interrupt their working day. Some interviews were held in the early morning , at 8.00 am, others were held in the evening. Some were held in lunchtimes, if a suitable location could be found near the participant's work.

For several people, but not all, a reason for attending the interviews was to earn some extra cash. Given that the total interview time was about 4 hours, payment was at £12.50 an hour, much more than the minimum wage which some people were earning.

The role of the translator

In the event the research could only be carried out with the help of translators. The translators not only attended the interviews, but also set up the meetings, arranging times and places, and reassured the participants about the purpose of the interviews. It was important that the translators were trusted by the participants, so that they could be reassured as to the legitimacy of the research. Ananiadou's paper (Athens 2004) on the preparation for the NRDC paper on Identifying Effective Workbased Skills... . . . explains why she didn't interview ESOL participants with a very low level of English. The budget for the project wouldn't cover the cost of employing translators, but also the translator might have influenced the exchanges between interviewer and interviewee in a way the interviewer would be unable to control. A similar view has been raised in reviews of Goldstein's work in Toronto, Canada, (Berlin/New York 1997) where the interviews with Portuguese workers in a toy factory, who had low levels of English, were carried out with a translator.

I think it is necessary to use translators, or at least have a translator ready to sort out any translation difficulties that may arise in an exchange, where the interviewee only speaks a very limited English. Without the translator, the views of people with limited levels of English would not be heard. Yet their views and

ideas about their own language experiences provide insight into how language is used in the workplace from their own unique perspective. These ideas can't be dismissed just because they have been obtained through someone else, the translator. During the interview there is a continual process of checking and double checking with the participant and the translator to see if what has been said and recorded is actually what was meant by the participant. I also think the views from second language learners who have a higher standard of English, at level 2 and above, are different from those with low levels of English. I think this is most starkly presented when we compare the statements of the higher level student in the Employability Forum , 'English Spoken Here' , May 2003, about the need for learning English with people whose English is their first language, the English native speaker, with the statements of people at lower levels of English who said they found it easier to learn English with people from their own language background as they all then made the same mistakes.

Research Instruments

I constructed 4 research tools for carrying out this research:

- 1- An English assessment, based on the National Literacy Standards, so that all research participants could be defined in terms of a level of English;
2. An employment questionnaire to provide a work context for each participant;
3. Two semi structured interviews, which would be recorded on tape.

Copies of the language assessment, the employment questionnaire, and the interview questions are provided in the appendices.

The assessments, questionnaires and interviews were carried out over a period of between two to four months. For 12 of the participants I carried out a preliminary meeting to explain the research and to invite them to sign the research consent forms. For the other 4 participants this explanation was done by the translator so that the consent form could be signed at the same time as the language assessments.

Each participant was scheduled to have three meetings. The first meeting covered the language assessment and employment questionnaire; the second meeting covered the first interview, and the third meeting the second interview. I wanted to spread the interviews out over a period of time so that the participants had time to reflect and familiarise themselves with the research. Between the first and second interview I gave all the participants a notebook in which they could record the words and phrases they acquired between the two interviews. Three participants took advantage of this facility.

Table One Language Assessments:

Level	No. of participants	Level	No. of participants
Entry 1	9	Level One	1
Entry 2	2	Level Two	2
Entry 3	2		

The distribution of levels of English within the research cohort wasn't quite as I had originally intended. I had thought only to include people at the Entry 1 level, but having spoken to people at the higher levels I thought their experiences were also useful in the research. I couldn't think of a reason why they shouldn't be included, particularly as they often had a lot to say about language learning, about multilingualism and code switching, using other languages in the same conversation.

The questionnaire asked participants about the participants' educational and personal background, knowledge of first and other languages, attitudes to work, their workplace. It was loosely adapted from a workplace training questionnaire used for the NRDC Report 'Identifying effective workplace basic skills strategies for enhancing employee productivity and development' (Anadiou, Elmsie – Henry, Evans, Wolf, London 2004). It was from the questionnaire that I found out about the sector in which they worked, their personal background and their attitude towards work.

Table Two Work sectors

Cleaning	6
Community Artist	1
Construction	1
Fruit packing	2
Housekeeper	1
Kitchen assistant	1
Office worker	1
Phlebotomist	1
Retail - worked on the checkout at a large supermarket chain	1
Van Driver	1

Cleaning covers working in a hotel, working for a family in an average sized house, working for an office cleaning company, and working in a very large household where five different languages are spoken, including English, so the contexts are very different and produce very different language experiences. In the hotel, for example, the use of English was kept to a minimum. The cleaner was interviewed in Russian, by another Russian speaker, and work was allocated by giving the cleaners a piece of paper with the room numbers on it of

the rooms to be cleaned. In the large household the cleaner, whose first language was Russian, had learnt some Arabic in order to speak with the family who owned the house.

I didn't exclude anyone because of the kind of work they were doing. In fact one of the interests of the project focussed on how different employers negotiated different communication strategies to get round the language barriers, and how much could be achieved at work with comparatively little English.

The language interviews consisted of a total of 60 questions about language used in the workplace. Copies of the interview forms are available in the appendices to this report.

Between the interviews I asked participants to record any new words or phrases learnt after the first interview. Two participants completed this task. Others told me informally of new words they had acquired and described where, when and why this was done.

4. Critical Perspectives

The model of language learning adopted in this report is taken from Lantolf's distinction between language learning as acquisition and language learning as participation. Language learning can be usefully described by these two metaphors - the acquisition metaphor and the participation metaphor. These metaphors are not opposed to each other, and it isn't a question of one being right and the other wrong. Rather, according to Pavlenko and Lantolf,(2000) they complement each other, so that whilst acquisition metaphor is associated with rules, with language as a commodity to be acquired, participation is associated with gaining access to and engagement with communities which then requires changes in the perception of self.

Pavlenko and Lantolf explore this idea in relation to the autobiographical work of two writers, one Polish and the other Japanese who left their home countries to live in the USA. Participation in a new community, at what ever level and in whatever aspect, requires not just the learning of new words and new expressions, the new language, but also as part of acquiring a new language, the decision 'to initiate a long, painful, inexhaustive, and for some a never ending process of self translation'. It is not just about translating the words, but also about translating the self. If this true, and there are features in the language experiences of some of the participants in this research that suggests it is, then it is also clear that the decision to embark on this process of language acquisition is highly personal, linked more to a concept of self, and not only to an external agency such as employment opportunity. Perhaps it is the highly problematic combination of the acquisitive and the participational aspects of language learning that explains why the participants in this research are less than whole hearted in attending English courses, which are now highly acquisition driven and leave less room, if any, for the exploration of self.

In some environments, an ESOL classroom perhaps, the acquisition metaphor is dominant, in others, the home, or at work for example, the participation metaphor offers for this research a more useful description of the process of language learning. In these environments language meaning has to be worked on through social relationships, and personal involvement. Of course in both cases a

language is in the process of being acquired. When acquisition is dominant then language learning is associated with scales of achievement, the National Literacy Standards for example, or figuratively speaking Led Zeppelin's Stairway to Heaven where "she knows if the stores are closed/With a word she can get what she came for"; with clearly defined assessment standards or criteria, and with the notion of certain language activities, maybe certain grammatical descriptions, being linked to given levels in the scale. Nothing showed the difference between these two modes better than the list of words written down by one participant over the four weeks between the two interviews. The rationale for the list of single words could only have been derived from the life the participant lived over those four weeks. It was not a list of words ready for a learner to acquire, and would appear quite chaotic to anyone apart from the list compiler himself. In that sense it was a minibiography and highly compressed life story. Here is an example: Dry cleaning in by 10.00 back by 4.00, Acupuncture, Thereafter, Hazard, Store, Colindale, Near, Damage, Also, Latch. The significance of this list is that the learning associated with it remains a secret to everyone but the participant; it can only make sense, or rather the selection of words can only make sense, to the compiler alone. Perhaps too participation in this research gave people a brief, and paid for, moment to reflect on their language experiences, which might have been one of the attractions the project presented to people.

5. Literature Review

C. Roberts (**ESOL in the Workplace: Review of Research and Related Literature**. London 2003) states that 'ESOL in the workplace is under researched almost to the point of non existence' and is critical of the more quantitative approaches taken through ESOL and communication audits which 'undermine the value and authority of other languages in the workplace and can stigmatise workers who can do their jobs but fail language tests.'

Other literature reviews carried out in this area also indicate the lack of data, and carry a similar message. Most research is about the general benefits of workplace training; some research is centred on the benefits, or otherwise, of workplace training in basic skills, but there is very little work done on ESOL in the workplace.

Roberts's paper **English in the Workplace** provides an overview of the main themes, and some of tensions in research into language use in the workplace . There are many localised evaluative studies/reports on approaches to language learning in the workplace, creating more effective workers and better work performance, often with an institutional focus, or written for government departments.

Critical Discourse Analysis research covers workplace exchanges, interviews, but doesn't appear to cover bi-lingual or multi lingual contexts, see **Multiple Discourse Analyses of a Workplace Interaction** London 2003) for an overview of different approaches. The Roberts and Sarangi **Talk, Work, and Institutional Order** (New York 1999) offers a very full account of the discourse in medical and other settings using discourse analysis and conversational analysis.

There are also ethnographic studies of language use in the workplace, but again this seems not to be done with bi-lingual or multilingual participants.

Examples of literature reviews are **Benefits to Employers of Raising Workforce Basic Skills Levels; a Review of the Literature** National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC), London 2003; and **Basic Skills in the Workplace** Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) 2002. (this only covers the English speaking world so leaves out data from France which was thought important in the **Benefits to Employers . . .** report.) **Adult ESOL Pedagogy: a review of research, an annotated bibliography and recommendations for future research** Barton and Fink (London 2003) covers as the title suggests classroom practice but with only a paragraph on ESOL in the workplace, referring back to work done in the Industrial Language Training Service.

Much of this work, ie research carried out by the NRDC, is derived from new initiatives started by central government, that is the Department for Education and Skills, and the need to improve basic skills levels in the general public.

The DFEE report from the Schellekens Consultancy **English Language as a Barrier to Employment, Education and Training** , contains much that makes sense to people working in ESOL , as does a report by Alice Bloch for the Department of Work and Pensions, **Refugees' Opportunities and Barriers in Employment and Training** (London 2003). But I found some items in these reports, particular over the notion of a language barrier, as opposed to the more Lantolfian 'border crossing' , with which my own findings clearly disagreed.

Other work in this area has been carried out by economists using a human capital model - the achievement of basic skills and qualifications is a human good which can be translated into a value in the marketplace and assessed according to the value to the employee in the form of higher earnings, or to the employer, in the form of greater productivity..

Examples of this work are: **Language Proficiency and Labour Market Performance of Immigrants in the UK** Dustmann and Fabbri (Economic Journal 113 July 2003) which tackles the problem of endogeneity in interpreting quantitative data in this field; **Off the Boat, Now Off to Work: Refugees in the Labour Market in Portland Maine**, Journal of Refugee Studies Vol 16 No 2 2003 and **Impact of Language Ability on Employment and Earnings of Britain's Ethnic Communities** (Leslie and Lindley 2000).

It is beyond the scope of this small scale research project to provide a full literature survey of the work in this area, but two further texts which seem linked to the approach I have taken here are: **Learning for/at work: Somali women " doing it for themselves"** (Morris, Beckett, Melbourne 2004) and **Tara Goldstein's Two Languages at Work: Bilingual Life on the Production Floor** (Berlin 1997).Both take an approach that makes the voices of learners, and learners who know little English, central to the research.

6. Migrant populations in London - Foreign Workers in the UK Workforce

It is extremely difficult to gain accurate data on the numbers of employed migrants entering and working in the UK. The Office for National Statistics stated in 2004 (ONS Series MN 2004) "there is not a single inclusive system in place to measure movements of population into or out of the UK" although EU regulations do demand that such a system is put in place by 2007. The Greater London assembly has now commissioned Rees and Boden to establish the New Migrant Databank, but the first meeting on this databank was on 16th February 2007, so it is still early days with this project. There are five main sources of data about migration and employment: the International Passenger Survey (IPS), the Labour Force Survey (LFS), data from the numbers of work permits issued in any one year, data from the number of new national insurance numbers allocated in any one year, and data from government schemes that attract foreign workers to the UK. Some of these schemes are very longstanding, such as the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (15,455 foreign workers arrived under this scheme in 2005) set up in 1946, and the Working Holidaymakers Scheme. Others, like the Workers Registration Scheme for people from the A8 countries (Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia, Latvia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Slovenia) are much more recent. Each source has its strengths and weaknesses. The LFS underestimated the total numbers for annual immigration by about 15-20% - see the ongoing study carried out for the GLA by Rees and Boden – Estimating London's New Migrant Population.

The Office of National Statistics - Foreign labour in the United Kingdom, current patterns and trends (Salt and Millar October 2006) drew together these different sources to provide an overview of this data.

From this report it seems clear that more foreign workers (about 400,000) came to work in the UK in 2005 than in any other previous year. Whilst the foreign workforce is engaged in more highly skilled occupations than the domestic workforce, the relationship between high skilled workers and low skilled workers in the foreign workforce is changing. More workers in manual and clerical occupations entered the UK in 2005 than previously. This is particularly true with workers from the A8 countries who enter the country through the Workers' Registration Scheme - 194,953 A8 citizens were approved under the Scheme in 2005 and 4/5ths of those were in manual and clerical occupations.

A further feature of this data indicates that people in the manual occupations, - skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled – are much more likely to be more mobile in seeking work than other socio economic groups. Manual workers made up 44% of Foreign Nationals currently living in the UK, and who were not living in the UK a year ago, as opposed to 30.2% for the professional and management category. Two thirds of foreign workers live in the SE of England, 682,000 in Greater London and a further 279,000 in the rest of SE England. The geographical distribution is very uneven, with the most prosperous areas of the UK benefiting the most from increases in the numbers of foreign workers.

There are no generalised sources of data on the language skills of foreign workers, but the migration data quoted here does indicate that, at the very least, there is now a significant and increasing number of foreign nationals working in

the London area whose first language is not English, and who might have a variety of needs and requirements for English language tuition.

Many people in this category, particularly those who came to the UK under WRS, came to find work. They were not driven out of their home country by war, persecution, or by economic or social deprivation - they are not asylum seekers or refugees; they are not from the new commonwealth countries, and not seeking to reunite with relatives already living in the UK. In that sense they do not fit into any of the pre conceived notions of the ESOL learner, see Dfee report Breaking the Language barriers (London 2000). Many have in fact become ESOL learners, if they do join an ESOL class, because of the changing status of their home country within the European Union. Ten years ago learners from Poland or Slovakia would have been allocated to an EFL class as they were not from the EU, asylum seekers or from the new commonwealth countries.

Although it is much too early to come to any conclusions about this data, Rees and Boden estimate that the net international inflow of migrants into the UK will “remain at a relatively high level for the next 25 years” and that 2/3rds of that inflow will be to London. This means that it is likely that the language environment described in this report, in which people with low levels of English are continuing to arrive and work in London, will remain a constant feature of London work environments. The multi-lingual workplace where there is less need for a particular standard of English and a greater demand for multi-lingual facility, for code switching between languages, and an intra linguistic awareness, will become more wide spread, with employers and employees creating and adopting communicative strategies that sideline English, circumnavigating its levels of complexity, in order to survive and make money.

7. Language and Employment

a. Using English at work.

In all the workplaces identified through this research English is only one of many languages used in employment. It is the most dominant language, not because it is the language of the supervisors or the managers, which in many cases it isn't, but because of the way it is used in the workplace, and because generally in the world outside work it is also associated with power and exclusion.

In this piece of research this sense of exclusion was as common with skilled language users, who were multilingual, as with those who knew less English.

b. Language and power - a political economy of English

English is the language of power in the workplace because it is associated with whole network of structures and systems that reinforce that dominance. **Jev** gave me the example of the supervisor,

who used her knowledge of English to exclude her from the workplace by pretending not to understand her, by speaking too quickly, and by showing impatience with the time it might take to provide explanations of work practice. **In** also agreed that this kind of behaviour by which people used their knowledge of English to exclude non English speakers is common in some workplaces. But this behaviour isn't seen as a barrier to finding work, presumably because it only becomes evident once the person is in work.

c. Multilingualism

Most workplaces in this research were multilingual. I couldn't work out whether this was because such places of work would be more willing to take non English speakers as they had developed the strategies to cope with people who did not speak much language, presumably out of economic or financial necessity, or because the jobs themselves attracted more foreign workers. It was unfortunate, and a limitation on this research, that I was not able to talk to employers about their use of different languages, their use of English and their perceptions of their employees as language users..

d. Code switching

Ch speaks Kinyarwanda at home. She is a fluent French speaker, having started a university degree in Brussels and also speaks Swahili. Her English was assessed at Level Two on the NLS scale. Most participants were skilled at code switching and spoke more than one language. English was only one of several languages used in a repertoire of languages. I am not at all clear whether this skill aids the development of English, but I suspect it does. Certainly the better English speakers spoke more than one other language, and some spoke several. Although **Ch** said she sometimes got her French and English muddled up this was not a major problem and never prevented understanding. This kind of code switching was very prevalent with these participants, and they appeared to be able to do it with great facility.

8. English as a Barrier to Work

The Schellekins Report (London 2001) states clearly that her research cohort "saw insufficient

English language skills as their major barrier to work". This wasn't necessarily the case with the participants in this piece of research.

Only one participant, also a vet who worked as a cleaner, as in the Schellekins Report, felt that her lack of English was a barrier to employment. Indeed several of the participants were surprised at how easily they could find employment with such little English. One participant, who has excellent English, and who wasn't able to find a job as a doctor for which he was qualified, did not feel that it was his knowledge of English that was the barrier to finding suitable employment. No one felt that a lack of English was in itself a barrier to employment. They all had jobs; many were looking for better jobs that paid more, and would provide more scope for learning English.

Whilst several participants had attended some English courses, only one participant felt that knowing more English would 'help a lot'. **Ag**, who worked in restaurants, and switched jobs between the first interview and the second interview, did not feel that his lack of English presented any difficulties at work. He thought it would 'help a bit' if he understood more English. As with many of the participants he worked in a multilingual environment. His first language is Latvian but he speaks Russian well, so is used to switching from one language to another. He speaks Russian and some English at work, though others speak Portuguese and Italian, which are languages he doesn't know. He feels that any problems at work can be quickly sorted out.

9. Work as a language learning environment

Li wants to change her job and work in a shop in order to learn more English. She currently works in a large household which contains many domestic workers from different countries, although the main language spoken in the house is English. Everyone in the house uses English as a second language. Four languages are spoken in the house: Filipino, Arabic, Urdu, and English. **Li** speaks Russian and Lithuanian well and Arabic 'a bit'. She actively is looking for work which she knows will improve her English. Similarly **Jo** has got bored with her job on the check out, because she has control of the limited English that is required of her. She is looking for work that is more linguistically challenging. **Jev** is also looking to work with an English family so that she can improve her English. All three participants definitely see work as a language learning environment and are changing their jobs so that they can improve their English. Only one of them has enrolled at a local FE college to learn English. Both **Li** and **Jo** are confident language users. **Jo**, who only speaks Russian and some English, was the person who got a job on a supermarket check out without knowing any English, even though she was assessed for her English. The supermarket where she works employs several Russians and she says she speaks quite often in Russian to her work colleagues but has sufficient English to operate the supermarket check out.

This is different to **R**, who worked in the construction industry, and didn't find work conducive to language learning, where it seemed almost unnecessary. **R** worked in a multilingual team but could communicate with other team members because of his fluent Russian, so that he could also understand Polish, Ukrainian and Latvian. His experiences in the old Soviet army gave him the ability to communicate with people from other states once included in the Soviet Union. His use of English was restricted to the names of tools, ie Makita, Stihl, which he would use often. **R's** experiences suggest that in the construction industry work is often divided by language groups, with each group having a leader who had sufficient English to understand an English supervisor.

As I have said previously some participants found that learning English from other Slavic people was easier than learning from English people. **A** was doing an English course but he found it easier to learn English from Poles, Russians and Latvians as they all made the same kind of mistakes. **In** also found it easier to learn English from a Latvian text book. This is different from the experiences of other ESOL learners - see the section on 'the learner's perspective' in the Employability Forum conference on Teaching English to Refugees and Asylum Seekers (London 2003) where it was felt that 'contact with native English speakers is essential'. Goldstein's work points up the ambiguities inherent to this view and the power relationships that exists between English and other languages in the workplace. In her work Portuguese workers in Toronto used Portuguese for community solidarity, and had not learnt English, despite living in Canada for some considerable time.

10. Why don't people go on English courses ?

J. was a Spanish speaker from Colombia. He worked as a community artist carrying out art work for community theatres and other community groups. He has lived in London for 12 years and has attended courses in oil painting, wood and stone carving, pottery, stained glass, metalwork. He has never attended an English course. He is clearly someone who will attend courses for subjects that he wants to learn, but has never felt the need to attend an English course. He did not know any English when he arrived in the UK. He has done a wide variety of jobs, including many cleaning jobs, and at one time led a team of cleaners, but has never felt the need to learn English in a systematic, course led way. His English is roughly at Level One, he communicates with enthusiasm, using a very individualised English full of Spanish words, inflections, and highly colloquial English words. Many of his clients are Spanish speaking from Latin America, so he doesn't need English to communicate with them. Other clients come from other backgrounds, and don't have English as a first language. Some clients are English, but he has sufficient English to communicate with them to his own, and presumably his clients' satisfaction.

In the multilingual world which he inhabits, the ability to move from one language to another, to code switch, and to employ an English that is appropriate to use with other non English speakers, is just as important as to speak good English, and in some ways more so. He thinks it would be nice to know more English, but it's not that important, and he can't see himself spending the time on acquiring a more formally correct English, given the amount of time that would require, the cost, and, perhaps, the possible the risk of failure. The course would be certificated and the time and money would be wasted if he didn't get the certificate. Given his control of different language functions, none of which can be assessed because they cover different languages, there is insufficient motivation for him to complete an English course.

In a way this view is corroborated by **A**, the participant who has good English, he has been assessed at IELTS Grade 7 and estimates he has attended about 700 English classes over a period of 6 years, but who was not able to find the job as a doctor that he had been trained to do. His good English, for which he has worked so hard, and which he speaks with such precision, has not given him the job he wants and for which he is qualified. In the medical practice where he works, as a phelabotomist, it is his ability to switch codes, to speak Hindi, Urdu, Tajikhi, Farsee, as well as to speak good English that is valuable. But this ability, invaluable as it is, appears to have limited status and is only a by product of both his knowledge of English, and his Afghani background, a country where several languages are spoken alongside Dari and Pashtu, **A's** two first languages, and which are never used at work.

In this sense both **A** and **J** corroborate the findings of Roberts who also found that it was not just language ability that secures employment and advancement in employment. It is **A**, who despite his excellent English, his qualifications, and his experience, who cannot find the job he requires. **A** stated that it wasn't his

language ability that prevented him getting the right job, in the same way as all other participants agreed that, what ever their level of English, language had never prevented them from being employed.

It would be wrong to say that **A's** many hours on ESOL courses have been wasted because it hasn't given him the job he requires. He is working in medical care, albeit at a lower level than his qualifications and experiences would justify, and he might well find the job he wants in the future. However both **A's** and **J's** experience demonstrate that there is no clear link between better knowledge and use of English and better employment prospects. Both participants also demonstrate that an important work skill, of great practical advantage even with little obvious financial reward, is the ability to switch codes and to move easily between different languages and cultures.

The workplace in fact no longer appears to be a monolingual environment. The ease with which these participants find work and operate at work demonstrates the decline in monolingualism.

Most of the participants in the Project want to learn English, but they want do so for a variety of different reasons, only some of which are to do with employment. There is no doubt that people can find jobs with very limited English. It isn't clear that the ability to speak good English necessarily leads to a better job, even it is generally recognised that good English is a useful skill to have at work. Very few participants thought that improving their English was unnecessary. But also only a few thought that learning more English would 'help a lot'. A key motivator for some was to help their children at school, again also found in Goldstein's study of Portuguese factory workers in Toronto, or in the case of one participant to have good English so she could find a good school in order to bring her child over to England to get an English education. For others acquiring better English would help them deal with other aspects of their lives, deal with officialdom, taxation, local government.

The language skills really needed for work are actually quite limited, and can be acquired, even by someone with very little knowledge of English, quite quickly. The best way, it appears, to learn this kind of highly practical English, is not on an English course, but at work, where, almost by a process of attrition, you need only learn what is essential to get by, and survive. In that way work sets its own standard, which everyone understands, and which everyone can work toward and succeed.

One participant wanted to learn more English so she could participate more in the cultural life of London, which excited her. She liked visiting museums, going to concerts, and thought she would get more out of these events if she knew more English. She was the participant who was so acute about the political economy of English at work, where a knowledge of English, within the multilingual workplace, is given a political value, and has a power to exclude or include other people at work. Again it is very difficult to predict this kind of motivation to learn English through any generalised assessment of language need.

Work then appeared to be only one of several motivators to learn English, but was not in itself the only or the key motivator for these participants. The complexity of motivations found here indicate that it might be quite difficult to

isolate only a few reasons for learning English, and so help providers of English in marketing and planning their courses. What is clear is that the reasons that first language English speakers might think are obvious as to why people want learn English, are not actually the reasons identified by these second language speakers.

8. Starting points - the concept of the beginner and definitions of a beginner level.

What does it mean to not know English ? 9 (assessed at Entry Level One) of the 16 participants interviewed for this project appeared to know very little English when they were assessed initially. That judgment was made both on how they completed the assessment exercise, but also how they deciphered simple English requests. I had no doubt that if they had presented themselves to an English course provider, an FE College for example, and some of them had done this, they would be classified as at a Beginner level, that is at or below Entry 1 on the NLS scale. But also in every case they would, over a very short space of time demonstrate a knowledge and understanding of English that in some respects went way beyond that level. For example, I interviewed two Somali women, who appeared to have very little English, and appeared puzzled by most requests. One had been assessed at beginner level by a local FE college. But in discussion, once I had understood the word 'pannet' which they used with an inflection heard often in London, so that the final 't' is dropped and made silent, and they realised I understood what they meant by the word, they then described working on a fruit packing line in a local factory, displaying a detailed knowledge of the English words for a wide range of fruit, of how to switch fruit packing lines, how to ask to leave work early, phone in sick, make jokes about other workers 'you married' , which would never come out of a formal assessment. This interesting exchange started with my non comprehension of the word 'pannet' which they pronounced with a clear London accent, an accent I didn't expect them to use. My non comprehension of their accurate and colloquial use of the word had initially acted as a barrier to further discussion. It was also not a word that the Somali translator was familiar with, and so he was unable to help me work out what the word meant.

This kind of event is not actually very unusual. The ability to speak and understand a new language at any level, is strongly linked to the confidence people feel at the moment of using that language. **Jev** was very clear about this in her interview when she describes how she knows more English when she speaks with someone she feels is sympathetic and understands her. She describes how at a local FE college she quite rapidly moved up the levels in the ESOL curriculum because her ability to read and write English developed much more quickly than her ability to speak English, which always seems to be affected by her level of confidence. Interestingly during her interviews for this project, this participant always wanted to check the question I asked, even when the translator was speaking Russian, to see the written version of the question so that she could better reply, in Russian.

It is clear that English is a very pervasive and ubiquitous language, which affects many other languages, and that English is known in many different ways. In Somali, and I haven't corroborated this, there are many words that are the same as English, so that even if they are pronounced very differently the word is actually the same. In some ways the imposition of a level of English is administrative, relating to later possible achievements, rather than the description of the language used at any one time, which is variable and context dependant. It is related more to the descriptions used in other levels used in the scale - so the 'you must be Entry 1 because you're not Entry 2' sort of conversation occurs, than to the real and utilised understanding of the language. It in this sense that, as the research progressed, I became more doubtful about my own rather hasty assignment of a particular level for any of the participants.

Conclusions

The interviews recorded in this research project raised several issues about the status of English and other languages in the workplace. As one would expect sometimes they have been agreement with other research in this area, and sometimes they have challenged statements in that research.

The experiences identified here have been mediated through my own very partial experience, the requirements of the project they are a part of, and through the translators' own experiences. There is nothing very innocent or pristine in the way these experiences have been recorded; they come in fact loaded with values, and of course, they are written in a language which many of the participants might find difficult, tedious even, to make the effort to understand. Stairway to Heaven, the stairway which a bit fancifully I'd like to see as a metaphor for the Adult ESOL Curriculum, was the song that had a notoriety in its day, 37 years ago, as the song that if you played it backward would reveal a dangerous and satanic message. I wouldn't go so far as to say there is anything satanic about the ESOL Curriculum, forwards or backwards, but I think this government developed language scale, despite its use both as a teaching tool and an administrative mechanism to sort out classes of similar levels, cuts across the complex language experiences of the people included in this study, because it doesn't deal with how language comprehension is supported through the use of other languages and by context. Language is a dynamic, not a commodity that can be acquired, at different levels. It works differently depending on who is engaged in the language event, and particularly on the context of that event.

Two key themes emerged from this work: plurality and context.

Plurality both in terms of the languages used in the workplace and in terms of the experiences of the participants, reflecting the linguistic relationships between the participants' first language, the English as used in a wide variety of contexts, and the many other languages used in the workplace.

Context in terms of the situational dynamic of language use and the way that language changes depending on the social situation in which it is used.

Lastly I wondered if ESOL teaching can keep up with the pace of change in the workplace and the ingenuity of both employees and employers in solving their language problems and communicating with each other. As always English is

important because of its association with power , its ability to exclude and stop people from achieving their goals. But that exclusion is not related to any exactitude or correctness of expression. In the light of the experiences I have recorded here the continual quest for exactitude, as expressed by many ESOL course providers, seems somehow irrelevant to the needs and requirements of people who use English as a second language with such creativity and such little instruction.

In response to the four research objectives stated at the beginning of this report I think the picture presented is variable:

People can find a variety of jobs with a very limited amount of English. There are many workplaces that have developed strategies for working with people who know only a little English. But there is also clear evidence that some people, even with excellent English, are finding it difficult to find the work for which they are qualified. Only one person in the research really felt that her lack of English was a barrier to employment. Language assessments in the workplace can be passed by people with very little English.

Non English speakers and that is both employers and employees have developed a range of strategies for communicating in the workplace. This includes working in teams, writing words down to ensure the completion of a job, and using other languages to communicate with others at work. I have not been able to include here accounts of some of the more personal techniques people use to communicate with each other, including gestures, abbreviations, predictions, nodding, and different forms of body language. Using these strategies might well uncover a more developed knowledge of English than might have been the case otherwise.

The methodology developed here to carry out the research has produced useful evidence about how English is used in the workplace, even if it is not possible to corroborate the research findings with the participants themselves. Using translators is an essential part of the research methodology.

The workplace is a language learning environment, and is seen by some participants as sufficiently important that they actively seek out those employers which provide more opportunity to learn English.

Appendix 1: Employment Questionnaire and Interview 1 Form

Participant No:	Name:	1 st Language:
Assessment	Speaking and Listening:	Translator:
Date:	Reading and Writing: :	
Employment Questionnaire	Employment:	
Date:	Employment contract:	Temporary casual
	Part/Full Time	Part Time
Work category		
Hours a week		
Time of day		
Time with employer		
Father's occupation		
Mother's occupation		
Age left school		
Qualifications on leaving school		
Courses taken after leaving school		
Qualifications gained after leaving school		
Attended university/higher education ?		
Subjects studied at university/HE		
Completed university course ?		
English courses taken in UK		
Length of English course		
First language		
Knowledge of first language		
Language used for education		
Language spoken at home		
Other languages spoken at home		
Knowledge of other languages		
Job recruitment		
Job interview		
Language used for job interview		
Job appointment		
Amount of work		
Relationship with other staff		
Job security		
Working hours		
Attitude to work		
Pay		
Likelihood of leaving this job		
Reasons for leaving in the future		
Need to speak English at work		

Use of English at work	
Only person who speaks own language at work	
Need for a translator	
Who acts as a translator	
Use of own language at work	
Need to understand more English	
Need to speak more English	
Interview One	
	Time
How often do you speak English in a day	
Do use other languages as well as English	
What other languages	
How well do you know those other languages	
Other languages spoken at work	
Questions asked in English	
Do people ask you questions	
Examples of answers	
Instructions How often are you told to do something in a day ?	
How do people ask you to do something	
Do people use gestures	
Can you demonstrate those gestures	
Are you told not do things ?	
Making statements Examples	
Social exchanges Do you use greetings and other social exchanges	
Do you close a social exchange	
Predictions and guessing meaning	
How do you predict	
Gestures when speaking English	
Stressing words	
Repetition	
What English words do you use in everyday speech, when you speak your own first language	
Where did you learn these words	
Did you know these words	

before you came to England ?	
Do you ever learn words from: Using buses Going on the tube ? The TV At work Shopping Any other context	
What words do you use most often at work ?	
When you talk with other people at work, do you use English or your own language	
What topics do you talk about at work: Pay TV What you do after work Other people at work The work itself Food Going out Children Family What you are doing tomorrow How long you will stay in England Sport Any other topic	
Who do you talk to if your pay is wrong	
How did you find out about the hours you worked	
Supposing you're sick. Do you tell your employer / How / What language do you use ? Would you use a translator ?	
Suppose something goes wrong. How is that put right ?	
If you have to do something knew, how is that explained to you ?	
Do you have to tell people what to do ?	
Have you ever had to explain something, or describe an action or process in English at work ?	
What kind of explanation or description did you provide ?	
Have there been any times when your lack of English	

has caused you difficulty ?	
Has your English ever been assessed before you start work ?	
If yes, what kind of assessment ?	
Have you ever not got a job because of your English ?	

Appendix 2: Interview 2 form

Interview 2			
Date:		Time:	
Are you still in the same job as the 1 st Interview			
If no, what is your current job ?			
Have the language requirements of your current job changed ?			
Has any event happened, since we last met, that effects your use of English ?			
Can you describe it to me?			
What words have you learnt since we last met ?			
Tell me about the contexts for learning those words ?			
How did you come to learn these words ?			
Do you use them much in your speech with other people ?			
Why did you select these words ?			
Are there times in the day when you communicate with other employees/people than other times ?			
Why at thosetimes ?			
Is the communication about work or other topics ?			
What other topics ?			
What languages do you use for this communication ?			
If you use more than one language, how comfortable are you with that language combination ?			
Why do you switch from language to another ?			
When do you switch ?			
Do you more or less English over the last month, or is it about the same ?			
If you use more, when do you use more ?			
What is the context for using more or less English			
Do you know why you use more or less English			
Go through a working day, hour by hour, telling me what might happen in language terms, during the day ?			

Are you more confident about your use of English, less confident or about the same?	
Can you explain how your confidence has changed ?	
Has the relationship changed with your supervisor ?	
Do you speak more or less English with your supervisor ?	
Have your feelings about work changed since the last interview ? If yes,how have they changed ?	
Will you be changing job in the next week , 1 month, 3 months, 6 months ?	
What job do you think you'll be doing ?	
Will you be doing something more related to what you want to do ?	
Is there anything else you want to say about using English at work ?	