

## **It's Just Research - Episode 2 - Transcript**

### **Sara Black**

Hello and welcome to It's Just Research, a podcast about all the exciting scholarship and writing done at the School of Education, Communication and Society at King's College London. This is a space to discuss what we do when we investigate the world, a podcast about research with researchers, I'm Sara Black, a lecturer at the school which we call ECS for short.

### **Pippa Sterk**

And I'm Pippa. I'm a PhD student in ECS and in this episode we're joined by Doctor Mel Cooke, who's a long serving member of the school. Welcome, Mel. Would you be able? To tell us a bit about your research area.

### **Mel Cooke**

OK, so I study mainly classrooms of adults who are migrants to the UK for whatever reason, and they have come together in classrooms to learn English. So that's known as ESOL English to speakers of other languages. So that's the setting for most of my research. Recently, I've been very engaged with a type of teaching called participatory pedagogy. That's mainly what I'm looking at now. And I'm mainly doing action research with teachers practitioner. And at Kings, I teach about language pedagogy as well as some other stuff that I've kind of learned along the way, like sociolinguistics and things like that.

### **Sara Black**

And you've written a book as well, haven't you? It's called Brokering Britain, Educating Citizens.

### **Mel Cooke**

That's right.

### **Pippa Sterk**

Why are you looking at this specific research area?

### **Mel Cooke**

How did I get into that? OK, so in my 20s in the 80s, I ran away from Britain to Spain, where I taught English as a way to make a living, and this is a very typical kind of story of how people get into this field. And I came back to the UK, and I was reflecting on my experience as a migrant in Spain. Of course, we didn't call ourselves that, you know, we were just white Europeans having a good time, but the anxiety that I experienced being a migrant in another country, the problems around integration and around learning the language and communication and stuff. And I thought, I realised when I came back here that, that would be compounded, you know, 100 times over for people who were also living in situations of suffering racism and linguistic discrimination and things like that and that kind of hooked me in. So, it was a personal experience that hooked me into the field, and obviously it was a way for me to make a living when I came back here before I got my academic jobs and things, and I did an MA in TESOL at the Institute of Education as it was.

**Pippa Sterk**

When you say TESOL, what do you mean?

**Mel Cooke**

So that's Teaching English to speakers of other languages.

**Pippa Sterk**

OK. Brilliant.

**Sara Black**

And you were a teacher for quite a while when you got back, before you started doing research...

**Mel Cooke**

Yeah, for about 7 years. And I came into King's as a practitioner researcher, so I had a quite unusual route into HEI, was seconded from a further education college where I was teaching ESOL, and I was starting working on a big project. This was in 2004. It was quite a lot of money being put into this area of adult literacy, adult numeracy and ESOL and I came here as a researcher on one of these big projects and they never got rid of me. I kind of stayed.

**Pippa Sterk**

And what made you want to stay?

**Mel Cooke**

Well, that's a good question because although the conditions of work weren't as good as where I came from. I didn't have a decent contract here for about 10 years. The environment was so much more stimulating and there was more freedom, and it was more interesting and there was some incredible academics in this department, a lot of whom have now retired. But it was an extraordinary kind of place to learn and to discuss all of the things that we were doing and it was just it was too good to resist. So I stuck around.

**Sara Black**

And during that time, you've seen some pretty radical changes in how well the UK really thinks about migrants and people who come from abroad, who don't speak English. Can you tell us a little bit about the changes you've seen as you've been in this field?

**Mel Cooke**

So I think what's happened, if you look at the history of immigration policy right from way back, it's got increasingly worse and worse and worse, it's never got better. It's never got more open. It's never got more welcoming. It's basically an increasing hostile environment. Which the government now call the hostile environment. So there's that on the one side and that's the backdrop to the classes. That's the backdrop to ESOL provision and it tends to go a bit, not necessarily hand in hand, but there's always a funding crisis for ESOL despite the fact that there's large numbers of people who need it.

And it's been used as a kind of weapon politically, quite a lot of the time. So you know, it'll be used as, for example, they'll say, OK, we need to do something about cohesion and integration because we've got certain problems. What we're going to do is make everyone take the language test so they'll continue to put language kind of in the centre of their solutions for problems which may not necessarily have much to do with language at all. And one of the big changes that I've certainly written about and actually studied for my PhD was about the citizenship testing regime that they brought in after the 2001, 2002 Immigration and Asylum Act, which brought in citizenship testing for the first time. So it was much more kind of, laissez-faire before that, I'm not going to say liberal because that would make it sound a bit more benign. It was much more laissez-faire. It was much more, you know like, you could get somebody to just sign a thing saying that you spoke English for your citizenship, whereas then it became much more formalised and more onerous for people. And that's when ESOL got brought into the kind of state apparatus for immigration, which it hadn't really been before that, and which is when I got very interested in it, because suddenly became a matter of securitisation. It was suddenly right at the centre of lots of really serious debates about securitisation, about immigration, about cohesion as they call it, about integrating things like that and suddenly I found myself in a field that was right at the centre of a load of political debate which was for me, it was far too interesting to ignore.

#### **Sara Black**

I guess that's where your book comes from, *Brokering Britain, Educating Citizens*, I found a quote from there that you said really interesting, which relates to what you've just shared with us, you wrote the UK lacks a developed language citizenship compared to with the nation states such as Western Europe and the US. Why do you think that is the case? And is it still the case?

#### **Mel Cooke**

I'm not sure if it's still the case, but I remember when this all first kind of erupted onto the scene in the early 2000s, nobody knew what the word citizen meant or citizenship really meant for us, so I think it's been much more elaborated in other places, for example France. You know it's kind of based, since the revolution in France, the idea of the citizen has been quite prominent and, in the US as well. It's a concept that is multivalent and so it's got a different meaning wherever you are. In this country, it was like a joke. We never had it as a concept and none of you would remember this, but there's a program called Citizen Smith. Which was, you know, like a jokey left-wing person he lived in Tooting, and he came back Tooting Station and began power to the people and all those. It was like a joke. And did Labour government at the time that was the Blair government, decided to introduce citizenship back into the kind of public conversation about our multicultural society. And it didn't stick with really a lot of people because it was very status top down the way it was introduced. But as I started to delve and think about citizenship from a political theory point of view, I realized it was much more complex and much more interesting, and it had a much more interesting political pedigree to it than we were being kind of led to think by the way it was being implemented here. And so that's when I started to look at the whole area of democratic participation and with the voice and all of those aspects of citizenship that I'm interested in now.

#### **Sara Black**

So if this is interesting thing you're telling us about the relationship between learning English and acquiring British citizenship, how do we understand Britain's former colonies and people who around the world have all learned English because of that history, whether they kind of chose to or not. Who would never

really be the kind of people one would think of as, oh, you're a British citizen. You thought you were born in a former British territory and might still be a British territory. You speak fluent English, but you're not a citizen, so this is interesting set of criteria that citizenship seems to involve. And yet if you had to try and list them, you'd struggle.

### **Mel Cooke**

You know, you're quite right. Yeah, I think language has been used as a proxy for other things. A lot of the time in policy and everything that you're asking me is to do with the intricacies of the immigration policies themselves. So what's happened in the, you know, over the decades is. That fewer and fewer people from the colonies have been given free route into the UK. There's more and more control has been put on to people coming from, you know. South Asia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, places like that. So in 2004, with the extension of the EU, EU citizens didn't have to do a test. They had free movement. So rightly, they didn't have to do a test, but the fact of the matter is they didn't have to be able to speak English either, to be able to come and work. So that kind of gave a lie to this need, supposedly for English to be the thing. That meant you could thrive economically and integrate and all those things. The underlying point is that language was only ever a kind of excuse. For policies that were actually about national origin. Who we wanted, who we didn't want. And you'll get all of these anomalies arising, which were exactly your point.

### **Sara Black**

So when in policy we talk about English speakers, what we're really talking about is, is whiteness. And we're talking about Europeanness and or is that not the case?

### **Mel Cooke**

I think that's too simplistic. I mean, yes, there will be an element of that, but I think that's too simplistic because there are clauses in the citizenship testing regime, as it is now, whereby if you have a degree in an English-speaking place, then you would be exempted. So, I think you'd have to look quite carefully at what they were saying about people from places like Nigeria or depending on. You know. What kind of roots they'd had in order to come here, but I think there's a very important element of what is called racial linguistics. Racial linguistics is a field, and there is a very strong kind of whiteness aspect to this. But I think it's too simplistic in a very diverse, multicultural, super diverse society.

### **Pippa Sterk**

When you say super diverse. Would you be able to immigrate on what? You mean by that?

### **Mel Cooke**

Yeah. So super diversity was coined by a sociologist called (Steven) Vertovec in the early 2000s, and it was a way for places like the UK to talk about what they saw as a changing type of diversity, which was moving away from large-ish communities of people who were coming from the Commonwealth to a much more diverse range of origins of people who are coming from lots of different places, and within that you could say, let's take as the Polish community, and that wouldn't have one meaning. So, you'd have different times when people come from Poland, depending on post war, 2004, the extension of the EU and then more recently, and so that wouldn't be one thing, but in policy it would be called one thing. So you'd have, like the Polish community and you'd have the Bangladeshi community. And that actually would be much more diverse long other lines than just national origin. It has been critiqued by other sociologists who say,

hold on a minute. That's not a new thing. You know, in part in most parts of the world like Africa and Asia, we've always been super diverse. It was the way of talking about societies such as the UK and the US, and the changes that were happening because of globalisation.

**Sara Black**

And it sounds like what you're really discussing here is problem with discourse and creating categories that are always, more about the political use of grouping people and homogenising them than actually being descriptive of the texture of the world. And so the teachers who are you call them brokers. It puts people who are in charge of being tacit immigration officials through being language teachers in a strange position, doesn't it? They're trying to resist the discourse and these groupings, but also are in charge of policing them.

**Mel Cooke**

Yeah, I mean, that's one of the reasons why we're interested in exploring this idea and which I explored in my PhD, which was about, OK, so if you've got ESOL teachers who are generally kind of left of centre, left-leaning liberal people who are of gone into this profession for, you know, sometimes humanitarian reasons or for certainly you know what they think is a kind of good will. Suddenly they're put in the position of representing a government agenda, which is what they were asked to do during the citizenship teaching time. They don't have to do that anymore, by the way, but there is a thing called British values that they have to teach now in further education colleges. Don't ask me what they are. I mean, they're things like democracy. As if that was invented by, you know, the Brits. As you can see, I'm slightly cynical about all of this. So, what I was seeing in the PhD was teachers in some ways tying themselves into quite a lot of not trying to speak to people who were, you know, recipients of this politics and these policies. Representing like Britain in a way that wasn't too hostile, but also not too apologetic. And it was actually very difficult teaching, because how do you do that? How do you carry out an agenda and at the same time not be seen to be, you know, an apologist for it because most of them were very critical of it. So that was very fraught time in the field, but it was a time where people then started to confront what we were being asked to do in some ways, so it was quite an awakening time.

**Sara Black**

Did you see outright resistance?

**Mel Cooke**

Yes. Yeah. Refusal in many, many respects. So there is that thing in in education, isn't there, in policy of how the teachers enact policy, is a complex thing. You have a range of responses from compliance to what they call strategic compliance. So you look as if you're doing it when you're not. Or refusal. You know there are different kind of responses. I saw all of those.

**Pippa Sterk**

And similarly on that topic of language and ideology. Of course, as a teacher you see like lots of different users of English in the classrooms of which are incredibly creative and incredibly innovative. But then you're also asked to teach one particular kind of standardised English. How have you seen responses to that from teachers?

## **Mel Cooke**

That's very interesting, too. OK, there is a constant ongoing discussion about these issues in the community. And sometimes they're more lively than others. And one of the things we're trying to do in the work here, I don't know if I've mentioned, but we're part of a hub, so some academics from here, a hub called the Hub for Education and Language Diversity, HELD. One of the things we're doing is holding frequent development workshops for teachers about social linguistic issues like non-standard usages like language mixing, linguistic repertoires, these things that reflect and represent real usage amongst real people rather than an idealised version of a language that you know we're supposed to teach. And so there is ongoing debate. And it is quite fraught, because often teachers are in the position of having to teach a curriculum or they have to teach, particularly to an assessment regime and the assessment by the nature of assessment is usually about standard English. So there is a tension, a set of tensions, and it can be quite problematic. Will say though that there are changes happening and even amongst the exam boards, and we've noticed even amongst the common European framework of reference for language levels and so on, the European framework, they're starting to talk. About what is called Translanguaging, which is the idea that we all use a mix of linguistic and semiotic resources in order to communicate. None of us use one kind of version of the standard, so changes are happening. Governments don't like this, Ofsted inspectors don't like this, but there is some kind of move amongst educators and even amongst assessors now to kind of move away from that. So I'm feeling a bit optimistic more than I would have done before perhaps.

## **Sara Black**

That's really interesting because in the context I'm from in South Africa, Translanguaging is something that is a common practice in classrooms at all levels, including higher education, and I believe, correct me if I'm wrong, is called a monoglossia. An emphasis on using one language at a time. Not mixing right the desire to use standardised forms for formal education. How far do you think a system where the basic or higher education that requires fixed criteria of assessment can go with embracing this kind of fluidity that you're talking about?

## **Mel Cooke**

How far can it go? I mean that depends very much on a shift in thinking about language. Which is probably only going to come from below rather than above, but one of the reasons I was feeling a bit optimistic is because some of the exam assessment boards have started to look at this. And there's quite a lot of resistance starting to happen within state system of schools. So, there's some academics in the North England actually, Julius, Melanie and Cushing. They're kind to resist the Ofsted. Does anybody know what Ofsted is?

## **Sara Black**

Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, just for the listeners who aren't familiar.

## **Mel Cooke**

So they're the inspectors who are going to schools and they're trying to resist the fact that they will often pick up non-standard usage by child. As you know a bad thing that needs to be regulated, and they're really trying to resist that, and that's starting to get quite a lot of attention. And I think what we have to

do is chip away, and chip away, and chip away, and keep on forming coalitions and keep on trying to talk about this stuff, you know, and we have coalitions with academics in South Africa as it happens who resist some of this by the notion of linguistic citizenship, so Christopher Stroud and colleagues at the University of Western Cape have done a lot of work in this. And we are in conversation with them and we use their ideas quite a lot to help us think through how we can support people who understand the idea that language is not one you know, you don't speak this pure thing called English or a named language like German or something like that, that we are all using different ways to communicate. There's a long way to go, obviously, and with the current kind of incumbents in the Education department and governments, probably no point in even talking about this stuff. But you know, there's a chance that if we got some kind of different incumbents in the education departments and things like that, they may be more favourable to listening to us.

### **Pippa Sterk**

When you mentioned that none of us really. This one ideal language that we are instructed to adhere to. Do forms of moving away from that also include stuff outside of spoken or written language through body language like images like?

### **Mel Cooke**

Again, I'm not an expert on translanguaging particularly, but there is a there's a kind of probably like a weak form and a strong form of looking at this. And so the people who are looking at trans-language in a very broad sense, we'd call it an entire semiotic process, so that you would be drawing on all sorts of things, not just as spoken or written word. You know, it would be the use of emojis. It would be the use of all sorts of different technological things, and yes, body language and everything that you can think of. Sometimes this is pushed really far, you know, so that every single sign that we make is translate. We kind of is in a way that's not necessarily useful in education, but it can be really useful in terms of actually developing somebody's communication and somebody's voice. You know, so is what the person saying. more important than the way they say. It no or yes. You have to kind of you know, as an educated particularly. Decide what you think about that question.

### **Pippa Sterk**

So that sounds like it's almost more about the approach to language than it is about.

### **Mel Cooke**

They call it a stunt, translanguaging stunts that if you're an educator and you're open to the use of all sorts of different communicative because you're more interested in the message that's being relayed or in the knowledge that people trying to acquire than you would be open to all sorts of usage, and sometimes the teacher really has to take the lead on that. And I found that in my MA teaching I have lots of students from overseas. I'm sure you too, and we might be actually talking about multilingualism or bilingualism, but they're all doing it in English, even though none of them have English as first language. I'll sit and you can do this in another language if you want and they go ohh and there you go and then they'll do so and that so.

### **Sara Black**

With what you've been telling us about what it means to be a teacher who's interested in the content being communicated not the form of it being communicated. That's a real contrast with a very stringent idea about language being used and I'm using air quotes here properly and it's interesting to me because I think citizenship is now increasingly tied up with concepts of patriotism. It's not now just the legal status, but it's a moral position around, you know allegiance to certain types of identities, or political entities and so I mean, what does that mean for being an ESOL teacher? What does that mean when you're caught between that legal and sort of more normative to slip in this field?

### **Mel Cooke**

Yeah, that's a good question. I think we've talked quite a lot about these big backdrops to the sector. So we've talked about immigration and integration and cohesion, all those things and patriotism, I think, is one of the it's part of that backdrop. And I think when it's very blatant, it's quite easy to either ignore or scoff at or something like that. You know if you've got some kind of display of patriotic further like the coronation or something or, you know all those things. I think what's more problematic is where you've got the more what they call, banal nationalist. Things happening where it's not necessarily it's so hegemonic and so typical that we don't even notice it. So teachers are in a position of deciding how far they want to make explicit. Some of the aspects of the country that they're representing, if they teach in English in the UK. Some will just decide to just teach grammar and syntax, and some will decide to, you know, go full into complex topics. And that's the kind of position that that they can decide on whatever they want to. However, the kind of teaching I'm interested in which is participatory teaching, where the needs of the curriculum is driven by the concerns of the students. Teachers tend to open up spaces much more to talk about complex stuff and how that is affecting people in their day-to-day lives, and that's where I think teachers who are interested in these big questions and how they impact on day-to-day lives can bring it into education. That's not to say that a lot of them do, but it's a space there that's potentially open for them.

### **Pippa Sterk**

In your journey within academia, do you feel like your background in ESOL as a practitioner has helped you look at these subjects from a particular angle?

### **Mel Cooke**

Very much so, like I came here as a practitioner, as employed on a big project for a couple of years I was seconded. I wasn't gonna leave my own job in further education. And I was brought into that project specifically because I had experience in the sector that they wanted to research. I didn't have a PhD, which is quite unusual. I then did the PhD later on in order to, you know, be able to stay in HEI, had no intention at the time and ever since then, I do feel that I've kept 1 foot in practice and 1 foot in academia and that's been really important to me. On the one hand, it can hold you back from academic progress and promotion in some ways, but let's be realistic about it. I'm particularly mind about that because for me, I can't imagine working in. Any other way? Because if I'm gonna make a living by talking about practice and yet not do it, then I think that's really important. And I've also managed to maintain my contact in the field so that there's always a ready audience for me to talk to. And recently I've gone back into teaching ESOL on Monday mornings I'm volunteering a friend of mine in east. London and that's become the highlight of my week. So in some ways it's almost like that is my centre and it is my core identity. Even I've been in aging much longer than I was an ESOL teacher. It's quite strange. So I'm quite satisfied by that. It's



something that I'm proud of that I've managed to keep my head above water in this environment and continue to do work outside of it because it's not that easy, necessarily.

**Pippa Sterk**

So as our running final question, I would like to ask you what is the research that you are most proud of?

**Mel Cooke**

OK, so I've done quite a lot of research with practitioners, action research where I've supported people and flexing on their own practice, but I'm very happy about. I think the work that I've done I've most proud of is the book brokering written, educating citizens, because I had the chance to bring together work by some of the best people in the field who weren't necessarily getting published in academic journals and academic papers and wouldn't have the form to do that, and we managed to bring that together in a book where we could kind of showcase some of this work, which is really trying to do some of the stuff I've been talking about through this interview. And it resonated with a lot of practitioners when it came out and I remember feeling very proud of it, it was the first time I'd had that feeling. You know, my PhD was much more fulfilled feeling by the end of it. So yeah, I would say that book definitely.

**Pippa Sterk**

That sounds like an amazing ending. Thank you so much, Dr Mel Cooke for being here.

**Sara Black**

Thank you for joining us on. It's just research the podcast for the School of Education, Communication and Society, our Kings College London. Join us next time when we have further exciting interviews with more of our colleagues. Our hosts are Sara Black and professor and we've been talking with Doctor Mel Cooke today. And this podcast was produced by Sylvie Carlos.