

### "Small Tragedies of Individuals' Lives": London's Migrant Division of Labour and Migrant Language Educational Settings

Zschomler, Silke

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Zschomler, S. (2023). "Small Tragedies of Individuals' Lives": London's Migrant Division of Labour and Migrant Language Educational Settings. *Social Inclusion*, 11(4), 101-110. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v11i4.7127>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Article

## “Small Tragedies of Individuals’ Lives”: London’s Migrant Division of Labour and Migrant Language Educational Settings

Silke Zschomler

UCL Social Research Institute, University College London, UK; [s.zschomler@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:s.zschomler@ucl.ac.uk)

Submitted: 30 April 2023 | Accepted: 24 July 2023 | Published: 24 October 2023

### Abstract

This article highlights the lived experience of migrants who have come to London to set up a new life and are learning English to facilitate this process. Drawing on my ethnographic research with a heterogenous group of adult migrants within and beyond the institutional boundaries of a migrant language educational setting in London, I tease out the often painful experiences and effects of deskilling my participants are confronted with as they are trying to make their lives in the city. Language proficiency is commonly seen as a key factor that accounts for migrants’ disparities regarding their labour market participation and linguistic competence often acts as a crucial gatekeeping mechanism to social inclusion, which is additionally impeded by wider structural constraints. In this context, my research highlights the ways in which my interlocutors find themselves caught up in entrenched forms of intersecting inequalities, unequal power relations, and the dynamics and conditions of London’s migrant division of labour. I shed light on how my participants deal with and navigate these complex processes whilst questing for the “right” linguistic competence to somehow propel their lives forward despite being aware that this might not necessarily come to fruition. I draw particular attention to the emotional cost of deskilling and being bumped down and show how this not only leaves an imprint on migrants themselves but also on those who are teaching them in order to increase migrants’ employability and social mobility.

### Keywords

adult migrants; critical pedagogy; deskilling; employability; global city; learning English; London; migrant division of labour

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Adult Migrants’ Language Learning, Labour Market, and Social Inclusion” edited by Andreas Fejes (Linköping University) and Magnus Dahlstedt (Linköping University).

© 2023 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio Press (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

This article highlights the lived experience of migrants who have come to London to set up a new life and are learning English to facilitate this process. Language proficiency is commonly seen as a key factor that accounts for migrants’ disparities regarding their labour market participation and linguistic competence often acts as a crucial gatekeeping mechanism to social inclusion, which is additionally impeded by wider structural constraints. This is particularly relevant in the context of London’s evolution as a global city and postcolonial migrant metropolis, which has shaped the city’s fabric profoundly and led to entrenched forms of social and economic disparity and a segregated labour market with a distinct migrant division of labour at the bottom (Back & Sinha, 2018;

Sassen, 2001; Wills et al., 2010). Thus, although language barriers are often emphasized when discussing migrants’ insertion into the labour market and their social inclusion, it is important to acknowledge that the picture is more complex, and wider exclusionary and hierarchising dynamics inherent to London’s migrant division of labour need to be considered. How this “dual nexus” (Piller, 2012, p. 291) between an individual’s language proficiency/constraints and wider structural constraints is experienced by migrants can differ greatly as their opportunities are shaped by nationality, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, age, legal status, as well as individual personality, expectations, and prior experience (Wills et al., 2010).

In this context, I draw on my ethnographic research with a heterogenous group of adult migrants within

and beyond the institutional boundaries of a migrant language educational setting and tease out their often painful experiences of being exposed to and confronted with such unequal dynamics as they are trying to make their lives in the city. I shed light on how my participants deal with and navigate these complex processes whilst questing for the “right” linguistic competence to somehow propel their lives forward despite being aware that this might not necessarily come to fruition. I draw particular attention to the emotional cost of deskilling and being “bumped down” and show how this not only leaves an imprint on migrants themselves but also on those who are teaching them in order to increase migrants’ employability and social mobility.

The dimensions and challenges discussed in this article became salient throughout my research, for example during interviews and conversations with both students and teachers, as well as on go-alongs in the city where the migrants at the centre of this research had come to set up a new life—many with the hope that London would provide more opportunities for them. My contribution is prompted by narratives of “small tragedies of individuals’ lives” (Roberts, 2012) that my interlocutors were faced with in connection with being exposed to the dynamics and living with the conditions of London’s migrant division of labour, which I found to crop up regularly during my research. Although I am not suggesting that the issues I discuss here were experienced in the same way by all the migrants who were part of the research and materialised in their lived experience in like manner, many of my research encounters revealed the impact these dynamics had on them. Unveiling such “small tragedies” is thus important, on the one hand, to understand these experiences better and to make the voice of those who are experiencing them and who often are among the most disadvantaged in society more audible. On the other hand, highlighting these experiences is paramount to increasing our understanding of wider inequitable relations and mechanisms as they can not only be seen as a matter of being experienced at the individual level but of accumulating into much larger issues of social inequality (Roberts, 2012). I will argue that migrant language educational settings are well positioned to play a role in finding ways of coping with as well as counteracting such experiences of inequality as migrant language students are often at the receiving end of such experiences. However, given the constraints of migrant language education and the difficult policy and practice environment the field operates within, which I will discuss in more detail later, there is a risk that migrant language educational spaces are hampered in playing this role and that instead of finding openings and pathways to counteract wider inequalities, they are reproduced within these settings.

This article unfolds as follows: I start by briefly discussing the conditions and dynamics of London as a global city and migrant metropolis, focusing on London’s new migrant division of labour, before I highlight the role

language plays as a gatekeeping mechanism as well as the connections between migrant language education, skills, and employability. I then give some insights into the ethnographic context and processes of knowledge-making in which the findings in the subsequent sections are embedded within. The finding sections elucidate both the experiences of migrant students as well as teachers at my field site, highlighting how the inequitable dynamics of being exposed to London’s migrant division of labour come at a great emotional cost, weighing heavy on both. I conclude by proposing a more participatory approach to migrant language education to foreground its potential to provide a platform for not only paying attention to the “small tragedies of individuals’ lives” but to also find ways for coping with and counteracting inequitable relations. Such an approach will further help to question and disrupt simplistic notions and understandings of the relationship between adult migrants’ language learning, labour market participation, and social inclusion.

## 2. The Global City and Its Migrants

The experiences discussed in this article are embedded within the wider context of London as a global city and migrant metropolis with a significant migrant population. The diverse and multifaceted make-up of London’s population is not only due to Britain’s historical role as a colonial power with London as its imperial centre and distinct postcolonial migration dynamics but is also related to general events in international politics causing different migrant groups to arrive in the UK. It has been even further reinforced by London’s rise to global city status (Sassen, 2001) denoting the city’s role as a key junction or crossroads within the circuits of global neoliberal capitalism (Back & Sinha, 2018). London attracts large amounts of international migrants as it is one of the global economy’s command and control points and has a particular significance as a production point of specialised financial and producer services that make the global economy run (Sassen, 2001).

Regarding its migrant population, it is important to note that global cities are responsible for creating different types of migrants, leading to the polarisation of social class divisions. On the one hand, there are privileged citizens, mainly highly skilled professionals brought by transnational corporations or drawn by the career opportunities the service industries in these cities afford them. On the other hand, the presence of these privileged citizens also requires and attracts less skilled and other service-giving people to serve London’s low-wage labour market in order to make sure that all the demands of the global city are met (Sassen, 2001). As Wills et al. (2010, p. 1) observe, “London has become almost wholly reliant on foreign-born workers to do the city’s ‘bottom-end’ jobs.” Their research explicates the emergence of this new labour market, which they refer to as London’s “new migrant division of labour,” that is mediated by

nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, language, and migration status and, as such, highly hierarchised and stratified. The language proficiency of London's migrant population and how this affects their position in the labour market are diverse. Previous research, for example, indicates that the employment chances of non-white migrants in the UK were increased by about 22 percentage points by fluency in English, which was also associated with 18 to 20 percentage points higher earnings when holding constant other factors that influence employment and earnings such as education or age (Dustmann & Fabbri, 2003).

Although not all migrants necessarily end up in London's low-wage economy, Sassen (2001) shows that the increasing inequalities in global cities are resulting directly from these distinct patterns of employment. Growth at the top end of the labour market fuels growth at the bottom and migrants from low-income countries are heavily over-represented at the bottom. Moreover, the continuous over-supply of low-skilled workers in London leading to a surplus to requirements means that there is a growing reserve army of largely foreign-born labour. This situation allows employers to apply further preferences, in particular adopting national and racialised stereotypes during recruitment processes, which leads to a racialised "hiring queue" (Model, 2002); once within a company's employment, this often determines the scope of migrants' upward mobility as well. This supply and demand imbalance also puts serious downward pressure on the terms and conditions of work resulting in increasing poverty and people needing to hold onto their job, regardless of the pay and working conditions. Research continues to show that employees from racially minoritised and migrant communities are more at risk of being in low-paid jobs and insecure employment, as well as being involuntarily on temporary contracts, and many social issues and inequitable relations facing the city are particularly likely to have an impact on them (see, for example, Tinson et al., 2017; Trust for London & WPI, 2020, 2022).

Those who end up in London's migrant division of labour are often acutely aware of their structural position, the low status of their work within society, and their limited options for upward social mobility. On the one hand, there are those, often categorised as "unskilled" or "low skilled," who have few formal qualifications, limited pre-migration education, or interrupted education trajectories. In the case of the latter, research with refugees for example has shown that they often find themselves forced to remain stuck in low-level jobs. Despite high aspirations to better their lives on arrival, barriers to accessing education, training, appropriate and sufficient language learning opportunities, as well as opportunities for developing knowledge and understanding of "how the system works" combined with immediate needs to earn a living meant they were hampered in their quest to progress and instead assimilated into a low wage economy of precarity and poverty (Morrice et al., 2020, 2021). On the other hand, many of those with higher levels

of education and professional backgrounds are exposed to processes of "deskilling and delanguaging" (Garrido & Codó, 2017) which push them into "survival employment" (Creese & Wiebe, 2009) and have been "bumped down," i.e., as higher-skilled workers they were compelled to take up less-skilled jobs for a lack of alternatives because their qualifications are not recognised and/or due to language barriers (Morrice et al., 2021; Wills et al., 2010). It is important to highlight that how migrants experience these processes differs as the knowledge and skill of migrants are classed, gendered, and also racialised and materialised on the basis of ethnic and national origins (Guo, 2015). Thus, although language barriers are often emphasized when discussing migrants' (im)possibilities for employment, the picture is more complex, and wider exclusionary and hierarchising dynamics inherent to London's migrant division of labour need to be taken into account in these discussions. The following section will look at this "dual nexus" (Piller, 2012, p. 291) between an individual's language proficiency and existing classed, gendered, and racialised labour market segmentation in more detail.

### 3. Language as Gatekeeping Mechanism

Language and linguistic ability play an important role as a gatekeeping mechanism not only to the labour market but to the city and society more widely. As migration and successful settlement are often measured in economic terms, employment is seen as a key factor in terms of social inclusion as economic wellbeing without doubt significantly impacts all other dimensions of one's life. The importance of proficiency in English is often stressed as paramount in terms of migrants' experiences of employment and social inclusion, which is not surprising given the linguistic dimension of the reproduction of social inequalities. However, as some scholars of social justice point out, there is a danger to base considerations of how language mediates social inclusion on overtly simplistic assumptions which run the danger of reducing it to the level of individual responsibility (e.g., Piller, 2012, 2016).

Undoubtedly, language is of crucial importance for engagement with and accessing opportunities in one's surrounding. Yet, as language is related to social and political knowledge and access to power structures, successful social inclusion is about more than solely improving one's linguistic proficiency or instrumental use of language. When transitioning to a new economic environment, migrants are often subjected to a "linguistic penalty" (Roberts, 2012) which refers to experiences of being discriminated against, excluded, or not being able to access certain opportunities on the basis of language performance that falls outside of established societal norms and not because of a lack of communicative ability or language skills required for the job. Roberts (2012) refers to such experiences as "small tragedies of individuals' lives."

Thus, although migrants' employment is heavily mediated by their proficiency in English, i.e., if a migrant's English competence does not match their skill level, they will be excluded from employment at their skill level, increased proficiency does not automatically result in better employment options. As Piller (2012, p. 288) asserts, "access to careers consistent with qualifications and experience...is mediated by a range of factors including accent, race and social networks." Migrants' real or perceived "lack of linguistic proficiency" can easily become a proxy for racial and ethnic discrimination which then also forces them into low-paid jobs. This creates a pool of people with limited employment options and with little possibility to escape or attaining the employment opportunities they seek despite gaining fluency in English (Piller, 2012).

#### **4. Migrant Language Education, Skills, and Employability**

To tackle the language barrier many migrants are faced with and its impact on social inclusion, countries that are receiving a significant number of new arrivals have put in place specific language programs which often put a heavy emphasis on work and employment. The scope and scale of these language programs differ considerably between countries. In England, the English language teaching for migrants who need the language in order to live in the country is usually referred to as ESOL (English for/to Speakers of Other Languages). ESOL has developed alongside the nation's history of inward migration and is heavily influenced by socio-political structures and decision-making processes that have been shaping its character, aims, objectives, and focus significantly over the years.

Growing out of an ad-hoc volunteer engagement in the post-war period, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the provision of ESOL became more organised. What is notable about this period was a central concern of the provision to actively enhance cultural and linguistic pluralism, anti-racism, equal opportunities, and social justice. This started to change in 2001 when ESOL was brought under centralized control and incorporated into the Skills for Life strategy (a policy aimed at reducing the number of adults with low levels of basic skills, literacy, and numeracy), which led to the ambiguous status of the field as an adult basic skill. This, in turn, fostered a perception of the field and students as being of "low status" (Cooke & Simpson, 2009; Zschomler, 2021). In addition, as links in policy between learning in the adult education sector and business were strengthened, the orientation of ESOL moved towards "skills" and "employability" (Cooke & Simpson, 2009; Simpson & Whiteside, 2015). However, given the perception of ESOL as a basic skill and the overall low status of the field and its students, critical voices have pointed out that, as a result, students are at risk of being solely perceived as low-skills trainees who are being prepared for menial employment

and low-paid work (Cooke & Simpson, 2009). This can come at the expense of focusing on skills and knowledge that students might require to navigate and build more sustainable futures and of creating tailored pathways for individuals to access suitable and fitting language and employment support in order to achieve their goals (Morrice et al., 2020, 2021). The foregrounding of skills and employability and moving away from a broader social justice agenda also has had an impact on the possibilities of the field to counteract its migrant students' often marginalised position in society.

Overall, in England, ESOL is poorly resourced and characterised by a "piece-meal and partial" (Simpson, 2019, p. 31) approach to funding. Eligibility criteria to receive government-funded ESOL provision have become more restrictive over the past decade in England (Foster & Bolton, 2018) and since 2011–2012 there is no funding for ESOL provided in the workplace. The underfunding and fragmentation of ESOL greatly limits provision and access, and the field's ability to provide the kind of comprehensive support that adult migrants are in need of. On the one hand, there is an acute lack of appropriate language classes; on the other hand, there is also a very little possibility for ESOL to work effectively towards minimising or counteracting the effects that wider social inequalities have on the lives of migrant students which as a result continue to be reproduced (Simpson & Hunter, 2023).

#### **5. Ethnographic Context and Knowledge-Making**

The insights presented in this article are based on ethnographic research into the lived experience of migrants who have come to London to set up a new life and are learning English to facilitate this process. I carried out fieldwork between the summer of 2017 and autumn of 2018, within and beyond the institutional setting of a further education college in London offering English classes for migrants. Over a period of about 15 months, I usually spent three to four days a week at the college as a participant observer in classes, meetings, training sessions, as well as on field trips and more general hanging around in the staff room and in areas where students usually gathered before and after classes. I also conducted four focus group discussions and ethnographic interviews with 39 of my student participants (22 female, 17 male, age range between 21 and 55) from 24 countries of origin, diverse backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, education, language, religion, socio-economic standing, and with complex migratory trajectories and different statuses including those seeking refuge and asylum, family reunion, as well as more economic-driven migration. Their length of time in the UK ranged from newly arrived to more than 12 years. My interlocutors attended English language classes ranging from Pre-Entry to Level 1, which is equivalent to pre-A1 (basic user) to B2 (independent user) as described by the Common European Framework (CEFR).



In order to venture more into the life worlds of my participants beyond the institutional setting, I included walking methods (O'Neill & Perivolaris, 2015) in the form of go-alongs during which I could accompany my interlocutors after their English classes as they were going to work or other engagements, others showed me around their communities or places that were important to them or invited me into their homes. This aided a more collaborative knowledge production focusing on inclusion and participation, to access the unsayable, i.e., by exploring difficult topics or experiences that interlocutors might otherwise keep to themselves or which might be difficult to retrieve through interviews. In addition, Kusenbach (2003, p. 472) observes that go-alongs can also “give clues as to how informants integrate memories of past events, and anticipations of the future, into the ongoing stream of their spatial experiences and activities.” For example, in one of my go-alongs with Elira, a 29-year-old female student who was born in Albania but had lived several years in Greece before coming to the UK, she led me to a coffee shop which she described to me as her “refuge,” a place where she would frequently go on her day off because, as she explained, “you can just sit, look out the window or read and be like everyone else because you not have to speak.” Whilst we were having coffee there, she told me with tears in her eyes about a very upsetting voicemail she had received from her son’s teacher with derogatory remarks regarding her English language skills. After some time, Elira pointed to an upmarket hair salon which was visible through the window, and started talking about how it was her dream to work there one day. She also shared with me the difficulties she was facing in her current employment situation and how this impacted her. At the time of my fieldwork, she was working as a housekeeper in a London hotel as her hair stylist qualifications were not accepted in the UK. My comprehensive approach further included ten interviews with managers and teachers at the college where I conducted my fieldwork.

Throughout the fieldwork, I took extensive field notes. The interviews, focus group discussions, and, if the situation allowed, the conversations from go-alongs were recorded and transcribed. In the pursuit of a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973), a prolonged engagement with my interlocutors and the triangulation of different types of rich data made it possible to “employ a macro approach to gain knowledge of the wider context of action, as well as maintaining a close eye on the various ways that social structures are taking effect within and through agents in the practice of daily life” (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 11). I took a grounded approach to data analysis, starting with open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1964) to be able to capture something of the literal essence of the data. This was embedded into more of a “zigzag approach” (Rivas, 2012) between data gathering and data analysis, with the latter moving from preliminary thematic coding, to refined thematic coding to more refined categories.

## 6. The Emotional Cost of Being Slotted Into the Migrant Division of Labour in the Classroom

The dynamics and conditions of London’s migrant division of labour were a constant and very tangible component of many of the conversations, interviews, and group discussions I had with my interlocutors and part of their everyday experiences and played out vividly in their narratives. Throughout the research, many of my interlocutors shared their often painful experiences of the outlined processes of racialisation, hierarchization, and hampered possibilities to be socially mobile with me. As one of my participants, who came from Iran to seek asylum in the UK and had experienced significant deskilling during his migratory trajectory with no success of even slightly reversing it after years of trying, put it: “You feel crushed. You don’t really live.”

Many also were very aware that whilst they were striving to improve their linguistic competence and proficiency to propel their lives forward, this might not necessarily come to fruition because of wider exclusionary and hierarchising mechanisms. For example, in one conversation I had with two students, about these issues and their experience of coming to college to learn English, one of them, Meserat, a 39-year-old female Eritrean student, struck a sombre tone and, looking down her body, remarked: “Look, what can I expect? Me, I’m just a black woman from Africa working as a cleaner and everyone can see.” Meserat had come to the UK to seek asylum about eight years prior to my fieldwork and had limited pre-migration education. She was married with three children and acutely aware of her racialized position within the global city space of London, to which she alluded in other conversations and encounters I had with her. She told me how she had been really happy when she found work as a cleaner initially but had hoped that she would be able to improve her employment situation as she progressed with learning English—a hope that, at the time of my fieldwork, during which she attended an Entry 3 class (equivalent to B1 intermediate on the CEFR), she felt would most likely not materialise, something she explained to me during the above conversation and finds echo in her words: “What can I expect?”

What was striking during these encounters was how tangible the pain experienced by my interlocutors was—the emotional cost of being slotted into London’s migrant division of labour, of being bumped down, of being discriminated against, of feeling stuck, crushed, and not “really living,” with no or little hope to escape from the circumstances they found themselves in, was clearly weighing heavy on them. During lessons and in the context of the classroom, this strong emotional impact and the negative affects that are experienced by students at an individual level due to their circumstances were many times hidden. Yet, they were lurking in the background and coming to the surface in certain moments, which is not too surprising as the topic of work and employability was high on the institutional and departmental agenda

and thus featured regularly in lessons at all levels. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes from an Entry 3 class describes such an instance:

I am participating in the [removed] class again. Everyone seems to be really happy and looking forward to today's lesson. As usual, the atmosphere is warm, friendly, and supportive. As the lesson starts and everyone is settling down, the teacher tells the students that she has a very exciting announcement for them. She projects a leaflet on the whiteboard from the borough. The large shopping center which is not too far from the college, is going to be expanded and there will be a recruitment fair in a few days. This had been on the agenda of the team meeting in the morning where all teachers were asked to promote the recruitment fair in their classes. The teacher thinks it would be a really good idea for the students to go there. The students ask some questions and we are all going through the flyer together. It becomes clear that this job fair is only for service-giving jobs, cleaners, security personnel, delivery drivers, and so forth. The excitement in the class goes down, most of the students are currently in employment and pretty much exactly in such kind of employment. So going to the job fair does not really provide an opportunity to move up, progress, or be socially mobile. The teacher keeps on encouraging everybody and repeats that this is really a great opportunity and they should go and have a look....Just as she is about to move on, Agnes comes in. She apologises for being late and the teacher uses the chance to ask Leo to tell Agnes about the job fair. When Agnes hears the word job fair, she gets excited but when Leo starts talking about the kind of jobs that will be recruited for at the job fair she sighs deeply and starts to talk about her experiences. She describes how difficult it often is for her to be faced with this reality that the only jobs on offer are "low jobs," as she refers to them. "It's so hard when you're background is different," she exclaims and almost starts crying. One of her classmates says some comforting words to her in Albanian but fails to cheer her up. Agnes continues to explain: "It's not easy....I mean, I was a designer for curtains in my country but now..." The hurt and pain are written all over her face and are palpable in the room. Many of the other students sympathise with her but two of her fellow classmates become quite invigorated and tell her that she just has to accept this situation. "You have to accept it and try your best." The gist of the advice was that she should go there, market herself, albeit undervalued, or for something different than her profession. "That's just how it is when you come to a new place, that's what you have to accept. Of course, you will go down, only if you're lucky you don't have to. You have to try." Their speech fails to encourage Agnes and makes her look even more in pain and hurt. She gets out a tissue as her eyes are

filling with tears and just keeps on mumbling: "But, but it's not easy, it's not easy." The teacher seems to be uncomfortable and quickly gets today's lesson topic projected on the whiteboard and tells the class: "Okay, let's move on." The class continues and all the activities are mainly about exam practice as the exam is just around the corner. Agnes, who is usually quite bubbly and talkative, stays really quiet for the rest of the lesson, and after the class finishes she leaves quickly. Some of the students decide to go to the cafeteria to have a coffee together and practise a bit more for the exam. They are inviting me to come along.

When I had the chance to talk about this lesson with Agnes a while later, she emphasised how she was "really sorry" for "the problems she made," as she referred to it. She went on to explain: "It just come out of me that day—I don't know why." At the time she was working as a housekeeper/nanny and had tried to get some internship opportunities more related to her field of expertise but without success and felt strongly that there was just "no way" forward for her. What "kept her going" was the hope that there would be a better future in store for her (now teenage) son who had come to London together with her from Albania—a common strategy employed by my interlocutors to somehow make their own situation more bearable.

Although Agnes' outburst of negative feelings and pain did not cause "problems," it came rather unexpectedly, both to the teacher and the class (and myself as well) and the teacher tried to move on to the regular lesson topic quickly without engaging with it. In other (rare) instances, teachers engaged with such issues more "head-on" and opened up a space for discussion of the students' differing positionality within London's post-colonial and global city fabric including experiences of exclusion, marginality, discrimination, racialisation, racism, and so forth. However, not all the teachers were equally inclined to do so or indeed felt comfortable doing so. Some felt it might be better for them to "stick to what they know and are good at," i.e., teaching the language. Others did not feel adequately equipped to do so but would have liked more opportunities to develop this aspect of their practice more. Teachers also spoke about how they were not able to engage with these wider dynamics more critically as much as they would have liked to during the four hours of lessons that students were entitled to per week given the pressure they are under to get students through the curriculum and achieve high exam pass rates. The latter might have been on the mind of the teacher in the above example and the teacher's reaction to this situation might have been different had it not occurred during a lesson that was set aside for preparing the students intensively for the impending exam.

Furthermore, I noticed how important it was for students to highlight when they could avoid experiences of deskilling or being bumped down and thus

circumvent the emotional costs accompanying these processes, which was the case for some of my participants, as for example Arif, a 25-year-old male student. He had come to the UK to seek asylum about three years prior to my fieldwork from Eritrea where he had been trained as an upholsterer and carpet layer. At the time of the research, he had been able to find very similar work and was employed by a company specialising in interior decoration and carpet laying. He often emphasised that he was doing “the same job” as in his country, pointing out how happy this made him. On one occasion, his Entry 2 class (equivalent to pre-intermediate on the CEFR) was playing a board game and he landed on a square asking him to talk about his occupation, which prompted several of his classmates to point out how “lucky” he was.

### 7. Between Transmitting Harsh Realities and Raising Aspirations

Overall, the teachers were very much aware of “the small tragedies of individuals’ lives” many of the students found themselves confronted with and how difficult this often was for them, particularly if students had to grapple with processes of deskilling and being bumped down. For example, in my interview with one of the teachers, Dan, he was very much aware of how, in his words, “annoying” these experiences are for students and described how he finds himself having to “transmit” these harsh realities to students. When I asked him what he thinks it means for his students to come to class, he remarked:

Well, for some students, they approach their ESOL class as, aah, something annoying they have to do in order to get on with the rest of their lives [laughs]....I think some students have very unrealistic expectations of where they are and so one aspect of my job, which is not very much fun, is to try to give students an accurate understanding of where they are...and, aah, that’s a difficult conversation, aah, to have and in some cases I have it every week with the same people...so if students, if students are...come to terms with why they are where they are...yeah...so, sometimes, erm, that’s, that’s an important thing for students to understand, erm, [and] sometimes they don’t.

The difficulty of this “aspect of his job which is not very much fun” was apparent in the interview. As he rendered his explanation, he gradually lowered his voice and, after a pause, sighed and continued slowly, with a very low voice: “Sometimes it’s really hard to transmit that.” After this, he looked to the floor and stayed silent for a while. Teaching those who “carry the weight of the world” (Bourdieu, 1999), e.g., those who are inhibited by structures that bear down on them and undermine their aspirations, includes “transmitting” to them an “accurate understanding of where they are,” which seemed to be weighing down on Dan as well.

Another teacher, Sharon, who referred to herself as being from a BAME (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) background, often talked about these inhibiting structures. Initially only open to a quick interview/conversation about her experience of teaching English to migrants whilst she was sorting through worksheets and preparing materials for upcoming lessons with me sitting next to her desk, she became really engaged in our conversation. Proclaiming that it was “bringing out the political animal” in her, she started to share her own experiences of coming to the UK as a child from the Caribbean and how she had been faced with structural racism and inequalities all her life. She was very much aware of the conditions that “make it very hard for people like our ESOL learners.” Referring to the predicament she found herself in as a teacher she remarked: “They need to have aspirations and you should give them some hope, but then how much will they be able to achieve?” A little later she continued: “I mean, you can tell them and help them to improve their English but that’s only part of the picture—it’s tricky, not easy.” She subsequently approached me again and again as she kept on thinking about the issues we had discussed, which made her also reflect on her classroom practice and ways of engaging with different students. One example she brought up a few times was Haz, a 23-year-old male Iranian student, who had come to the UK to seek asylum and with the dream to study physics at Oxford University. Sharon told me that she thought “he needed to get a dose of reality and better look for a job at KFC,” which she to some extent saw as the most likely progression for him from his current irregular work in a small local takeaway restaurant. She really could not envision his ambition and wish for the future to ever come to fruition. She juxtaposed this with an example of one of her previous students, a young Polish woman who, despite being a qualified teacher, was working as a housekeeper for a hotel in London. Sharon deemed that “more should be possible for her in London, at least as a teaching assistant” and continued to push the student to get all her certificates, required translations, references, and so forth, as she felt “it would be such a shame for her to give up on a better future.” Haz and the young Polish woman were studying at the same level in their respective English classes, yet, how Sharon perceived their future possibilities differed immensely and her engagement with both was to some extent mediated by wider hierarchising dynamics and inequitable relations. Reflecting on these experiences, she explained how our conversations had made her compare and rethink how she related to these two students. She also stressed how teachers are hampered in their possibilities to engage more critically with issues of inequality, exclusion, and the realities of their students’ lives given the bureaucratic burden and pressure they are under to achieve, for example, certain benchmarks funding is dependent on. Conveying a feeling that can be interpreted as pertaining almost to resignation, she concluded: “When you see these realities



as a teacher it can make you feel really bad, and the worst thing is that there is not really anything you can do about it.”

## 8. Conclusions

The dimensions and challenges discussed in this article became salient throughout my research, for example during interviews and conversations with both students and teachers, as well as on go-alongs. However, having discussed these issues, I do not want to suggest that these dimensions materialised in the lived experiences of all of my interlocutors in the same way as I already pointed out earlier. Being slotted into London’s migrant division of labour and being exposed to exclusionary, discriminatory, and hierarchising dynamics often took an immense toll on my interlocutors’ emotional wellbeing as well as their overall feelings of respect and dignity. Sometimes their eyes filled up with tears and they found it difficult to talk further when these issues came up. The “small tragedies of individuals’ lives” were frequently laid bare, albeit often rather unexpectedly, particularly as my fieldwork progressed and my interlocutors felt comfortable in their interactions with me and we had established a relationship of trust and mutual respect. Many times, my interlocutors remarked that it was the first time they were telling someone about how they felt, which they often found to have a healing effect. What became evident was that, many times, their experiences had made them feel as being locked up “into a shell of incompetence” (Park, 2015, p. 70) which came at a great emotional cost, echoing the “coming to terms with where you are” that Dan had identified as a painful process many of his students had to undergo in connection with their migratory trajectory. As we saw, this does not only leave an imprint on migrants themselves but also on those who are tasked with teaching them English in order to help them navigate the processes of setting up a new life and improve their prospects for the future.

Where does this leave the learning and teaching of English in the context of migration, processes of deskilling, and migrants’ insertion into a segmented labour market? It is certainly true that, as Morrice et al. (2021) point out, fast-track language courses combined with vocational skills which would support faster access to employment commensurate with migrants’ background and qualifications could make a significant difference to their experience, and there is certainly a lot of scope to improve the provision of ESOL in this regard. However, what I would like to highlight is that migrant language education has another role to play here that goes beyond increasing migrants’ skills, employability, or human capital on an individual level. Regarding her students’ lived experiences marked by inequitable relations, hierarchising, and racialising dynamics, Sharon concluded that in the context of her work “there is not really anything you can do about it.” Yet, considering the discussions in this article, I would like to propose a more

hopeful outlook. There is certainly an argument to be made for the importance of English language classes for migrants to open up possibilities for listening to and sharing difficult experiences, for reflecting on uncomfortable issues, for making questions and experiences of inequality and the “small tragedies” that result from them a more central concern. Leveraging migrant language educational spaces in this way would place those attending the classes, their own immediate experiences, and the issues they are faced with more at the centre of what is being paid attention to, discussed, and dealt with in the language classroom, thus linking their language learning to the analysis of broader issues in their lives. This resonates well with a more participatory approach to teaching and learning that is anchored in critical pedagogy and concerned with developing a social conscience that can make a difference in this context. Encouraging students to question the realities of their lives allows for offering a platform to not only educate for individual success but to also foster an active and critical engagement with the often very unequal life worlds of migrant students (see also Heinemann & Monzó, 2021; Zschomler, 2019, 2021). There is, as I would argue, great potential for migrant language educational spaces to foster such active and critical engagement. This, in turn, can then also make it possible to question and disrupt simplistic notions and understandings of the relationship between adult migrants’ language learning, labour market participation, and social inclusion.

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the participants who took the time to share their experiences with me. I would also like to thank the two reviewers for their comments. The research for this article was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC 1800772).

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

## References

- Back, L., & Sinha, S. (2018). *Migrant city*. Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1999). *The weight of the world*. Polity Press.
- Cooke, M., & Simpson, J. (2009). Challenging agendas in ESOL: Skills, employability and social cohesion. *Language Issues*, 20(1), 19–30.
- Creese, G., & Wiebe, B. (2009). ‘Survival employment’: Gender and deskilling among African immigrants in Canada. *International Migration*, 50(2), 56–76. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2009.00531.x>
- Dustmann, C., & Fabbri, F. (2003). Language proficiency and labour market performance of immigrants in the UK. *The Economic Journal*, 113, 695–717. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0297.t01-1-00151>
- Foster, D., & Bolton, P. (2018). *Adult ESOL in England*

- (Briefing Paper No. 7905). House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7905/#fullreport>
- Garrido, M. R., & Codó, E. (2017). Deskillling and delanguaging African migrants in Barcelona: Pathways of labour market incorporation and the value of 'global' English. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 15(1), 29–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2014.944757>
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. Basic Books.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1964). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine Pub. Co.
- Guo, S. (2015). The colour of skill: Contesting a racialised regime of skill from the experience of recent immigrants in Canada. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 37(3), 236–250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2015.1067766>
- Heinemann, A. M. B., & Monzó, L. (2021). Capitalism, migration, and adult education. Toward a critical project in the second language learning class. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 12(1), 65–79. <https://doi.org/10.25656/01:21963>
- Kusenbach, M. (2003). Street phenomenology: The go-along as ethnographic research tool. *Ethnography*, 4(3), 455–485. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146613810343007>
- Model, S. (2002). Immigrants' social class in three global cities. In M. Cross & R. Moore (Eds.), *Globalization and the new city: Migrants, minorities and urban transformation in comparative perspectives* (pp. 82–118). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Morrice, L., Tip, L. K., Brown, R., & Collyer, M. (2020). Resettled refugee youth and education: Aspiration and reality. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23(3), 388–405. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2019.1612047>
- Morrice, L., Tip, L. K., Collyer, M., & Brown, R. (2021). 'You can't have a good integration when you don't have a good communication': English-language learning among resettled refugees in England. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(1), 681–699. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez023>
- O'Neill, M., & Perivolaris, J. (2015). A sense of belonging: Walking with Thaeer through migration, memories and space. *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture*, 5(2/3), 327–338. [https://doi.org/10.1386/cjmc.5.2-3.327\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1386/cjmc.5.2-3.327_3)
- O'Reilly, K. (2012). *Ethnographic methods* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Park, J. S.-Y. (2015). Structures of feeling in unequal Englishes. In R. Tupas (Ed.), *Unequal Englishes: The politics of Englishes today* (pp. 59–73). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Piller, I. (2012). Multilingualism and social exclusion. In M. Martin-Jones, A. Blackledge, & A. Creese (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of multilingualism* (pp. 281–296). Routledge.
- Piller, I. (2016). *Linguistic diversity and social justice*. Oxford University Press.
- Rivas, C. (2012). Coding and analysing qualitative data. In C. Seale (Ed.), *Researching society and culture* (3rd ed.) (pp. 366–392). SAGE.
- Roberts, C. (2012). Institutions and linguistic penalties. In S. Alegre, M. Moyer, E. Pladvall, & S. Tibau (Eds.), *At a time of crisis: English and American studies in Spain. Proceedings of 35th AEDEAN Conference* (pp. 272–283). Autonomous University of Barcelona.
- Sassen, S. (2001). *The global city: New York, London, Tokyo* (2nd ed.). Princeton University Press.
- Simpson, J. (2019). Policy and adult migrant language education in the UK. In M. Cooke & R. Peutrell (Eds.), *Brokering Britain, educating citizens. Language, mobility and institutions* (pp. 28–44). Multilingual Matters.
- Simpson, J., & Hunter, A.-M. (2023). Policy formation for adult migrant language education in England: National neglect and its implications. *Language Policy*, 22, 155–178. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-023-09655-6>
- Simpson, J., & Whiteside, A. (Eds.). (2015). *Adult migrant language education: Challenging agendas in policy and practice*. Routledge.
- Tinson, A., Ayrton, C., Barker, K., Born, T. B., & Long, O. (2017). *London's poverty profile*. New Policy Institute. <https://trustforlondon.org.uk/research/londons-poverty-profile-2017>
- Trust for London, & WPI. (2020). *London's poverty profile: 2020*. <https://trustforlondon.org.uk/research/lpp2020>
- Trust for London, & WPI. (2022). *London's poverty profile 2022: Covid-19 and poverty in London*. <https://trustforlondon.org.uk/research/londons-poverty-profile-2022-covid-19-and-poverty-in-london>
- Wills, J., Datta, K., Evans, Y., Herbert, J., May, J., & McIlwaine, C. (2010). *Global cities at work: New migrant divisions of labour*. Pluto Press.
- Zschomler, S. (2019). 'Language is your dignity': Migration, linguistic capital, and the experience of re/valuation. *Languages*, 4(3), Article 64. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages4030064>
- Zschomler, S. (2021). *Reimagining migrant language education from the bottom up: An ethnographic study* [Unpublished Doctoral thesis]. University of Cambridge. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.75287>

### About the Author



**Silke Zschomler** is a research fellow at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL Social Research Institute, IOE, University College London. She is interested in the lived experience of migrants in London and her interdisciplinary research is situated at the nexus of migration, inequality, urban multiculturalism and diversity, integration, and language/language learning—particularly in the context of the global city and postcolonial migrant metropolis. From a methodological perspective, her work is committed to and centred around ethnography, participatory and collaborative approaches, and the coproduction of knowledge.