

Toolkit: Running volunteer-led English language classes in churches

“Unmet English language needs present a barrier to pretty much all forms of social inclusion, from work, to making friends, to supporting children in school. If a church cares about social exclusion - it should care about this issue”.

English Language Classes Volunteer Lead

What is ESOL?

ESOL – “English for Speakers of Other Languages” can have a couple of different meanings:

1. Formal ESOL can be used as shorthand for a particular qualification (such as ESOL Level 1), which is often achieved through attending regular classes and then passing an exam/coursework for accreditation. These classes should always be delivered by trained personnel.
2. Informal ESOL is sometimes used as short-hand for the need or desire to learn English – whether conversationally or in structured classes (but not necessarily accredited). Where ESOL is led by volunteers, a variety of materials might be used, perhaps produced in-house or by others. **This kind of ESOL might variously be referred to as ‘conversation clubs’, ‘language cafes’, ‘informal English classes’ etc and is the type most often found in church settings.**

Who might attend English language classes?

Learners can come from any background - all nationalities, all types of immigration statuses (including economic migrant, asylum seeker, refugee or on a family visa), recently arrived or lived in the UK for decades. They may have secure accommodation or be experiencing rough sleeping or other types of homelessness, and they may be in some type of employment, highly skilled or unemployed. In short, it is best not to make assumptions!

Some learners may already be doing formal English classes, which they have access to for a variety of reasons. These learners may come to free English conversation classes to practice or receive extra learning. Others may not yet be able to enrol or on waiting lists. Sometimes, particularly for caregivers, it can be hard to attend formal English classes (which lead to a qualification) because it is hard to balance commitment to regular, intensive study; therefore, free English classes in community settings is a good way to access learning flexibly.



Why is this important now?

At the time of writing, changes to the qualification levels of English needed by most migrants (which may in the future include refugees and asylum seekers) to enter, reside and/or settle in Britain have been proposed in the Government's *White Paper on Immigration*. The provision of English cafes, clubs and conversation practice by churches will become even more important if such changes do occur, especially as most would be considered beginner level, and can sometimes be free to access as well.

Why should offering English language classes be part of my church's social action ministry?

Besides the obvious benefits of learning English in terms of communication, offering ESOL or conversational language classes can build confidence amongst those attending, and help communities feel more welcomed and integrated. This has a knock-on effect in daily life, such as being able to articulate needs, communicate with professionals and build friendships - getting to know people at church is also, of course, important if offering English language learning is one part of your invitation to come to church. In short, providing conversation classes or ESOL in your church as part of your social action ministries can have a huge and long-term impact on peoples' emotional, social, physical and mental wellbeing.

There are some churches that have volunteers with teaching backgrounds or paid ESOL educators as part of their social action. However, this requires significant investment of time and resources; even then, these classes may not lead to a qualification but may be considered as foundation or 'pre-entry' space for ESOL levels/qualifications.

More likely in church settings are conversational or informal 'ESOL' classes, sometimes combined with hospitality/other social action such as international cafes, shared community meals or creches than run parallel to language classes to allow more parents/carers to attend.

Setting up volunteer-led English language classes in church

All churches in the Diocese of London are responsible for safeguarding vulnerable adults and children, particularly through the PCC. There will be at least one Parish Safeguarding Officer (PSO), whose details can be found on the church's website.

When setting up a new social action project which will support vulnerable people, such as community ESOL classes, it would be a good idea to inform your PSO; not just so they can offer any guidance, existing resources or advice, but also to ensure the activity follows the churches safeguarding policy.

If you need more support, your PSO can reach out to the Diocesan Safeguarding Advisor for your Episcopal Area. **Further information on Diocese of London Safeguarding, including contact details and out of hours contact, can be found [here](#).**

The *Learning & Work Institute* has a great set of resources for volunteers that cover essential information about working with adult learners of English language, which can be viewed [here](#). For more generic resources on supporting volunteers, visit Church Urban Fund's Knowledge Bank, where you will find their '[Volunteer Resources](#)' – these include a guide, templates, forms etc.

It is also important to consider trauma-informed approaches – especially when working with people who may have complex or multiple traumas. This could be as simple as making sure the teaching room is set up so that all students can see the exit clearly (as some victims or survivors of abuse find this really important and reassuring), or making sure that loud noises, such as scheduled fire alarm testing, does not happen when class is being held (as some people, especially if they have PTSD, jump very easily at loud noises or are frightened by sirens). Be mindful as well, that for some people, physical touch can be triggering or re-traumatising. Also, consider the importance of working in pairs of e.g. mixed sex volunteers for mixed sex classes, female volunteers for female only classes etc (NB: this is important for cultural sensitivity too, not just trauma-awareness). Also, in the winter it can get dark early in the evenings, so think about personal safety for everyone involved, both volunteers and students.

For more information on trauma-informed approaches, or to access free, online training workshops (for London), visit [Thrive LDN](#). The workshops can be completed at your own pace, and you can choose either to complete Bronze, Silver or Gold level (or all three!).

A note on evangelism

Some churches will see this social action as mission and evangelism in its own right, whereas others may wish to be more explicit in inviting people to know Christ. The case study below is a great example of navigating this boundary sensitively:

“Free English Classes” and sensitive evangelism

These “Free English Classes” are enormously popular! The teaching sessions are followed by a shared dinner, and the advertising on the website is clear that there will be an invitation to learn about Jesus after the formal lesson, over and after dinner.

“Improve your English in small groups, enjoy a meal with people from around the world and discover who Jesus is”.

In the worksheet for that week, on the back page, is a bible verse which links to the topic of the teaching session. However, this part of the workbook is intended for use only during the meal (not in class). The direct invitation to find out more about the Christian faith is given at some point during the meal, and it is made clear that people can leave if that is something they do not wish to explore or engage with – whilst some people do choose to leave before then, many more are interested in staying and hearing about the Christian faith.

This approach to evangelism, which clearly boundaries the ‘learning’ portion of the evening and the ‘social and faith-sharing’ part of ensures that students feel comfortable, and are clear about what is happening when. This gives freedom and choice for all who attend, without the church compromising their beliefs and desire to share the Gospel.

Combining English classes with wider social action ministries

We know that many of our churches across the Diocese are often running more than one social action ministry, with which people - both guests and volunteers – might engage simultaneously. Particularly for guests/service users, this joined-up approach can be extremely helpful in tackling multiple needs, including isolation.

If setting up ESOL classes or a conversation café is the right ministry for your church, it is worth considering what might be needed for people in the community to access these classes you are providing. For example:

- What are the faith/cultural backgrounds of those attending? Does it follow that you'll need to consider particular dietary requirements if providing refreshments or a meal? What about any cultural expectations around separate spaces for men and for women?
- Are the people wanting to access ESOL provision able to do so?
 - e.g. if the majority of people are practising Muslims, then Friday lunchtime might not be the appropriate time to run the classes (because of midday prayers at the Mosque).
 - Equally, if some of those in the group are parents with small children, running an informal creche or stay and play whilst ESOL lessons are being held might be welcome! For those with school-aged children, be mindful of e.g. needing to leave for the school run, and/or put on classes during school hours.
 - If most of the people you expect to attend your class are in work during the day, then consider making some or all your classes available during the evening.
 - Some of this will be trial and error as you start to get into a pattern of regular attendees and becoming aware of their needs re. timetabling. Of course you'll never meet everyone's needs but connect with other churches/communities who are offering English classes, so that you can signpost people to alternative provision if they can't attend your classes due to scheduling.
 - Is the cost of travel prohibiting some people accessing the classes? Consider whether you can afford to help supplement or pay for travel costs, especially if lessons happen at night and people are nervous about walking in the dark.
- If those wanting to access ESOL classes are asylum seekers placed in local Home Office accommodation (such as a hotel), a community space to gather as well as learn English might be very well received – bear in mind that as most asylum seekers are not allowed to work; there is often very little to do, as well as very little money. A community meal after the ESOL classes or a conversation café that provides a hot meal could help people build friendships across the community too.
- Do you already run a Warm Space, or Place of Welcome? Is it possible to run the English language classes in tandem or before/after that?

- Think about how you are advertising your English classes - is it possible to provide basic flyers in different languages so people know what to expect, for example? Think carefully about how you advertise (i.e. invite expressions of interest rather than name dates, times and locations freely – this also helps protect people from Far-Right action, such as protesters turning up outside your weekly class for refugees). Consider placing advertisers in local community settings (with permission) e.g. GP, library.
- Is the space you are holding the classes in fit for purpose? For example, think about how you can make the space accessible and how you can make sure that trauma-triggers are mitigated, such as having a room with lots of windows/natural light and exits in clear line of sight.
- Make sure that if someone is hard of hearing they have the option to sit closer to the teacher to enable direct line of sight for lip reading. If someone wears a hearing aid device, do you have a hearing loop in place?
- How are you enabling a sense of wider community, so that people who attend English classes can engage with the church more widely? For example, you might have a lot of parents/carers with small children who attend your English lessons – have you invited them to e.g. toddler group or Messy Church?
- Finally - please don't forget to check what is happening locally in other churches, or faith and community spaces, before committing to setting up ESOL or language classes in your area. It may be that someone is already doing this, but needs more volunteers, for example.
 - You should also consider how people will progress on from your classes (especially if your church is only able to offer one level of class, or you are relying on a resource which has a limited number of sessions). For some people, attending your English classes may be in addition to attending formal ESOL learning, whereas for others your church may be their only ESOL engagement. If you want to signpost people forward to adult learning courses with local ESOL providers, [check this map to see what is currently available in your area.](#)

The two case studies below offer examples of thoughtful engagement with their community, and meeting the needs of particular groups of people when offering English language classes in church:

English classes for asylum seekers and refugees

ESOL classes for local asylum seekers and refugees runs weekly at this church, who partner on this with another local church of a different denomination. Whilst one community provides the volunteers and meeting space, the other provides the teaching itself.

The English classes are informal, meaning they do not lead to a 'qualification'. Instead, lessons focus on themes (rather than e.g. grammar) and are things which are helpful and necessary for people arriving from outside the UK to know – e.g. using public transport – and also introductions to elements of British culture. This helps give students agency, and increased dignity.

Advertising the classes to those who have little or no English is achieved by having some information translated on flyers, including Farsi and Arabic (as well as in English). For those who want to find out more about the Christian faith, volunteers are encouraged to be sensitive and non-intrusive about people's backgrounds and reasons for seeking asylum, creating a space of trust and welcome. Relationships are built between students, teachers and volunteers, helping everyone to get to know each other and sustain a flourishing community with Gospel values at its centre.

English classes for women from the local community

At this church, there are two groups for their [conversational] ESOL classes – one for men, and one for women; this was done deliberately to be sensitive around perceived needs in cultural context. Women from the local Bengali community in the parish attend classes weekly, which is followed by an 'opt-in' Bible study in both English and Bengali (there is a break between the end of the English class, and the start of the Bible study, to give people autonomy over whether to attend the latter). Advertising is done in Bengali and English, and the flyers are advertised across community settings such as the GP and local family centre.

The church runs a variety of community-based ministries, including parenting programmes, play-based family activities and parent-toddler groups. Many of the women access these even if they are not Christian - and because of that are able to engage with the church in a variety of ways: building relationships with church leaders, volunteers, and with each other. The women's ESOL group also have the option to participate in termly trips – sometimes these trips have a practical element, such as getting set up to use the local library. Other times, the trips are more sociable, such as a visit to a local tourist attraction.

General resources

- CUF [Church Urban Fund]
 - [Knowledge Bank](#) – lots of resources for faith-based social action. This includes Volunteering Resources, links to External Forums and their ‘Project Planning and Fundraising Guide’
- Free English Classes
 - [Free English Classes](#) is a network you can sign up to, which provides a model for setting up English classes in your own church context
- Greater London Authority
 - [Supporting the ESOL Sector | London City Hall](#) – including helpful case studies, and a section on Working with Volunteers
 - [The London Strategic Migration Partnership \[LSMP\]](#) - employ a Regional English Language Coordinator. They recommend the following resources:
 - Their ESOL newsletter, which provides regular updates and support for those offering English lessons across London – sign up [here](#)
 - Information on training to teach ESOL – available [here](#)
- Learning & Work Institute
 - [Volunteers, English language learners and conversation clubs - Learning and Work Institute](#)
- Thrive! LDN
 - Thrive London [LDN] offer free, [trauma-informed practice workshops](#) for people living and working in London; the sessions are developed in partnership with Nicola Lester Psychological Trauma Consultancy and can be completed at your own pace.
- WEA [Workers’ Education Association]
 - WEA are occasionally on the lookout for venues to run their free ESOL classes in! Could your church offer a space and hospitality? – visit [here](#)

Sourcing teaching materials

Here is a short, non-exhaustive list of free (or suggested donation) resources or libraries, which can be downloaded:

- **English for Everyone**
A DK series of publications. Both course books and practice books available to purchase through online retailers, from Level 1 (Beginner) to Level 4 (Advanced).
- **BBC Learning English** – available [here](#)
Includes many resources, including ‘English at Work’, ‘English through Drama’ and ‘Grammar’. Videos, podcast and guidance for teachers are all available.

- **Learning & Work Institute: Conversation Club Units** – available [here](#)
15 units arranged thematically, including ‘Travel’, ‘Health’ and ‘Food and Cooking’
- **British Council** – available [here](#)
Filter by ‘Level’, ‘Skill’ (e.g. Listening, Reading, Grammar), Type (e.g. video, podcast, self-study) and ‘Topic’ (e.g. Relationships, Culture and Customs)
- **Leeds Asylum Seekers’ Support Network** – available [here](#)
A wealth of lesson plans from across different organisations such as the BBC and British Council. Includes ‘Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling’ and ‘Exam Preparation and Driving Tests’.
- **One Stop English** – available [here](#)
A lot of resources, but the ‘Absolute Beginners Series’ (19 units) and the ‘Cambridge ESOL: Skills for Life’ (12 units) seem very good.
- **Skills Workshop** – available [here](#)
Hundreds of resources, which can be filtered by Level and Resource Type. Everything from ‘Sarcasm’ to ‘Emergency Services’