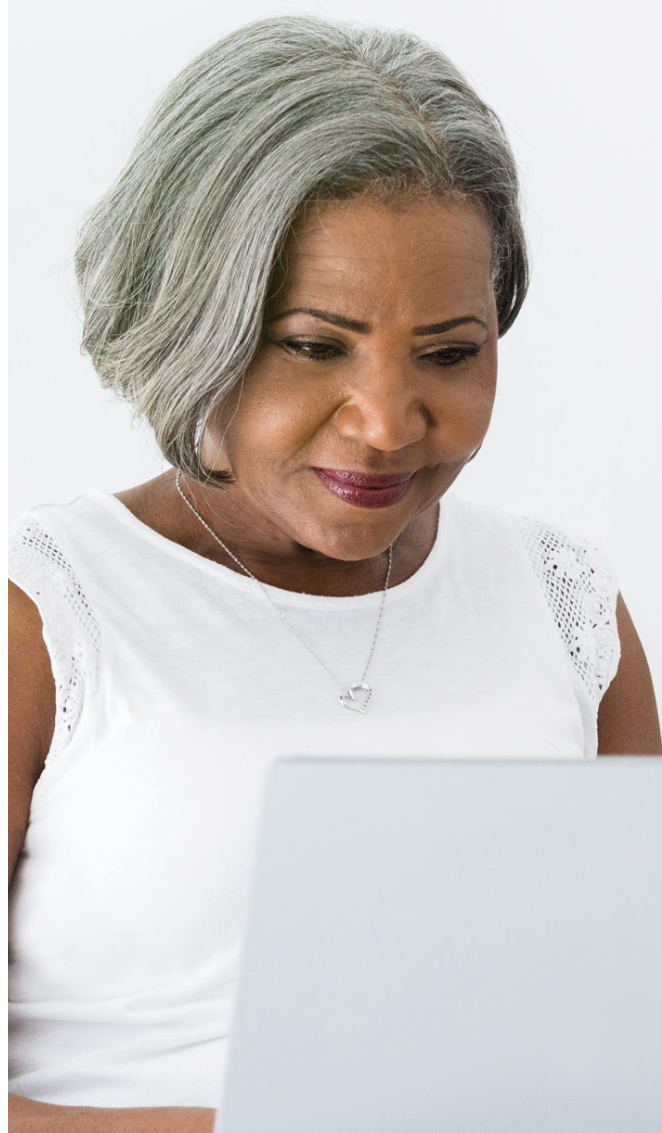


Volunteers,  
English language learners  
and conversation clubs

# Running conversation clubs online

## A guide for organisers





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# Introduction



When the pandemic-driven lockdowns of 2020 brought face-to-face English language provision to an abrupt halt, many organisations were quick to establish some form of online support for learners, including conversation clubs. For many, this was a first venture into online support, and seen only as a stop-gap until face-to-face provision could be resumed. Perhaps surprisingly, the experience proved positive in many respects, and it is clear that volunteer-led online support can help organisations extend their offer, reach new learners, and attract new volunteers.

In 2019/20, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government commissioned Learning and Work Institute (L&W) and Learning Unlimited to research and develop resources and guidance to support volunteers and organisations running conversation clubs for English language learners. The free-to-download '[Volunteers, English Language Learners, Conversation Clubs](#)' (VELLCC) resources, developed prior to lockdown in March 2020, were launched during the summer of 2020. This supplementary guidance has been developed specifically to support volunteers facilitating conversation clubs online.

From additional research undertaken to inform this guide it is clear that, like face-to-face conversation clubs, online conversation clubs can be very popular and effective, and are likely to remain part of the English language offer beyond the pandemic. Organisations and volunteers report that online conversation clubs have many benefits for participants.

The benefits for participants include:

- developing valuable digital skills alongside English language skills
- widening participation, especially for those who face barriers due to isolation, caring responsibilities, or health conditions
- reducing costly and time-consuming travel
- offering more flexible session times which can be easier to align with other commitments
- being able to participate while doing something else e.g. supervising children or domestic work
- being able to participate, using different kinds of devices, from a wide range of locations e.g. a garden or park and across geographical boundaries e.g. from outside the local area, or even another country

Online support can present significant challenges in relation to digital exclusion and poverty. This guidance includes key considerations and suggestions for organisations which are providing and supporting volunteer-led online support for language learners. The **Additional useful resources** section provides supplementary links to those in the original VELLCC resources, with links to information, guidance and resources which are specifically related to online support and sessions.

Conversation club organisers may also find the companion resource useful: **Running conversation clubs for language learners online: A guide for volunteers**. This guidance aims to provide a range of useful information, ideas and activities. It includes guidance for getting started online, tips for planning and managing online sessions, ideas for games and activities which work well online, organisational considerations for providers to reflect on and links to additional useful resources. It is divided into four main sections and users are encouraged to dip into the sections which are most relevant to them, and to use this guidance alongside the original set of VELLCC resources. The final section, **Additional useful resources**, is the same in both online guidance documents.

Wherever you see this icon click to go to the VELLCC resources online



# Considerations for organisations

## Part 1

### 1.1 Technology

Whether you want to develop volunteer-led online language learning support provision as standalone, or as a supplement to face-to-face ESOL provision, it may be helpful to consider a range of issues which can help both learners and volunteers.

*It takes time, so be patient with it, but it is worth it!*

#### Technology (general)

Which tools are most appropriate for your organisation will depend on a number of factors, including what you are trying to achieve, what works for your volunteers and, most important of all, your participants.

*Give it a go! It's challenging, but you'll reach new communities and new learners.*

*Keep everything as simple as possible, for everyone involved.*

*Our WhatsApp group has got learners using English all the time. Every day you can see people saying, 'What do you think about this?' Or 'What are you doing about this?' And 'Here's a link to this.' They are communicating with each other much more than before, when they saw each other just once a week.*

- What will you need the technology to do – for participants, volunteers, your own organisation?
- Can you afford to pay, or must the technology be free?
- What sort of technology will work best on the types of device (mobile phones, tablets, laptops) that your participants and volunteers are likely to use?
- How easy will it be to show participants, volunteers, and colleagues in your own organisation how to use the technology?
- How will you support volunteers and participants if they encounter technical problems?
- Are there suitable tools that your participants, volunteers, and/or your own organisation are already using?

#### Digital poverty

Useful strategies to address digital poverty – that is, lack of devices and/or connectivity – include fundraising and partnership working with other agencies who may have (or be able to access) funding to support digital inclusion.

If you are planning to lend devices to participants, consider any issues that might arise around personal data on the devices. It may be simpler (and more cost-effective) to gift devices to participants. For purchasing mobile data, you may find an online service such as Recharge.com [<https://www.recharge.com/en>] helpful.

Have you established clear criteria and processes for any provision of devices and/or mobile data?



## Digital skills

Many participants and volunteers already have good digital skills and wide experience with online technology. Those who do not can, with support, quickly gain confidence and skills.

*People are learning a lot of technological skills that they are going to need anyway.*

*Never did I think our participants would pick up digital skills in the way they have. They want to learn all the features of the platform, they want to try digital tools on their phone, download different apps. You can see how they're growing in confidence, taking to new ways of doing things quite easily.*

## Platforms and apps

There are so many platforms and apps to support online learning, it can be difficult to choose. In Section 1 of **Running conversation clubs online: A guide for volunteers**, Zoom, Skype, and Microsoft Teams are compared'. Zoom is the most popular right now and therefore likely to be the one volunteers and participants are most familiar with but it doesn't take long to adapt to other platforms. So if there's any reason your organisation is committed to one platform or app in particular, it shouldn't cause too much of a problem, with the right training and support in place, to learn the features.

- Are there any requirements about which platform volunteers should use?
- Are they expected to use free accounts (which may have time limitations) or can you support them to have a paid for account?

## Digital badges for recognition and reward

Digital badges may offer an appropriate way to recognise and celebrate online volunteering and online English language learning. If you are not already using digital badges, see the resources section for information on how to create and issue your own badges.

- Would your volunteers appreciate digital badges?
- Do you have an existing way of recognising and celebrating achievement?



## 1.2 Participants

### Technology

Many participants connect to the internet via their phone, using either poor quality Wi-Fi, or costly mobile data (which they may need to reserve for other, more pressing needs).

Technologies that require fast, stable internet connections with high bandwidth are unlikely to work well for these participants. Even when using more suitable technologies, participants are liable to experience problems with connectivity. This might make it difficult to download or open tools, leading to time delays while people are speaking, and necessitating turning off functions such as video.

### Defining your online community

Your online provision may attract participants and volunteers living elsewhere in the UK, or even abroad. In one London-based conversation club, for example, participants have joined from the USA, Brazil and Sardinia as well as other parts of the UK. This can add a richness to the group as there is a greater diversity of experience to share and a motivation to find out more about each other's environments, news and routines. Participants can also continue to attend a familiar group, even if they move to a different area.

However, the potential for wider reach can create challenges, for example if your remit is to deliver for residents of a particular area. To ensure effective safeguarding, it's important that you know who everyone attending is. Participants in some areas may experience slower or unreliable internet connections affecting their ability to join in effectively, which can take up time in sessions.

*We get interest from participants and volunteers outside of our area, even outside of the UK. We decided to accept volunteers from outside our area, because they're doing the support, but we only take participants from the area we serve.*

- What technology will work for your participants? Which are they most likely to use in their everyday lives?
- Are you asking participants some pre-joining screening questions (e.g. online, phone or Google form) to establish important information including their languages, level of English and literacy, digital skills and knowledge, and type of device used?
- Are you sharing this information with volunteers running the conversation club?

- What criteria will you use to decide who to accept?
- How will you communicate your criteria to volunteers, participants, and other interested parties?
- If you do decide to open your online provision to individuals living far away, are there any implications for safeguarding? How will you address these?
- How will you support participants joining from areas with slow or unreliable internet connections?

*Where we live, it has to be online because of the distances. People are dotted about miles apart. It just wouldn't work face-to-face. And online gives people so much more flexibility. They can meet evenings, on the weekends, whenever.*



Conversation club participant - New York

## Participant experience

Participants experience online provision through their devices and their internet connections. For participants on mobile phones, that means:

- A small screen
- Mobile versions of online tools and platforms – which often work differently to versions for laptops and tablets
- Internet access via (often unreliable) Wi-Fi or (costly, often limited) mobile data
- Ability to join provision from a wide range of locations, including public locations that offer free Wi-Fi

It is important that those responsible for planning, preparing, and facilitating provision understand how participants are likely to experience it – particularly if their own experience of provision comes from large-screen devices with access to high-quality internet connections.

## Support for participants

Support for participants may include:

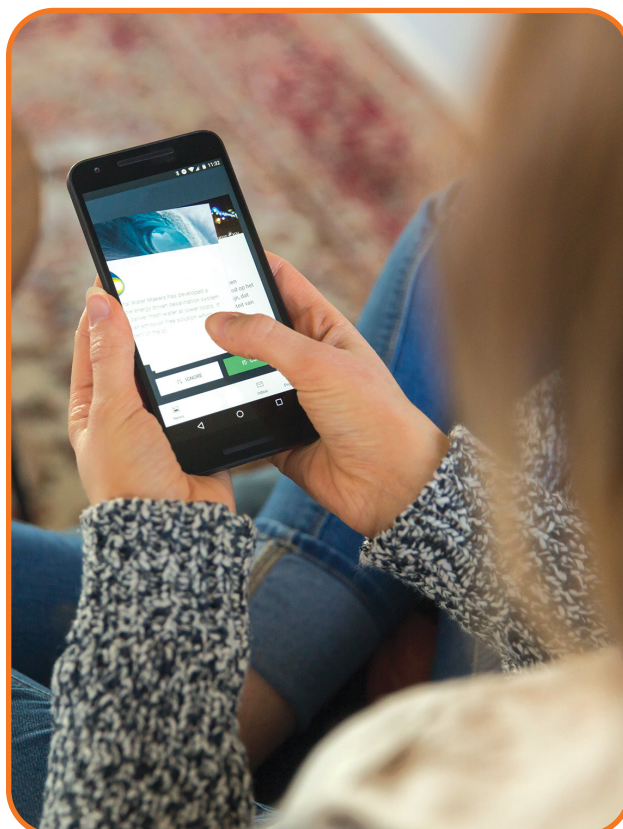
- Strategies to combat digital poverty, to support participants with devices and, in particular, connectivity
- Strategies to support participants develop digital skills. This may well include providing real-time support, particularly to help participants get online
- Sensitivity to personal issues, particularly in relation to joining sessions from home. For example, some people may prefer to turn their video off, mute from time to time, or be careful about the content of discussions
- Opportunity to raise personal issues privately. Make sure everyone has the opportunity to message or speak privately about any issues they may be facing

*We did a session the other day which was purely all the volunteers come to a Zoom session but join on your mobile phone not your laptop, and they all went, 'Wow, it's really hard for the students then, isn't it?'*

*We get the volunteers to recognise that it can be student-led, and maybe the best thing is just to ask how someone is doing, what have they done that week. At basic levels, it's, 'What food did you eat yesterday? Can you remember all the food vocabulary?' But that also brings out when they then have to report back and say, 'He doesn't seem to have any food,' 'Okay, well, we'll look into that as well.'*

*People who lack English skills can be incredibly isolated, so provision that enables you to reach out and connect them online is a great investment.*

*You really need a mobile router. Otherwise you're on your phone and just buying data constantly. So it's not just giving people an allowance but working out how you can get them access to decent and reliable Wi-Fi.*



## 1.3 Volunteers

### Managing volunteers' expectations and commitment

Although organisations cannot make the same demands of volunteers as paid staff, it is important for online conversation clubs to have consistency and regularity. Encourage volunteers to commit for a specified period of time which can be reviewed periodically. Online sessions have more flexibility as there is no need to book rooms or work around term dates – so agree session and holiday dates early on. Pairing volunteers means volunteers can miss the odd session, if needed.

### Support and training for volunteers

Identify what types of support and training volunteers may need in relation to devices and connectivity, and building their digital skills and confidence.

Topics to cover in training (online or face-to-face) might include:

- The volunteer role
- How to use the technology, for example: how to screen-share and use breakout rooms on Zoom
- Session planning, preparation, and facilitation
- Initial assessment of new participants
- Supporting participants to get online
- Online safety, for both participants and volunteers
- Other safeguarding issues
- Volunteer welfare – screen work

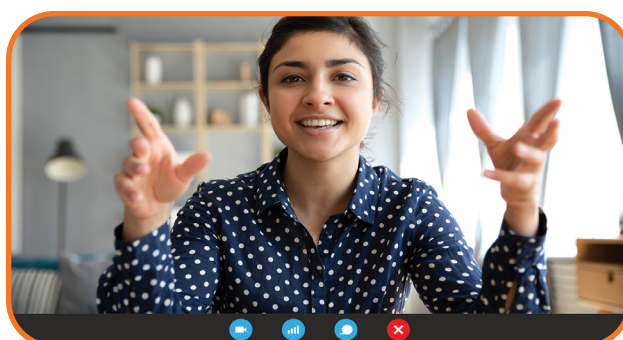
Practising together in pairs or small groups, where they can learn and make mistakes safely, may help volunteers gain confidence with the technology. Opportunities to sit in on online sessions are also useful.



- Do you have an agreement in place between volunteer and organisation, with commitments on both sides?
- Do you have an initial induction meeting between a volunteer and someone from the organisation to establish expectations and raise any issues?
- Do you have an end date in place (even if this can be extended)?



- Do volunteers have a reliable computer with access to a fast, stable internet connection? If not, can you provide it?
- Are volunteers expected to use free versions of online tools and platforms (which may have limited functionality) or can you give them access to paid-for versions?
- Do volunteers have a suitable space to use? If not, can you give them access to somewhere suitable?
- What technical training and support will volunteers need with the technology? What guidance and support can you provide to volunteers on how to cope with technical problems?
- What training and support will volunteers need to facilitate sessions and support participants effectively?





## Peer support

Peer support can be particularly valuable in the context of online provision, where volunteers may be working remotely and alone. Pairing volunteers maximises numerous benefits including monitoring and supporting participants, observing and supporting each other (peer mentoring), sustaining activities and managing challenges. It can be helpful to pair a more experienced volunteer with a new volunteer. Volunteers may appreciate co-facilitating with a teacher or coordinator from time to time in order to learn and get feedback. Visiting others' sessions to support, observe or co-facilitate can be easier online, too.



- Would an online messaging group, such as WhatsApp group (or similar) be helpful for volunteers?
- Could you pair new and more experienced volunteers?
- Could you put volunteers into teams with collective responsibility for an element of provision?
- Could you suggest or host events where volunteers can share expertise and experiences?

## Ongoing learning and support

Ways to offer volunteers ongoing learning and support include:

- Helping to facilitate online sessions yourself
- Volunteer catch-ups / supervision sessions, done 1:1 or in groups (such as a team of volunteers together responsible for an element of provision)
- Inviting volunteers to staff meetings
- Email updates
- Online noticeboards, such as [Padlet](#), to share news and resources
- Group reflection sessions
- Celebrations of volunteers' work



- Do volunteers need any training or support running online conversation clubs on the agreed platform?
- If so, could they observe or work alongside a more experienced volunteer?



## 1.4 Planning and managing volunteering-led support and sessions

### Mix and match provision

Running online sessions alongside face-to-face provision offers participants more opportunity to practise or study, and can be particularly helpful to participants who have to miss face-to-face sessions on account of (for example) caring responsibilities, work, or ill-health. Discuss with participants whether they would find it helpful to combine online support with face-to-face meetings.

Some conversation clubs are online temporarily whereas others may stay online. Some participants might be keen to go back to meeting face-to-face whereas, for others, this may present a range of barriers. For example, they may live in different local areas, parts of the country or even the world! Some may have childcare, caring or work responsibilities. Others may be unable to afford travel costs or the time to travel.



How can you involve participants and volunteers in planning changes in moving between delivery modes and finding a solution, e.g. combining or alternating online and face-to-face sessions?

### Commitment and communication

Perhaps even more so than its face-to-face equivalent, online provision benefits from consistency and regularity. Amid the pressures and distractions of daily life, it is easy for participants to forget to log on at the appointed time. Help your volunteers to set up systems to notify and remind participants ahead of time. When participants do miss a session, follow up with them to check that they are OK, and still want to attend sessions. Seek regular feedback from participants on their experience of the provision. This sort of regular communication can make online provision feel more personal and less remote.

The same applies to volunteers, who have the added burden of responsibility for sessions. Encourage volunteers to commit for specified periods of time, but review their commitment with them regularly. Agree session and holiday dates early on. Wherever possible, lighten the burden of commitment by allocating responsibility for provision to pairs or teams of volunteers – and check regularly with the individuals concerned that they are personally satisfied with arrangements. Ask individuals how arrangements and/or provision might be improved.



Are volunteers clear about any expectations around their commitment, e.g. termly?





## 1.5 Safety and privacy

### Risks and barriers

Identify the risks and barriers volunteers or participants face and what you can do to mitigate these. Potential risks relate to safeguarding and privacy, as well as risks arising from people being in their own homes.

### Safeguarding

Depending on circumstances, you may want to consider safeguarding issues in relation to:

- Lone and/or remote working by volunteers, including by phone, as well as online
- Home working by volunteers
- Participants participating from home
- Participants participating from public locations, including locations such as public transport that offer free Wi-Fi
- Creating safe online spaces for volunteers and participants, particularly participants who may have experienced trauma, such as refugees – in addition to monitoring of online session spaces in real time, this may extend to moderation of messaging groups and online noticeboards, and certainly includes sensitivity to potentially troubling topics
- Confidentiality, data protection and compliance with GDPR and other legislation relevant to disclosure of personal information (including, but not limited to, personal information required for connectivity)
- Safe and secure use of online technologies generally

Issues faced may be quite complex, such as protecting the privacy of a participant who lives in a women's refuge and wishes to stay anonymous, or how to respond to a disclosure made during a session. It will be helpful to have clear policies for volunteers to follow, informed by an accurate, up-to-date understanding of the technical affordances and constraints of whatever technology is being used.

### Implications of people being in their own homes

Be responsive to any issues participants and volunteers may have in relation to joining sessions from their homes (see page 5).



- How could you help protect a participant's privacy if they live in a women's refuge and wish to stay anonymous?
- How could you support volunteers or participants who are unable to afford the additional data costs to take part? (See **Running conversation clubs online: A guide for volunteers** for more guidance about online barriers and safety).
- What do you require in relation to online security, confidentiality, GDPR?

*We all volunteers make a group agreement with participants, on a regular basis, about confidentiality and not sharing emails. Before we set up a WhatsApp group, we make a group agreement that phone numbers won't be used in any way outside of the group. Any material posted to the group is carefully moderated.*

*In our ground rules we suggest that participants turn off their camera when children are present in their room.*



- Do you check if volunteers and participants have a suitable space to use?
- If their home situation is not suitable, is there another safe space you can suggest they could use?

# Additional useful resources

This section includes useful resources additional to those detailed in the original VELLCC resources (see A Guide for Volunteers).



## Part 2

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### Digital access, inclusion and support

- BT:  
<https://newsroom.bt.com/bt-to-help-disadvantaged-children-with-home-schooling-offering-six-months-free-internet-access/>
- Choose - Fair price comparison:  
<https://www.choose.co.uk/guide/free-computer-schemes-on-benefits.html>
- Creating online communities  
<https://cityofsanctuary.org/2020/04/02/creating-online-communities/>
- Citizens Online:  
<https://www.citizensonline.org.uk/>
- Digital access for all:  
<https://digitalaccessforall.co.uk/>
- Digital Unite:  
<https://www.digitalunite.com/>
- Future dot now:  
<https://futuresdotnow.uk/devicesdotnow/>
- Good Things Foundation:  
<https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/areas-of-work/digital-inclusion>  
<https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/projects/connecting-families%20>
- Gov.uk:  
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/get-help-with-technology-for-remote-education-during-coronavirus-covid-19>
- Jamboard getting started: [Instructions](#) and [video](#)
- Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2020:  
[https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking\\_with\\_us/whats-happening/lb-consumer-digital-index-2020-report.pdf](https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/lb-consumer-digital-index-2020-report.pdf)
- NCVO Knowhow (Page last edited 4 April, 2019) How to build an engaged online community <https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/how-to/how-to-build-an-engaged-online-community>
- Refugee Learning Stories: [Supported mobile learning in the "Third Spaces" between non-formal and formal education for displaced people – Refugee Learning Stories](#)
- Time Bank: [The answer to getting our learners online? Bicycles! - TimeBank](#)
- WaveLength: [WaveLength](#)
- WhatsApp getting started: [Instructions](#)
- Zoom getting started: [guidance](#) and [video](#) and [multilingual videos](#) (with thanks to EFA, Xenia and JCORE UK)



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## Digital skills and learning online

- Digital Unite: [Technology guides | Digital Unite](#)
  - Jamboard: [Getting Started with Google Jamboard \(Web Version\) Tutorial - YouTube](#)
  - Leeds Asylum Seekers Network:  
<https://lassn.org.uk/teaching-resources/teaching-remotely/delivery-technology/>
  - Signal: [Signal for Beginners. For some reason, people have gotten... | by Martin Shelton | Medium](#)
  - WhatsApp checklist: [Microsoft Word - WhatsApp Checklist \(literacy.org\)](#)
  - WhatsApp, getting started:  
<https://www.whatsapp.com/coronavirus/get-started/?lang=fb>
  - WhatsApp FAQ: [WhatsApp FAQ - How to download WhatsApp Desktop](#)
  - ZOOM features: [Polling for meetings – Zoom Help Center](#)
- 

## Online safety

- **Palanac, A.** 'A 'safe space' in 'cyberspace'? Refugee students in synchronous online EAP classes'  
<https://eap4socialjustice.net/2020/05/14/a-safe-space-in-cyberspace-refugee-students-in-synchronous-online-eap-classes/>
  - **Palanac, A.** (2020). 'Creating a safe space. Towards a trauma-informed ELT pedagogy for refugees.'  
*Language Issues*, 30(2), pp. 3-14
  - **Digital Unite (2020)**, Internet security:  
<https://www.digitalunite.com/technology-guides/internet-security>
- 

## Resources

- Leeds Asylum Seekers Network: [Teaching Remotely - Leeds Asylum Seekers Support Network \(lassn.org.uk\)](#)
  - Learning and work, Volunteers, English Language Learners and Conversation Clubs:  
<https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/volunteers-english-language-learners-and-conversation-clubs/>
- 

## Translation/Multilingual guides

- City of Glasgow College - BURC: [How to use Zoom in different languages – BURC](#)
- DeepL:  
<https://www.deepl.com/en/translator>
- Google translate:  
<https://translate.google.co.uk/>
- The Jewish Council for Racial Equality (Translated guides for using Zoom) [English](#), [Amharic](#), [Arabic](#), [French](#), [Farsi](#), [Kurdish Kurmanci](#), [Kurdish Sorani](#), [Lugandan](#), [Polish](#), [Somali](#), [Spanish](#), [Tigrinya](#), [Turkish](#), [Vietnamese](#).

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## Volunteering

- **Volunteers in ESOL forum:**

Discussion forum for volunteers and co-ordinators in the voluntary ESOL sector, hosted by Jiscmail and moderated by NATECLA. To subscribe, email the owners and request to be added to the mailing list:

**VOLUNTEERSINESOLFORUM-REQUEST@JISCMAIL.AC.UK**

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## Websites and apps

- Flipgrid: [Flipgrid | Empower Every Voice](#)
- Flippity: Flippity.net: [Easily Turn Google Spreadsheets into Flashcards and Other Cool Stuff](#)
- Kahoot!: [Kahoot! | Learning games | Make learning awesome!](#)
- Marco Polo: [Home - Marco Polo](#)
- Padlet: [Padlet](#)
- Quizizz: [Quizizz - The world's most engaging learning platform](#)
- Quizlet: [Learning tools and flashcards - for free! | Quizlet](#)
- Wordwall: [Wordwall | Create better lessons quicker](#)



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## A guide for organisers



For any queries please contact  
[enquiries@learningandwork.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@learningandwork.org.uk)

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