

Volunteers,
English language learners
and conversation clubs

A guide for volunteers





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Introduction



This guide is for volunteers who are planning to support migrant language learners. It is based on research and consultation with key stakeholders including volunteer organisers, volunteers and conversation club participants – and learning from successful conversation clubs across England.

In a range of settings, volunteers play a valuable role in supporting adult English language learners. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) recognises this, but has also identified that the quality of volunteer-led support varies. There is a need for better guidance and resources to support the delivery of conversation clubs, and other informal volunteer-led activities, to enhance their benefit to participants' English language skills and social connections.

MHCLG commissioned Learning and Work Institute and Learning Unlimited to research and develop resources and guidance to support the delivery of conversation clubs and other volunteer-led language practice for adult English language learners. This guide is one part of the 'Volunteers, English language learners and conversation clubs' set of resources.

The *Volunteers, English language learners and conversation clubs* set of resources also includes:

- **Conversation club resources:**
15 topic-based units for volunteers to use in English language conversation clubs.
- **Conversation club resources guidance:**
Supporting guidance on using the topic-based units.
- **English conversation practice toolkit:**
Ideas, resources and templates for volunteers to support conversation practice with migrant language learners in a range of contexts and settings.
- **Supporting introductory videos.**

Additional resources developed for organisations and organisers are:

- **A guide for organisations**
- **Research report.**

This '*Guide for volunteers*' is designed both as a guide to read through and a resource to dip into. It is divided into four main parts:

Part 1 is for people who are new to working with adult English language learners.

Part 2 is for people who are new to volunteering with this target group.

Part 3 is for volunteers who are new to running conversation clubs for English language learners, with or without support from an established organisation, or other volunteers.

Part 4 includes useful links and references for finding out more.

Migrant English language learners

Part 1

1.1 Who are migrant English language learners?

Migrant English language learners come from non-English speaking countries across the world. For example:

A re-settled Syrian man who is new to your area, and knows very little about the place and culture he and his family find themselves in.

A settled older migrant from Bangladesh. She has been here for over 20 years. She missed out on opportunities to learn English and meet people from outside her language or culture group.

A young single mother from Ghana with three pre-school children. She finds it hard to get out of the house and is looking for a local opportunity to improve her English with other mums. Ideally somewhere that provides childcare, too.

A woman from Afghanistan with no previous experience of formal education. She cannot read or write in English or her main language (Pashto).

An Iranian woman with a medical degree and professional work experience. She needs to improve her English to apply for university or find skilled work. She is attending a local ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) class. She wants more speaking practice to help prepare for an IELTS* exam.

A young Sudanese man with depression and other mental health issues. He is waiting for a decision about his asylum application. He is worried about his family left behind.

A woman from Chile who feels lonely and socially isolated. Her adult children do not live in the area. She wants more opportunities to meet and interact with other people and feels comfortable in a women only group.

An Iraqi man who has been in the UK for 10 days. He is seeking asylum. He shares the same language (Kurdish) with most of the other centre users.

A migrant from Colombia who works long unsociable hours as a cleaner so finds it difficult to attend ESOL classes.

A Hungarian hairdresser – she cannot afford an ESOL class at the right level in the area.

A teacher from Poland. He is on a waiting list for a place on an ESOL course at the local college. He wants to teach in the UK.

Find out more

For clarification on the terms *migrant*, *refugee* and *person seeking asylum*, see: www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/the-truth-about-asylum/

*IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is an internationally recognised test of English language proficiency, often needed by non-native English language speakers to support university applications.

Follow up questions: *What do you know about the people you will be supporting? How can you find out more? How might support needs vary depending on who the participants are?*

1.2 Why support language learning?

Learning English can make a huge difference to people's lives. Skills and confidence in English help migrants to:

- better understand and deal with daily life
- start to feel at home
- build connections within their local community
- get onto education and training courses relevant to their interests, experience, skills and future plans
- find work or get better jobs
- support their children's learning
- improve their health, happiness and wellbeing
- better understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens.



ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) classes for adults are run by colleges, training providers and charities across the country. Some ESOL classes are free, and some providers charge fees. This can depend on various factors, such as whether an ESOL course is accredited or not, who the funder is, what status the learner has (e.g. type of visa, jobseeker etc.). Some migrants cannot access ESOL classes for a range of reasons. For example:

- there may not be ESOL classes locally at the right level
- local classes at the right level may be full with long waiting lists
- local ESOL courses may be too expensive
- centres may not provide childcare
- people may not meet funders' criteria (e.g. visa, job-seeking or benefits status)
- travel may be difficult, or travel costs are a barrier to attending classes.

Volunteers can play a key role in supporting migrant English language learners, whether they are attending ESOL classes or not. The important distinction is that conversation clubs are not ESOL classes. Instead of formal English language teaching and learning, they provide welcoming, informal and supportive spaces for people to practise their English and build social connections – and many offer a lot more than this!

Find out more

See the *Volunteers, English language learners, conversation clubs* video 'Supporting learners'.

To read more about volunteer roles in migrant education, see the *Volunteers in Migrant Education* (VIME) website and resources: www.languagevolunteers.com/

For more information and guidance on helping people to learn English', see *Volunteers, English language learners and conversation clubs - A guide for organisations* – MHCLG **Volunteers, English language learners, and conversation clubs**. <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/volunteers-english-language-learners-and-conversation-clubs>

1.3 How can you communicate with someone who speaks very little English?

It often surprises people to find that it is possible to communicate effectively with someone who has little or even no English! Here are some strategies to try:

Grade your language

- Speak as naturally and clearly as possible – but keep your sentences short and simple.
- If you usually speak quickly, try to speak a little more slowly than usual – but don't speak so slowly that your speech becomes unnatural.
- As appropriate, use everyday common words and expressions, but avoid using slang, e.g. *broke*, *dodgy*.
- Try not to use idioms* as these can be confusing, e.g. *"There isn't room to swing a cat"*.
*An idiom is a phrase that means something different from its literal meaning.

Use non-verbal strategies

- You can use images, photos, realia (real objects), gesture and mime.

Keep reading and writing to a minimum

- Unless you are providing literacy support, it's important to focus on speaking and listening. (Ideally people who are beginners in a language, only try reading and writing words they know and understand). If some new words come up that are important for participants, you can write them clearly on coloured cards and keep the word cards for future practice, or participants can take them home to copy.

Encourage participants to support each other

- Ask other participants with shared languages to help interpret or explain.
- Encourage participants to use translation apps together or show each other how to use them independently.



2.1 What skills and qualities do volunteers need?

Sometimes people do not recognise all the valuable skills, knowledge and qualities they have, which they could usefully share with others through volunteering. See how much you have to offer by trying this mini skills and qualities audit. Ticking just some of these shows you could make a great volunteer!

Qualities

- ☐ I can encourage people to talk.
- ☐ I am a good listener.
- ☐ I am patient.
- ☐ I enjoy meeting people.
- ☐ I like helping people.
- ☐ I am welcoming/smiley.
- ☐ I have a good sense of humour.
- ☐ Any other qualities?

Having things in common

- ☐ I know what it's like to live on a tight budget.
- ☐ I speak/understand one or more language(s) other than English which are spoken by the adult migrants I am supporting/planning to support.
- ☐ I know what it's like to not understand the language.
- ☐ I remember what learning English as an adult was like.
- ☐ I have the shared experience of migrating to the UK.
- ☐ Anything else you might have in common?

Local and UK knowledge

- ☐ I know the local area well.
- ☐ I have good local networks.
- ☐ I know about local services and service providers.
- ☐ I have good knowledge about living in the UK.
- ☐ Any other local and UK knowledge?

Other useful skills and knowledge

- ☐ I have good organisational skills.
- ☐ I have other useful skills:
.....
.....
.....
.....
- ☐ Any other skills and knowledge?

2.2 Why volunteer?

People have many different reasons for volunteering. Most volunteers say they get as much out of volunteering as they put in – if not more! Identifying your motivations can help you get the most from the role. What are yours?

help others	learn new skills	better than being alone at home
say thanks and give back	get more involved in my local community	build my confidence
meet new people	volunteering as a placement for a training course	learn more about the local area
develop my own skills and confidence in English	help people to feel welcome and more at home in the local area	broaden my horizons
keep busy	learn more about other cultures	become a role model within your community
thinking of becoming an ESOL teacher	valuable experience to add to my CV	... any others?

Find out more

See the *Volunteers, English language learners, conversation clubs* video 'What volunteers get from the role'.

To find out more about volunteering, see: www.gov.uk/government/get-involved/take-part/volunteer

2.3 What else should volunteers consider?

This section covers several important aspects of volunteering for volunteers to be aware of, find out more about and follow up, if necessary:

- Health and Safety
- DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) - a criminal record check that is required when working with vulnerable adults and children
- Signposting
- Safeguarding
- Sensitivity when talking to refugees, asylum seekers and trafficked people
- Organisational policies.

Health & Safety

Volunteers are not expected to be Health and Safety experts, but everyone needs to help ensure any volunteer support is provided in a safe environment. Make sure you find out:

- about the fire exit routes and assembly points
- who the key people are, e.g. Health and Safety officer, first aider and safeguarding officer - and where the First Aid box is.

DBS

DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) is a criminal record check that is required if you are working with or supporting children and/or vulnerable adults. If you are volunteering through a centre or organisation, they should check you have a current DBS check, or help to organise a DBS check for you. Alternatively, you can request one yourself: www.gov.uk/request-copy-criminal-record.

Signposting

This means helping people find out about and access support from existing organisations or services so that they get the most appropriate help. It is very important that volunteers do not try to give professional advice themselves but signpost to the most appropriate support. For example, if you spot signs of financial hardship, distress, ill-health, domestic violence or suspect someone is a victim of people trafficking, who could you signpost to?

Safeguarding

Safeguarding essentially means protecting people's health, wellbeing, safety and human rights, and enabling them to live free from harm, abuse and neglect. It is fundamental to creating high-quality services for people, and it is an essential part of planning a community club. The key principles of safeguarding, as set out by the UK government, include:

- **Empowerment:** presumption of person led decisions and informed consent.
- **Protection:** support and representation for those in greatest need.
- **Prevention:** it is better to take action before harm occurs.
- **Proportionality:** proportionate and least intrusive response appropriate to the risk presented.
- **Partnership:** local solutions through services working with their communities. Communities have a part to play in preventing, detecting and reporting neglect and abuse.
- **Accountability:** accountability and transparency in delivering safeguarding.

If you are working in a centre, or as part of an organisation, make sure you know what their safeguarding policy is, and who you should report any safeguarding concerns to.

From: SpEC (Speaking English with Confidence)
Volunteer training toolkit



Image: Paul Hickinbotham

Sensitivity when talking to refugees, asylum seekers and trafficked people

Some migrant language learners and volunteers may have experienced war and other types of trauma in their lives. It is important to be mindful of this when providing support and framing questions. Student Action for Refugees provide some valuable advice for their volunteers:

People get very worried about what they can and can't talk about with refugees, but actually very few subjects are taboo if approached in the right way. Use your common sense and be sensitive like you would in any conversation - and if you see that the person is uncomfortable, change the subject. Make sure that it is a two-way conversation, if you are asking lots of questions then make sure you are happy to share the same information about your life ...

- **Reasons for leaving home country:** You may be fascinated to understand more about this, but don't ask. People may well tell you though, and feel free to ask questions and get into a conversation about it if they do. If you want to find out more, read the news. Also offering your lengthy opinion on, e.g. the war in Syria is probably inappropriate
- **Journey to the UK:** These journeys are very often arduous and distressing. People may tell you about them, but again don't ask.
- **Immigration status:** Whether a person is an asylum seeker, refugee, refused asylum seeker or anything else has nothing to do with you, and they will not value you asking. Much of their lives here will be, or will have been, dominated by their status.

See: www.star-network.org.uk/

Policies

If you are volunteering through an organisation, they should have policies which cover all key areas including Health & Safety, Safeguarding and Equal Opportunities. It is a good idea to familiarise yourself with these.

- **War:** Many refugees have experienced war, so generally offering your own (intellectual rather than experiential) opinions about a current war is probably inappropriate.
- **Family:** Generally, even if there has been a tragedy, people tend to like to talk about their families but be sensitive and if the person seems uncomfortable, change the subject! In activities give learners a choice to talk about a family member or a friend as some refugees might find it difficult to talk about their family.
- **Home countries:** It's absolutely fine to ask where someone is from, ask which part of the country and whether they're from a town/city or the countryside/a village, too. Although you shouldn't ask why they left, generally people love to talk about where they have come from and to compare their country with this one.
- **Politics and religion:** Many people love a good conversation about politics or religion - but not everyone. So just use your common sense and move on if people appear uncomfortable or if it gets too heated. Big group discussions are best avoided unless you know the group very well. And remember that this is not the place for anyone to try to convert anyone else to their point of view or religion (including you).

Find out more

<https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/safeguarding/what-is-safeguarding>

www.gov.uk/request-copy-criminal-record

www.welcomelanguageclubs.eu/en/language-club-toolkit/setting-up-a-language-learning-club/some-basics/getting-started/



Conversation clubs for beginners

Part 3

3.1 What are conversation clubs?

Conversation clubs come in many shapes and sizes. While each conversation club is unique, they usually provide an informal, welcoming space for adult migrants to practise their English, build confidence and develop social connections. Conversation clubs can have other features, such as:

- Some may be for specific groups, e.g. Syrian refugees or local women, and others may focus on specific activities (e.g. cooking, visiting places).
- Some have just one or two volunteers present, whereas others have a large team of people including a volunteer organiser and other centre staff.
- Some have input from other service providers, e.g. to offer health advocacy support or to help signpost to other support or services.
- Some club sessions are pre-planned, others are more flexible and spontaneous, responding to who comes and what they would like to talk about.
- Some conversation clubs support participants to learn about and access local services, go on visits and invite in guest speakers.
- Conversation clubs are usually free – but sometimes there may be a small charge to attend or an invitation to contribute towards the session or the refreshments.
- Sometimes, if travel costs are a barrier to attendance, these costs are covered for participants.
- Some offer refreshments, snacks or even a meal.
- Some conversation club organisers and participants fundraise to help cover additional costs.

Conversation clubs are **not** formal English classes, so volunteers do not need to be qualified ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) teachers. Volunteers, like ESOL teachers, do not need to have English as their first language. In fact, it can be extremely helpful when volunteers share one or more languages with participants.

Although conversation clubs encourage participants to attend regularly – and many keep a record of attendance – others believe it is important that participants know they are welcome to drop in whenever they can and do not keep a record of attendance.



With thanks to Xenia for the photograph and the link

Find out more

This video from the Speaking English with Confidence project shows participants talking about why they attend Conversation Clubs: <https://youtu.be/VH0nGeY9-9U>

This video from Xenia describes their approach and the impact of their club: <https://vimeo.com/386723503>.

To find out more about Xenia, and access their free resources, see: www.xenia.org.uk

3.2 How do you set up a conversation club?

Some people volunteer at conversation clubs that are already established and have an organiser. Others decide to set one up themselves.

This section covers some key things to consider if you are setting up a conversation club from scratch.

Respond to local need

Check there is the interest and need for a conversation club in your area. You can speak to staff from local organisations, education and service providers such as colleges, charities, community groups, libraries, schools and children's centres, to find out what else is going on.

There may already be several conversation clubs taking place, but there may still be an unmet need, e.g. a local daytime one in school hours to make it easier for participants, especially women, with young children.

If you plan to volunteer in a 'City of Sanctuary', there will be local organisers who will have a good idea of what is already happening and where, and where there may be unmet need.

Find a place to meet

If you don't already have a venue, here are some suggestions of places which may be happy to host your sessions:

- Local community centres
- Spaces linked to places of worship (although some people may not feel as comfortable in a place of worship)
- Museums
- Libraries (they may also support you to incorporate a book club)
- Schools or children's centres are suitable if the conversation club is mostly for parents of young children. N.B. You may need to be a school parent and/or registered volunteer at that setting
- A friendly local café - although check if they are willing to provide some refreshments, or if you would be expected to buy refreshments
- Universities
- Parks and markets – all you really need is somewhere to sit!

If you live in a 'City of Sanctuary', there may be a host of possible venues, such as the local theatre or university. The City of Sanctuary co-ordinator may be able to suggest some venues to contact.

Decide on the day, time and frequency

Think about the best days, times and frequency for the people you hope will join your club. Many conversation clubs are 1 – 1.5 hours long but some are shorter – and some are as long as 3 hours. Most conversation clubs meet weekly, although some meet fortnightly or monthly, e.g. the first Sunday of the month. Regularity is important so people get into the habit of attending and don't have to remember random dates and times. Here are a few things to check:

- Does it need to be while children are at school?
- Would evenings/weekends be better if people have jobs?
- Do you have people who are on medication, e.g. for depression? People on some medications feel they function better in the afternoon.
- Some days and times such as Friday afternoons may clash with prayer times.

Advertise your Conversation club

Here are a few suggestions to help you get the word out:

- Word of mouth, social media and tapping into local networks can make a big difference.
- Make a simple postcard or flyer. Keep text to a minimum but include all key information, e.g. who your club is for, where, when, whether children are welcome, how to join or find out more – and that it's free!
- Ask local centres to display your publicity, e.g. local colleges and ESOL providers, libraries, community centres, GP surgeries, children's centres, schools, faith groups, food banks, charities (especially any providing clothes or small items for newly-arrived refugees), supermarkets and local shops.
- Local stakeholders are usually happy to help spread the word so speak to relevant local service providers, migrant networks and charities, etc.
- If you are in an area with long waiting lists for local ESOL provision, you may find there is a lot of demand for your conversation club. Colleges and other ESOL centres can signpost adults they cannot place on a course. You may even need to plan how to manage a waiting list, too!

Consider children

If your club has parents who need to bring young children, there are some additional things to consider:

- Is it possible to provide a crèche? Or find DBS-checked volunteers who can help to look after children in the same space?
- If your group has new mothers, perhaps choose early afternoon when the children are likely to be asleep in their pushchairs (but consider the space needed for this)
- If the children are mobile, you will need to consider the venue carefully from a child safety point of view. Check if the centre can provide free crèche support. Alternatively, could you set up a volunteer-run crèche?
- A children's centre is ideal. Perhaps you could run the group within a 'Stay and play' session but you may need to be already registered as a volunteer with the centre. Safeguarding practice, especially with regard to DBS checks.
- Libraries are child-friendly spaces and may have toys as well as books to help keep children occupied.



Find out more

See the *Volunteers, English language learners, conversation clubs* video 'Planning conversation clubs'.

To find out more about 'City of Sanctuary UK', see: <https://cityofsanctuary.org>

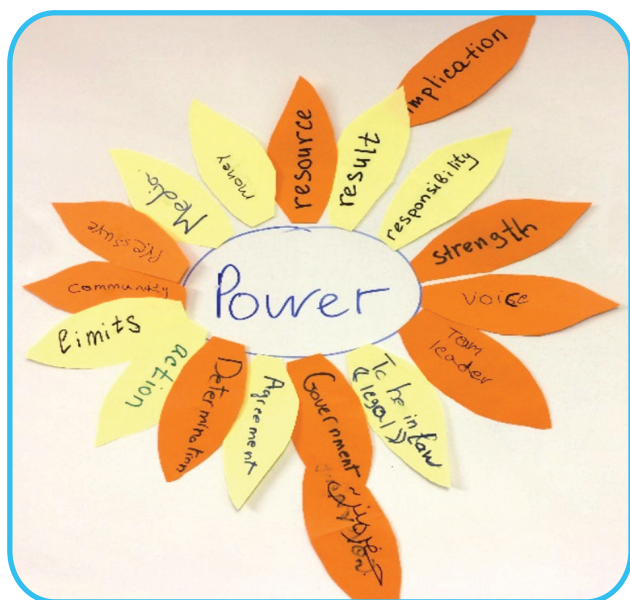
Image: Courtesy of Wakefield 'Theatre of Sanctuary' Conversation Café.
© Robling Photography

3.3 How do you run a conversation club?

Many conversation clubs choose a different topic to talk about in each session which, ideally, has been suggested by, or negotiated with, participants. This could be, for example, food, cooking, football, local services, the local area, or something in the news. Others may have a craft or skills focus such as sewing, ping pong or even making dumplings! Some arrange trips and invite guest speakers. Many use a mix of approaches.

It is important to get to know your participants, their reasons for attending, get a sense of the level of their skills in English, find out what they are interested in talking about and agree some topics together. If conversations are based around your participants' interests, you create a strong, shared community together and you can't go far wrong!

You can find ideas and resources for negotiating topics in the *English conversation practice toolkit*. This includes creating a word flower or pizza to find out more about the participants in your group.



Should I 'teach' English?

Conversation clubs are all about 'facilitating' and supporting conversation practice, building confidence, communication skills and fluency, rather than correcting mistakes or 'teaching'. However, sometimes participants are keen to know how to pronounce something, to be corrected if they feel they have made a mistake in what they said, or they may ask you something in particular, e.g. "How do you ask for things in a shop?". In cases like this, it is important to respond and try to provide an opportunity to practise the language they want to use in a meaningful way. For example, in response to a question about shopping, you could ask participants to select some images of things they would like to buy from the picture pack and practise asking for them in a shop, asking how much they cost or asking other questions about them.

In relation to grammar, the best strategy is to encourage participants to develop 'Learning to learn' skills, support each other and follow up grammar queries independently through free on-line English sites, research or useful study guides such as the Raymond Murphy series: www.cambridge.org/gb/cambridgeenglish/authors/raymond-murphy

If someone has struggled to explain something, you can help by saying it yourself and checking back with them, without any further comment. Or, if helpful, you can simplify the statement so that it is easy for them to understand and try saying again.

A word flower produced by English for Action participants www.efalondon.org

Find out more

For more ideas and guidance, see **Volunteers, English language learners, and conversation clubs** *Conversation club resources and English conversation practice toolkit*. <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/volunteers-english-language-learners-and-conversation-clubs>

How should I select and use resources?

- A bag of magazines, a picture pack, a tablet or mobile phone are invaluable. You can cut out and collect interesting images from magazines and newspapers or save pictures from the internet on to devices. In sessions you can display, project or hand round the images or device during the session if you don't have access to a projector or a printer.
- Think about diversity when selecting pictures and avoid stereotypes.
- Materials aimed at children are unsuitable for adults – unless directly related to the participants' own children or the topic. For example, knowing the names of animals in a zoo is unlikely to be a priority for an adult. Instead focus on practising the language that's important to them, e.g. words, phrases or conversations relating to topics they have chosen.
- If you are writing key words on cards, use lower case as words in capital letters are much more difficult to read, especially for people who are new to literacy. However, do use capital letters at the beginning of words where needed, e.g. for names of people, places, days, street names and if the word is commonly seen in capital letters, e.g. signs such as EXIT.

IMPORTANT: Unless used sparingly, handouts and worksheets can make a club feel more like an ESOL class and actually stop conversations as participants stop talking and focus on reading, writing and grammar instead. Some clubs provide handouts and worksheets related to the topic for participants to take home for further practice.

Mobile phones

- Although they can be a distraction and interfere, mobile phones can be a great asset too! Participants can show each other photos on their phones – a great way into a really interesting conversation. They can find an image or even a sound to help understanding and, if that doesn't help, use a translation app.
- It's a good idea to talk about mobile phones as part of the group agreement process. For example, participants can agree to keep them turned off or on silent and only take or make very important calls outside the room. They can also agree to use them as part of a conversation and to help themselves or each other understand something new.



Image: Unsplash.com

3.5 What shall I do in my first conversation club session?

The first session of a conversation club can be anxiety-inducing for volunteers (and participants!) because there are many 'unknowns', for example:

Will anyone come?

Will people talk?

Who will come?

Will they come back?

Will people enjoy it and find it useful?

What will we talk about?

Before the session

- Choose a very general topic which is likely to be of interest to most participants, e.g. food, cooking, the weather, the local area. * Collect useful resources, e.g. leaflets, photos, etc. related to this topic and the local area. Prepare some starter questions on the topic, too.
- Come early to set up the room. Think about how to use the layout to make it comfortable and sociable, e.g. putting chairs in a circle. Some clubs also provide games and books for participants to use or borrow.
- Organise some refreshments, even if it's only a jug of water and some biscuits.

During the session

- Make sure everyone gets a warm, personal welcome as they arrive.
- Start with a general chat then a fun ice-breaker activity to help participants relax and start to think about the topic in a relaxed way (see ideas in **Volunteers, English language learners, and conversation clubs** *English conversation practice toolkit* – MHCLG).
- Spend some time finding out about each other and discussing which topics participants may be interested in talking about at future sessions. Try to ensure participants do most of the talking!
- Use some question prompts to get the conversation started on the topic you have chosen (see **Volunteers, English language learners, and conversation clubs** *Conversation club resources* – MHCLG). If you have a large group, divide participants into pairs or small groups to explore the topic. Encourage participants to ask each other questions, too, so the session is led by the group's needs and interests.
- Go with the flow and don't worry if the group leads the conversation elsewhere, e.g. if there is something in the news that people want to talk about, or if a participant has some news they want to share, or brings a problem to the session which others can help to resolve.
- Make a note of any new words so you can help participants review and practise using them in future sessions.
- Find out what everyone would like to talk about next time and get some feedback from participants at the end of the session.

Find out more

For ideas and suggestions on different ways to approach topics based on your participants' interests and priorities, see **Volunteers, English language learners, and conversation clubs** *Conversation club resources and English conversation practice toolkit*. <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/volunteers-english-language-learners-and-conversation-clubs>

After the session

Reflect on how the session went, for example:

- Did everyone find the topic interesting?
- Was the language level of conversation appropriate? Or was it too easy/hard for some?
- How were the group dynamics? Did anyone look left out or uncomfortable?
- Did everyone speak? Did anyone speak too much?

Regular **reflection** will help you run a successful conversation club. Use your reflections to help you plan the next session. For example:

- If the group have not quite 'gelled', do some more ice breakers and games.
- If one person dominated the discussion, prepare some friendly intervention strategies (for suggestions, see **Volunteers, English language learners, and conversation clubs** Section 3.6: *Top tips and English conversation practice toolkit* – MHCLG).
- If participants didn't find the topic interesting, actively involve them in discussing and choosing the topics they would like to cover.
- If some people found it hard to participate because of their level of English, think about how to pair participants or set up small groups differently so participants with lower level English can chat with someone with a shared language, or encourage participants to help each other with translation apps.

A few things to avoid

- Don't make assumptions about people based on their English, e.g. perfectionists are often less willing to 'have a go' as they want to get it right, so it is easy to underestimate what they are able to say/understand.
- Hold back on expressing strong opinions yourself as this can close down discussions.
- Be prepared to stop or change a conversation if it is not engaging participants, or if it becomes inappropriate in any way.

What went well? Why?
What didn't go so well? Why?
What can I do differently next time?



Image: Unsplash.com

3.6 Conversation club TOP TIPS!

Big groups

Big groups can be fun as there can be a lot of energy in the room and you can do more games and activities. If you are working alongside other volunteers, each volunteer can work with a small group of participants. If you have a large group to manage on your own, start with a whole group activity, chat or "circle time". This helps the whole group get to know each other better. Then break into pairs or smaller groups for main conversations and activities. 3-5 people is ideal.

Otherwise you may find just a few people do most of the talking and many participants speak very little, if at all. Everyone can report back to the whole group at the end of each conversation before moving on to the next one.

Checking understanding

Avoid direct questions such as: Do you understand? In many cultures and contexts, people feel more comfortable saying "Yes" rather than "No", so this question still won't give you the information you are looking for. Instead you can ask questions to check. For instance, imagine your group are going on a trip to the museum. Instead of re-capping the information yourself and asking if they understand, ask:

Where are we meeting?
What time are we meeting?
Where are we going?
What do you need to bring?

How are we getting there?
What time are we coming back?
Who can you contact on the day
if you have any problems?

Children

Children can be a sensitive topic. Some groups may include a mix of people including parents with children, people who are trying to be parents, parents who may have lost a child or may be separated from their families. Getting to know your participants will help you get a better sense of whether to include or avoid this topic.

Where club participants are all parents with children living with them, topics such as children's health, well-being and education, local support for families and free activities for children in the local area are likely to be very popular. Parents will probably be able to suggest a lot more!

Participants who have lived in the area for a while, may well have a lot of useful information and suggestions to share with parents who are new to the UK. Remember to signpost, if needed, and consider inviting in a specialist from your centre or from another organisation, if appropriate.



Equality, diversity and cross-cultural communication

People who settle in the UK, or who are in the process of applying to settle in the UK, are often very interested to find out more about living in the UK, the area they are living in and the diversity of people they are likely to meet and interact with. They may want to find out about and discuss their rights as ethnic or religious minorities as well as those of other minority groups, e.g. relating to sexual orientation and gender identity.

Be mindful that some features which affect the make-up of your group may be ‘invisible’, e.g. a disability such as arthritis, dyslexia or a mental health condition. Also, with many migrants coming from countries which criminalise and persecute people who identify as LGBTQ+, some participants may be less likely to disclose their sexual identity.

Issues and questions may come up which need signposting to a specialist, or consider inviting a specialist in.

Facilitating

Use a range of strategies to get your participants to do most of the talking – otherwise they will only practise listening skills!

Give people time to respond and try not to finish people’s sentences. The thinking time (cognitive load) is much greater for people working in a new language so they may need a bit longer to respond.



Ground rules

If you have a reasonably steady and consistent group, agreeing how to work together can be a powerful activity which gives participants a sense of ownership of their group.

Invite everyone to discuss and agree how best to work together. People will probably come up with things like:

- Respect each other
- Support each other
- Come on time
- Put our phones on silent
- Learn together
- Help everyone talk.

Participants can then record their ground rules on a flipchart sheet or poster to display every week or refer to when needed.

If someone doesn’t understand

If someone doesn’t understand what you or another participant said, the speaker can:

- repeat it exactly (or a little slower) as it gives a second chance to listen
- rephrase it, i.e. say the same thing using different and easier words
- mime, draw, write it down, find it in a dictionary, find a picture or a sound on a phone/tablet
- ask other participants to explain it in a shared/ common language.

If you are going to play a game – giving simple, clear instructions to language learners is harder than it looks! Instead, mime, do a short demonstration using a more fluent speaker or another volunteer rather than giving verbal instructions

If one person dominates/talks too much

It can be common for any group to have one or two people who like to do most of the talking. There can be many reasons for this – enthusiasm, being extrovert, loneliness, having few opportunities to talk to others, willingness to ‘have a go’, having a higher level of English, or thinking it is culturally expected of them, e.g. as elders! It can be a good idea to discuss together the importance of everyone giving space for others to speak, it’s a good idea to have some intervention strategies ready. For example, break in when you can and say:

Let’s hear from the others now.

Shall we find out what others think?

Sometimes it works to give participants who speak a lot some extra responsibilities. For example, you can invite them to ask the rest of the group some questions.

If someone rarely speaks

Although you want everyone to participate fully and equally, some people are naturally quiet, and their preference is to listen first. Perfectionists may need encouragement to take the risk to speak when they are not sure if what they are saying is correct.

Quiet people may feel more comfortable talking if you split the group into pairs for an activity. You may want to chat with the non-speaker individually. You could ask questions like: *“How do you feel about the conversation club?” “Would you like to speak more?” “How can we help you to speak more?”*

Learn through doing

Doing things is one of the most effective ways of learning for adult ESOL learners, especially if it’s doing something relevant to their lives. So, encourage conversation club participants to get actively involved, e.g. planning a journey together, organising a fundraising event, giving practical advice for a real problem, showing someone how to download and use a helpful app.

Learning to learn

Sometimes, participants ask how to spell a word or want to copy a new word down to help them remember it. Encourage participants to keep a vocabulary notebook for important new words and look at it regularly. This can help with developing important ‘Learning to learn’ skills too. Some conversation clubs also offer participants a worksheet or handout to take home for extra practice – this is fine, too.

Literacy

Some participants may be new to reading and writing in English, and some may not read or write in any language. For these participants:

- Use lots of pictures, mime and realia (i.e. all without written text) to support participants to develop their speaking skills.
- Try to signpost these participants to an ESOL provider, ideally one offering ESOL literacy classes.
- Remember, the main focus for conversation clubs is speaking and listening – not reading and writing, so keep literacy work to a minimum.
- If possible, suggest or provide some literacy practice activities they can do at home.

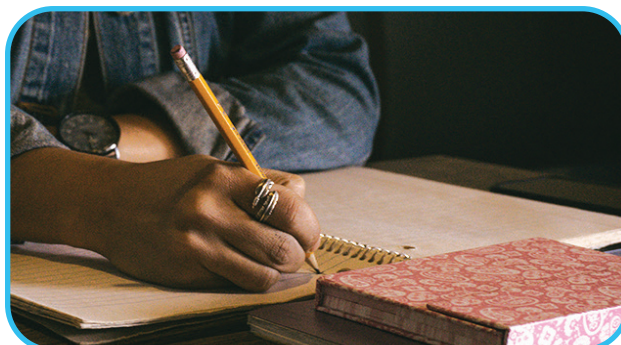


Image: Unsplash.com

Mixed level groups

Mixed level groups can be challenging to manage – especially if you are new to conversation clubs. You may be able to split participants into groups by level with other volunteers. If this is not possible, talk together about how the group can support everyone to participate. Help more advanced participants to appreciate that supporting beginners, is great English practice for them and a form of volunteering which will be good for their CVs.

Othering

Try to avoid 'othering', i.e. using language or references that make people feel different or subordinate. For example, if you are talking about festivals, a question like: 'How do people celebrate this in your country?' implies the country where participants live now, is not their country. Also, your participants may have lived in several countries. So, asking: 'How do people celebrate this in other countries that you know well?' does not make people feel as if the UK is not their home, but also recognises and draws on their life experience.

Ideas for framing questions to avoid 'othering' are included in the mind maps for each unit, see **Volunteers, English language learners, and conversation clubs** *English conversation practice toolkit* – MHCLG.

Problem tree

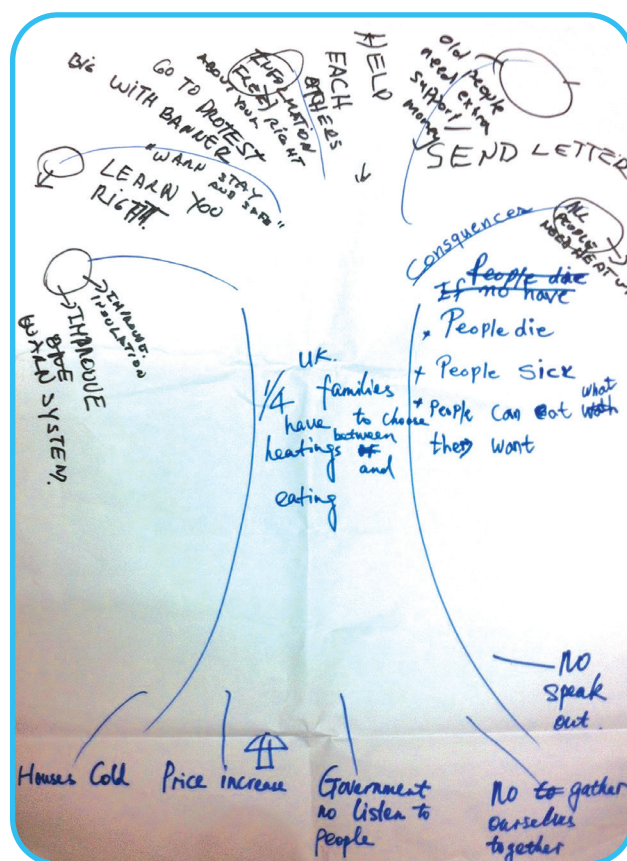
Image: English for Action <https://efalondon.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/energy-tree-1-e1415030525474.jpg>

Participatory approaches and activities

Participatory tools and activities are very effective in getting participants actively involved in discussing issues affecting their daily lives. Everyone can get actively involved and contribute meaningfully, drawing on and sharing their existing knowledge and experience. Participatory activities empower participants, build independence and confidence and encourage participants to find practical ways of making or influencing change in their daily lives or community.

These activities usually require minimal resources, such as a picture pack, some sheets of paper and coloured card or pens. For example, creating a 'Problem Tree' together about an issue such as homelessness gives the opportunity to discuss a particular issue in detail and explore its root causes, local effects and possible solutions,

See **Volunteers, English language learners, and conversation clubs** *English conversation practice toolkit* (MHCLG) for more participatory tools, activities and guidance.



Peer learning

Ask to observe someone with experience facilitating a conversation club with a similar group. Consider what went well and why. There is always a lot to learn from things that didn't go as planned, too!

Progress

Conversation clubs provide an invaluable opportunity for participants to try using the language they are learning – however, learning takes time. The speed of individual participant's progress in speaking and increases in confidence will vary and depend on many factors, including:

- **The daily environment** and how many opportunities they have to speak English. For instance, someone who mostly stays at home, or has any job where interaction is minimal, or mainly communicates with other speakers of their main language, is unlikely to progress as quickly as someone who uses English regularly in their everyday life.
- **Feeling safe** is a fundamental need for everyone's well-being. Being unsettled and having pressing concerns about daily survival can impact on learning and the ability to concentrate. It is likely that some participants may be waiting for an immigration decision, are struggling to make ends meet or may be feeling depressed.
- **Previous experience of formal education** and having existing study skills make a big difference to progress. Some participants will automatically make notes, as needed. However, some participants who have not had this opportunity will benefit from support with 'Learning to learn' such as keeping a small vocabulary book for important words they want to remember and practise.
- **Being multi-lingual** or knowing another similar language can help with understanding and using new languages more confidently and easily.
- **Age** - while children learn languages naturally, adults generally have to work harder to gain fluency and clarity.
- **Health** – some participants may be taking medication which impacts on their ability to concentrate and/or remember new information easily.



Refreshments

Chatting over a cup of tea or coffee can be a good ice breaker and a welcome hot drink for participants who may have been working. Some clubs offer a more substantial snack or meal, which can be significant for participants who face financial hardship.

Repetition and long-term memory

Most language learners have to come across a word, phrase or structure a number of times before it goes into their long-term memory. You can help conversation club participants with this by encouraging them to keep a note of key words and phrases they want to remember and practise using.

They could use a notebook or their phones for this. Encourage them to look back at their key words regularly and try them out in the conversation club. Although conversation clubs are not ESOL classes for teaching English, it's likely new words will come up though participant questions and peer learning.

Using other languages

Although conversation clubs provide opportunities to practise English, using shared languages can be very helpful. For example, in mixed-level groups, participants with more English can help beginners understand instructions, translate new words and provide explanations in their shared language.

Using other languages in the group can be a good conversation topic. Participants can identify some advantages, and possible disadvantages, and how best to manage these, e.g. if the majority of participants share one language but one or two people don't.

When people disagree

Sometimes, participants may have very different opinions and as a conversation club facilitator, you can help address this in several ways.

It can be helpful to discuss and create a 'group agreement'. As part of this process, participants can agree they have a right to disagree with each other, but no-one has the right to insult anyone.



Image: Unsplash.com

This guide is part of *Volunteers, English language learners and conversation clubs* – a set of free resources which can be viewed and downloaded from:

www.learningandwork.org.uk/resource/volunteers-english-language-learners-and-conversation-clubs/

Migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum

A large number of local and national voluntary organisations offer support to migrants, refugees, and people seeking asylum. Here are just a few:

British Red Cross	www.redcross.org.uk/get-help/get-help-as-a-refugee
City of Sanctuary UK	https://cityofsanctuary.org/
Refugee Action	www.refugee-action.org.uk/
Refugee Council	www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/
Scottish Refugee Council	www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/
Welsh Refugee Council	https://wrc.wales/

Volunteering

DBS checks	www.gov.uk/request-copy-criminal-record
NATECLA: Framework for Good Practice in Voluntary ESOL	Principles of good practice for organisations in the use of volunteers to support English language learning http://natecla.org.uk/uploads/media/208/16911.pdf
Safeguarding	https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/safeguarding/what-is-safeguarding
Volunteering	www.gov.uk/government/get-involved/take-part/volunteer
Volunteers in Migrant Education (VIME)	www.languagevolunteers.com/

Conversation clubs

Language clubs for life skills	www.welcomelanguageclubs.eu/en/language-club-toolkit/
SpEC (Speaking English with Confidence) project	https://youtu.be/VH0nGeY9-9U
Student Action for Refugees	www.star-network.org.uk/
Xenia	https://xenia.org.uk/ https://vimeo.com/386723503

Language learning

British Council: ESOL Nexus professional development module on how to support ESOL learners 1:1

<https://esol.britishcouncil.org/content/teachers/staff-room/continuing-professional-development/introduction-teaching-esol-one-one>

IELTS (International English Language Testing System)

www.ielts.org/

Essential Grammar in Use – Raymond Murphy self-study grammar book series

www.cambridge.org/gb/cambridgeenglish/authors/raymond-murphy

NATECLA - the National Association for teachers of English and community languages to adults (open to volunteers, too)

www.natecla.org.uk/

Free resources

Learning and Work: Participatory approaches

www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/LW-Citizen-Curriculum-Activity-Pack-FINAL.pdf

NATECLA: Links and resources to help volunteers support migrants, refugees or others to learn or practise English

www.natecla.org.uk/content/668/For-volunteer-ESOL-teachers

Our languages

www.ourlanguages.co.uk

Talk English

www.talk-english.co.uk/

Volunteers in Language Learning for Refugees

Resources for organisations using volunteers to support English language learning, including detailed toolkits for organisations, for teachers working with volunteers, and for volunteers themselves
<https://volunteersinlanguagelearning.eu/>

Volunteers,
English language learners
and conversation clubs

A guide for volunteers



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