

A photograph of three young women of South Asian descent smiling and talking. The woman on the left wears a maroon shirt and a brown headscarf. The woman in the center wears a white t-shirt with the text 'THE FUTURE' and a colorful patterned headscarf. The woman on the right wears a black top and a black headscarf. The background is a blurred indoor setting. Overlaid on the image are several colorful, semi-transparent geometric shapes: a large orange shape in the upper left, a green shape in the upper right, a red shape in the center, and a blue shape in the lower left.

Volunteers,
English language learners
and conversation clubs

Conversation club resources guidance

Introduction



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 toolkit is one part of the '*Volunteers, English language learners and conversation clubs*' set of resources.

Other resources in this set developed for volunteers are:

- **Conversation club resources:**
15 topic-based units for volunteers to use in English language conversation clubs.
- **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.
- **A guide for volunteers:**
Guidance for people who are new to volunteering, supporting English language learners or running conversation clubs.
- **Supporting introductory videos.**

Additional resources developed for organisations and organisers are:

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

This supporting guidance has been developed to support the use of the **Conversation club resources** – a set of 15 topic-based units for use by volunteers running English conversation club sessions for adult English language learners. The units are based on research, observation and learning from successful conversation clubs across England.

The units were developed for use by volunteers who may have received little or no training, including people who are volunteering independently without support through an organisation. They were developed for 1:1, small or large group face-to-face use in conversation clubs. However, much of the content could be used or adapted for online support using a platform such as Zoom, which also offers screen sharing, whiteboards and break out rooms which work well with large groups. Online interaction and language practice can be extremely valuable for participants who are housebound, social distancing or self-isolating.

If you are new to working with migrants and/or supporting English language learners you may also find it helpful to read or dip into the other '*Volunteers, English language learners and conversation clubs*' resources for volunteers.



All resources in the *Volunteers, English language learners and conversation clubs* set are free to download from: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/volunteers-english-language-learners-and-conversation-clubs>

Key principles and good practice

The units in the **Conversation club resources** pack are based on some key principles and good practice:

- Conversation clubs are friendly, supportive and informal spaces providing opportunities for participants to practise speaking English in a welcoming setting facilitated by one or more volunteers.
- Conversation clubs **are not** English (ESOL) classes, i.e. no 'teaching' expected or required! However, some participants may ask questions about English and most like to learn new words.
- Participants attend for many reasons and getting to know why can help volunteers tailor sessions to best meet participants' interests and needs.
- Conversation clubs work best when they are based on shared interests, and participants themselves discuss and decide what they would like to talk about.
- Conversation clubs provide important opportunities for participants, especially those who may be socially isolated, to meet and interact with other people.
- Learning English can make a huge difference to people's lives. Skills and confidence in English help migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, 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.



The topic-based units



This pack includes ideas for conversations and activities for the following 15 topics:

1. Shopping



2. Home



3. Family and friends



4. Culture and creativity



5. Health



6. Education and skills



7. Nature and the environment



8. Travel and transport



9. Training and work



10. Local history and landmarks



11. Food and cooking



12. Money



13. Having fun!



14. What's new?



15. Technology



Each topic-based unit has four main parts:

- A mind map (page 1)
- Session ideas at a glance (page 2)
- Guidance for some example conversation-based activities (page 3)
- Supporting resources which can be printed, projected or displayed on a tablet (one or more additional pages)

There are no set times for each topic or activity. Each topic could be explored for between one and five sessions depending on the level of interest of participants, their interest in digging deeper into a topic and exploring it from a range of perspectives, and whether there are opportunities to broaden the topic by going on visits and/or inviting a speaker in to the conversation club to give more information and answer questions.

Likewise, conversation club times vary considerably. As a very rough guide, each mind map box/perspective could generate at least 30 minutes of discussion with some prompting, mixing up groups and asking groups to report back on their discussions (good for language development) without using any additional tools or activities. A two-hour session, for example, could be divided as follows:

- 15 minutes opening chat/circle time
- 20 minutes getting started on the topic
- 30 minutes for main conversation 1
- 10 minutes break
- 30 minutes main conversation 2
- 15 minutes closing chat/circle time.

What to include in a conversation club session

English conversation clubs come in all shapes and sizes. Some are run as pre-planned sessions, and some are run very flexibly, and volunteers wait to see who turns up and what they would like to talk about. Some settings have an organiser who may prepare a few resources for volunteers to use when they arrive, and others depend on volunteers to bring anything they need.

The units in this pack have been based around the following key stages of a conversation club session. You can choose which of these stages to include to best fit your group and setting – it may be some or all.

A key priority is to encourage participants to share their ideas on what they would like to talk about and base your club around this.

Welcome	A warm, personal welcome for each participant. If required, participants sign in or you record attendance on a register.
Opening chat/ circle time	Introductions for anyone new. General chatting. Anything to follow up or report back on from the previous session? Any news from anyone?
Getting started	Introduction to the topic. One or more warm up activities linked to the topic. Questions to get the conversation started and find out which aspects of the topic participants are most interested in talking about.
Conversations	One or more main conversations linked to the topic, possibly from several perspectives and with supporting activities.
Closing chat/ circle time	Feedback about today's topic and conversations. Discussion around ideas for any follow up action or research for taking the topic further, e.g. discussing the topic more, arranging a visit to a local place, inviting a speaker in, etc. Sharing ideas and agreeing the main topic for the next session. Information and reminders about any important dates/events coming up.

Using the topic-based units

The 15 topic-based units have been designed to be used very flexibly so you can use or adapt whichever sections from each unit are the most useful and suitable for your type of conversation club and the needs, interests and language levels of your participants.

Mind maps (page 1)

The mind map for each topic includes ideas, questions and suggestions for exploring each topic from a range of perspectives. You can select from these to help generate conversations based on participants' levels and interests:



The single page version of the mind map can be used as a handy prompt for volunteers - but could also be shared with participants with higher levels of language and literacy. Another option, if appropriate for the literacy and language levels of your participants, is to print out enlarged versions of some or all of the mind map boxes for any topic. You and your participants can stick these on a wall or arrange on a table and add to or adapt the questions and suggestions as you go along or add your own new mind map boxes.

Inevitably some topics overlap with others. This isn't a problem at all and revisiting a topic, possibly through another perspective, can provide a useful opportunity to review and build on what was discussed before.

The blank mind map templates (see Appendix 1) should help you to frame and build conversations on any topic at all that participants suggest.

Session ideas at a glance (page 2)

You can use 'Session ideas at a glance' for ideas for different stages of a conversation club session. Depending on the time available and the type of session you run, you can either dip into, use or adapt a few of the ideas for different stages of a session or, if you run a more structured topic-based session, you may like to follow the session ideas more closely.

Example activities (page 3)

This page has more detailed suggestions for several topic-based activities linked to one or more mind map boxes/perspectives. Some activities are suitable for participants with any level of English. Where activities may be more useful for participants with lower or higher levels of English, this is indicated.

Any resources or preparation needed is explained. Some activities have supporting resources which are provided, others require you to bring in or prepare a few things, and some don't require any advance preparation at all. There is more detailed guidance for some of the example activities, as well as other ideas for icebreakers, warm up activities, speaking games and templates, in the '*English conversation practice toolkit*'.

Also, as some volunteers may have limited time, if any, for preparation and some settings may not be able to provide access to a printer and photocopier, some suggestions for realia (real objects) that volunteers can bring in, or ask participants to bring in, are included.

Supporting resources (additional pages)

You can print, project, display or pass round supporting resources on a laptop or tablet. There are also some common resources which can be invaluable in building up a conversation club 'kit' - which you can add to as you go along:

- A picture pack with images from magazines and newspapers, postcards, photos, etc. (you and participants can keep adding to this).
- Tablets, e.g. for looking at pictures if printing or projection/Wi-Fi is not available
- Smartphones, if you or the participants have one, are useful for dictionaries, translation apps, looking up information, sharing photos, sounds, etc.
- Local leaflets and flyers
- Interesting objects
- Flipchart paper and marker pens
- Scrap paper and pens or, if you're lucky, mini white boards and dry wipe pens.

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Education and skills

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6

Introduction to the topic

This topic provides opportunities for participants to discuss their educational background and skills and consider when, where and how they developed their skills. Participants also discuss learning opportunities in the local area.



Session ideas at a glance

Welcome	If required, participants sign in or you record attendance on a register.
Opening chat/ circle time	Introductions for anyone new. General chatting. Anything to follow up or report back on from the previous session? Any news from anyone?
Getting started	Remind/tell new participants of the topic for this session: Education and skills . Choose one or more warm up activities linked to the topic. See next page for ideas for: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discussing skills• Talking about past learning experiences Ask some questions to get the conversation started and find out which aspects of the topic participants are most interested in talking about. (See mind map and next page for ideas)
Conversations	Plan to have 2 or 3 main conversations linked to this topic, possibly with supporting activities. See next page for ideas for: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Skills: Top ten tips• Skills: Similarities and differences• The local area: Information sheet If you have a large group and participants divide into small groups or pairs for each activity/conversation, finish each of these with the whole group reporting back and maybe discussing further together.
Closing chat/ circle time	Feedback about today's topic and conversations. Discuss ideas for any follow up action or research for taking the topic further, e.g. inviting in a speaker from a local learning provider. Share ideas and agree the main topic for the next session. Any reminders or important dates/events coming up?

Level of English: The activities included in this unit are suitable for all levels and mixed groups, with support provided for activities that require writing.

Things to consider: Some participants may need support with activities that require writing. There is also likely to be a broad mix of educational backgrounds in the group. Some participants may not have had the opportunity to go to school as children. Ensure that all skills and experience are valued through discussing informal learning experiences as well as formal learning.

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Education and skills

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Getting started: Picture pack

Resources and preparation: Print, project or display images of different skills relevant to your group. See also Picture pack: Skills. Sticky notes.

- Explain you are going to talk about education, learning and skills and check that everyone understands these words.
- Spread out images from the Picture pack. Ask participants to choose one to talk about - prompt questions: How did you learn? Where were you? Who taught you?
- Elicit the skills that participants have learned throughout their lives. Use the Picture pack to prompt as needed and add more as they come up. Include some entertaining or interesting items as well as more obvious options (drive, swim, milk a cow, read, catch a fish, juggle).
- Write each skill on a sticky note - these will be needed for the next activity.
- Display some questions from the mind map for discussion to get the conversation started: What does education mean to you? Where can learning happen?

Skills: Top ten tips

Resources and preparation: A3 paper or flip-chart sheets; coloured pens

- Start off with brief discussion about learning English: What do participants find difficult?
- Make a list of issues, then ask the group to come up with suggestions to help others.
- Make some suggestions to start with e.g. Come to conversation club regularly. What else?
- As a whole group, come up with a list of **10 top tips for learning English**. Make a poster or handout to display in the centre and give to new members.

Skills: Similarities and differences

Resources and preparation: Sticky notes from the Getting started activity

- Discuss the sticky notes and classify the skills according to where they were learned: home, workplace, community, school. (Display the flipcharts with headings or divide a whiteboard into columns.) Add additional skills to sticky notes as they come up.
- During classification, draw out the following: Which skills are used daily, and which less often? Which skills are useful in the UK? How do we keep our skills? How do we pass skills on? Which are most important for everyday life/work?

The local area: Information sheet

Resources and preparation: Flip-chart sheets. If possible, provide access to laptops and printing.

- Enlarge and display some questions from the mind-map, e.g. What are your education tips for someone new to the area? What different types of classes and education centres do you know about? What do you know about applying for places in schools, colleges or universities? How can we support each other's learning?
- Participants share their views on what they needed when they first arrived. Where did they go for help? What would they advise others?
- Together, research and create an information sheet for someone new to the area. Include details of ESOL classes/contacts, other classes, local schools and colleges, community groups, social groups, interpreting services, advocacy groups in the area.
- Take time to discuss design as well as content, and ensure everyone is involved (allocate tasks: writing content; sourcing images; checking facts such as names and numbers, etc.)

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Supporting
resources

Education and skills

Picture pack: Skills

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A few important notes

Literacy

As well as selecting and adapting what you cover according to the different speaking and listening levels of participants, it's also important to be aware of literacy skills. Some participants, regardless of their skills and confidence in speaking and listening, may be new to reading and writing in English. Some may never have had the opportunity to learn to read and write in their main language(s).

As conversation clubs are all about 'talking', the resources in the units are very 'text light'. However, sometimes a written prompt or discussion card can really help a conversation flow. So, some activities have cards or handouts with some text. Only use these if you are confident the language on the cards will be understood by the participants. In mixed level groups, you can ask for a volunteer or two to read the cards or prompts aloud so new reader/writers can still actively participate in the conversation.

Languages

Although conversation clubs aim to support participants in practising their English and feeling more confident speaking English, sometimes it can be very useful to encourage participants to use their main/ other languages. For example, in mixed level groups, a quick translation of a word can very effectively help another participant stay engaged in a conversation.

Translation apps can be useful, too. It's a good idea to have a conversation about languages with the group so you can agree how they can be used to support each other, but without interfering too much with English speaking practice.

Mobile phones

Although mobile phones can be a distraction and interrupt sessions, they can be a great asset too! For example, 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 phone use with the group at the beginning of each session. 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.

Be aware that some participants may not have a smart phone or, even if they do, may not be able to afford data. So, if possible, share Wi-Fi details for the centre.

Appendix 1: Mind map templates

Getting started

Skills

Local area

Around the UK

Around the world

Staying safe

Personal view

Our rights and responsibilities

Social/Community

Taking the topic further

Useful apps and websites

Other ideas



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