

Sustainable ESOL - British Red Cross, Portsmouth - SNAP project: A case study

The project

The SNAP project is led by the British Red Cross in Portsmouth. It offers English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision, alongside case work and wellbeing activities to people seeking asylum.

The key aims of the ESOL project are:

- To build learner confidence
- To enable learners to try to speak even if they made mistakes
- To enable learners to reach out and talk to someone else
- To learn some basic vocabulary
- To support learners to be able to live in Portsmouth and go to the shops, the doctor's, and build social connections
- To provide the language learners need - i.e., learner-led curriculum based on language they identify as being useful in their everyday lives

Before Covid, ESOL classes ran alongside drop-in information, advice and guidance (IAG) sessions. During the pandemic, lessons have moved online. This case study explores the key challenges of online provision, key success factors and opportunities of delivering ESOL online, and areas for future development. These findings are based on a workshop held with the co-ordinator, volunteers and stakeholders of the SNAP project.

Supporting asylum seekers

The precariousness of the asylum system means that regular learner attendance is hard to achieve, and the tutors and volunteers may never know if that is someone who is choosing not to come or that their circumstances have changed, and they are required to move on. These learners' lives are very complex and often they are not free to come to class if they have to see lawyers or health professionals for example. They are often not in control of their own timetables.

Key challenges of delivering ESOL online

- Some learners have been unable to access the provision during the pandemic due to not having access to digital devices or an internet connection or not having sufficient level of digital skills to access the classes. Among those who can access online provision, technical capacity and capability vary and there can be interruptions from signals or Wi-Fi deteriorating which can disrupt learning.

- There are few opportunities for general conversation and social interaction between learners. Friendships – which can provide crucial peer support - have taken a lot longer to form than in face-to-face classes.
- Tutors find it more challenging to respond to individual needs.
- Online provision is particularly challenging for learners at lower levels. Tutors and volunteers feel they have lost touch with some of the lower-level learners who were keen to learn. Accessing ESOL provision is a vital part of their gaining confidence and supporting their integration into the community.

Success factors and opportunities of delivering ESOL online

- Learners attendance is more regular than when provision was delivered face-to-face. This continuity supports progression as the tutor can refer to examples from the previous lesson and can see learner progression more easily. This can be attributed in part to a huge effort by the co-ordinator who rings everyone beforehand to support the attendance.
- Volunteers have taken a flexible approach to delivery to accommodate learner needs and circumstances.
- Resources have been printed out and posted to learners to facilitate access. Learners also have access to all the resources from the classes via a shared online platform. This is regularly updated by tutors.
- Online learning has increased access to a wider range of teaching and learning materials. For example, the teacher can show YouTubes, share audio files, look at PowerPoints or pictures etc via the screen share. It is also possible to send a listening piece before the class and the students can have listened to it once already. None of this is possible in the drop-in classes due to lack of IT facilities in the venue.

Areas for future development

- Encourage learner interaction outside of class by setting up a WhatsApp group or similar. This can help build contacts and friendships and improve learner confidence.
- Develop an online conversation class or club for students.
- Offer more support accessing digital learning – for example, volunteers who do not teach ESOL could teach learners how to access Zoom.
- Offer blended learning provision - given some of the opportunities of online learning, particularly around accessibility for some learners (e.g., not having to travel to class). Face-to-face provision is still crucial for some learners, for

example learners at lower levels. Using the [New to ESOL resources](#) developed by Learning and Work Institute and Learning Unlimited can support development of a low level ESOL course.

- Build an ESOL partnership with other community organisations such as libraries who run relevant non-formal learning activities, and FE colleges and other learning providers for formal ESOL. Developing a joined-up approach would help to provide onward progression from the absolute beginners group and broaden the opportunities for learning and practice. The current volunteers are well connected into quite a lot of these various other organisations. One of them has started a new email esol.ports@gmail.com as a route for people looking for classes, for example. The project also has good links with the university's teacher training programme. The trainees have participated in the face-to-face classes which was beneficial for everyone as the trainees gained valuable experience and it was good for the students and volunteers as well. It would be helpful to continue the involvement of university student trainees where appropriate.

Additional resources

1. [Learning and Work Institute: Volunteers - English language and Conversation clubs](#) - great session plans etc. Ideas for ways of working and includes a research report and case studies.
2. [Learning and Work Institute: Guidance on forming ESOL partnerships](#)
3. [Learning and Work / Learning UnLimited resources - New to ESOL and Refugees New to ESOL](#)
4. [Natecla - Framework for good practice in voluntary ESOL](#)

Further reading for those with an interest in language development.

1. [Spiegel, M and Sunderland, H Teaching Basic Literacy to ESOL Learners](#)