

Setting up support for English language learning: Initial guidance for volunteers/volunteer groups

Firstly, a few things not to worry about:

- You do not have to be an experienced English teacher, or have any experience of teaching at all, in order to help.
- You do not need to follow any particular curriculum or formal teaching programme – the FE colleges and Learn Devon will be offering a range of accredited ESOL courses at different levels (including online classes) so leave that to them.
- You do not need to have an explicit knowledge of English grammar. If you don't know what the 3rd Conditional or the Past Perfect are.....no problem. (If you do want to know more about English Grammar though, there are some reading tips at the end)

The key to successful language learning is input.

You first learned to speak and understand language well before you went to school; initially, you didn't learn through structured classes but simply through language input from the world around you – by listening to your parents and the rest of the family, to their friends, to the television and the radio, etc, and by observing and participating in activities connected with the language you heard.

So, the key to helping someone learn English is to make sure that they get plenty of input.

At least some of the input should be comprehensible – otherwise the learner is likely to switch off – and this won't be a problem for lots of your learners as many of them will already have some English when they arrive. Google translate, images (photographs, drawings), props (there are always things around us that can be named – a kitchen drawer for example contains a wealth of language input: knife, cut, chop, whisk, teaspoon, tablespoon, dessert spoon, etc, etc) and actions can all be used to support comprehension.

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Setting up an English Language support programme.

- Establish a schedule. Whether it is one session a week or more, schedule your sessions for particular days and times so that they can become part of everyone's routine.
- Find out what else is happening in terms of support for Ukrainian refugees so that you can timetable your classes/sessions on days/at times that don't clash with other activities that are being organised locally
- Be prepared to be flexible and don't let yourself get frustrated or disheartened if learners don't turn up regularly. Remember that newly arrived refugees will be coping with a huge amount of change and will have a lot of things to sort out. Some of them will also be looking for, and finding, employment so their availability will change.
- It's a good idea to build some breaks into your schedule so that everyone can have take some time out for holidays, bank holidays, etc. You might want to follow the pattern of local school terms and organise an alternative programme for the long summer holidays
- Find a suitable venue. Local schools, libraries and churches are all possibilities. Ideally, there should be plenty of space and the venue should have heating so you can all stay warm in the winter.
- Organise refreshments – a kettle, some mugs, teabags, some milk, biscuits and fruitjuice are essential
- Make a checklist of things that you will need and start gathering them. Pens and paper for the learners, a whiteboard or a flip chart if possible – though large sheets of paper, even old rolls of wallpaper, can be used instead
- Work in pairs, or groups of three, if possible. That way you can support each other with ideas and planning; you can break up large groups of learners into smaller, more manageable groups when necessary; and you have back-up when one of you is busy/away on holiday/unwell.

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What a volunteer English Language learning support programme might look like

What you decide to set up will depend on a lot of factors, including the number of learners, how many volunteers you have in your group, whether there are any experienced teachers among you, how often the venue is available....how much energy you have got.

But whatever the frequency or number of sessions you organise, we suggest that you put a mix of the following into your local support programme:

- **English lessons. In some areas of Devon, learners will be able to access ESOL classes at the local college or classes run by Learn Devon. If this is the case then there is less need for you to organise more formal English classes – but neither does it mean that you shouldn't do so if there are any experienced teachers among your group of volunteers. As long as whatever you set up doesn't clash with provision at the local college then your classes will complement theirs and enable learners to progress faster.**

The classes you run can be as informal as the teacher wants and – on request - we can provide plenty of links to resources, including lesson plans and ready-made worksheets so that volunteering doesn't take over your life.

Ideally, the level/s of the class/es should be decided by the needs of the learners and the preference of the volunteer teachers. If, for example, there are a lot of beginners in your local area then it makes sense to focus the classes on them. The volunteer teachers' preferences are also vital though – beginners are generally harder to teach and require more careful preparation so a less experienced teacher might prefer to run a class for Intermediate or advanced students

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- **Conversation Groups/Conversation Club.** You do not need to be an experienced teacher to lead a conversation group. The starting point can simply be a group of learners and English-speaking volunteers coming together for coffee, cake and a chat. The social aspect is as important as anything else – if the learners feel comfortable then they will pick up some English along the way.

It's a good idea to choose a theme or a topic for the day. The starting point could be something in the newspaper or the village newsletter, or a photograph of your family or something that you've picked up from your house on your way out. Have a couple of back ups with you as well, in case the conversation needs a prod

There is an excellent Conversation Club Toolkit, full of suggestions, ideas and materials available at <https://learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/English-Conversation-Practice-Toolkit.pdf>

For learners who already speak some English – lower-intermediate level and above – there is an amazingly long list of topics, each with a printable pdf of questions that can be used to start discussions, at <https://esldiscussions.com/index.html>

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- **Practical Activity Sessions – e.g. Gardening, Cooking, Sewing, Painting, Walking**

Some of the most successful language learning takes place not in the classroom but when learners are joining English language speakers in practical, hands-on activities.

You and your fellow volunteers may not be experienced teachers or experts in English grammar but among you there will be lots of experience and expertise in gardening, sewing, Arts and Crafts, local history, local walks, cooking and baking, etc, etc – and actively participating in any of these activities, working alongside people speaking and demonstrating in English, is a fantastic way to learn.

You might want to run a series of practical sessions on a particular theme – e.g. Baking, Gardening, once a week for a few weeks, or you might want to mix and match – with different volunteers leading a practical session each week in a subject of their choice. Encourage learners to get stuck in and to share their own skills and knowledge – you will end up learning from them as well.

Nobody needs to have an explicit or detailed understanding of English grammar in order to help speakers of other languages learn English. The reality is that all native speakers of English are good at grammar – you use it successfully every day when you are talking to your friends and family, going shopping, phoning the local council with a complaint.....If , on the other hand, you are a volunteer for whom English isn't your first language, then you are likely to understand more about grammar than the vast majority of native English speakers.

You might want to find out a bit about the Ukrainian language as well. What are some of the main differences between Ukrainian and English? Ask your learners to teach you a few words and encourage them to talk about their language.