

Bridges Not Walls! Learning English with Community Support

Migrants Organise is a platform for migrants and refugees to act for justice and dignity. We believe migration is a fact of life; instead of resisting it, let's organise it.



Knowledge is Power! We run weekly activities for our members including English Beginner and Conversation classes. Many of our members face barriers getting into mainstream education, e.g. lack of provision, childcare, health and financial reasons. Our sessions are led by volunteers and designed to build confidence in a safe environment and to complement (not replace) mainstream provision. We also organise 121 mentoring support to help tackle isolation and discrimination, build relationships, improve language skills and to help people feel connected in their new neighbourhood. Together we can build power and dignity.

What is this resource? Who is this for?

This resource has been created by Jeff Samuelson, a qualified ESOL teacher, and Migrants Organise volunteer.

I began teaching with Migrants Organise because I wanted to do something meaningful with my time after retirement. Ten years later, I am still organising weekly classes and have found the warmth and resilience of my students to be inspiring. I am sure I have learnt more from them; nevertheless, I hope you find this resource useful. It's a combination of tips (from my experience), as well as useful websites, books and TV programmes that I have found along the way. Teaching English, whether in a formal or informal setting, is incredibly rewarding. Feel free to dip in and out, and do what works best for you and your learners. Good luck!



Learning English in informal settings, such as small conversational classes, is an essential step for migrants and refugees to feel connected and part of a community; however, this should complement - not replace - quality and effective state subsidised ESOL provision.

This resource is aimed at community groups and volunteers interested in supporting others to learn English in **informal settings** - either as a starting point for new arrivals to help them with their basics, or to complement more formal ESOL learning. The guidance can be tailored to group settings, family classes or 121 mentoring - all of which we do at Migrants Organise.

How to prepare your class / session

It goes without saying that preparation is key. You should aim to teach students something concrete in each class and for a clear plan on how to do that. But at the same time it is good to be flexible and to deviate from the 'plan' if students have their own line of enquiry.

Teaching is not the same as learning; the best kind of learning comes from the students themselves in response to their own questions and concerns. I often find that a lesson that is generated by the students themselves is often the best lesson. This can happen when the first student to arrive begins to ask questions that are relevant to her own situation and life. When the other students arrive they will often also, with a little encouragement, begin to ask similar questions.

By allowing students the opportunity to guide, we can ensure that classes are relevant to their lives and support their everyday needs.

Topics and Themes

It makes sense to group subjects into topics and themes. Here's a list of possible topics that you're likely to find yourselves working on with your learner(s).

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • introductions / getting to know each other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • handling phone calls
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • local transport / travel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • directions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family relationships (sister / brother etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • useful personal info (e.g. pronouncing their address, date of birth etc. - if appropriate)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • days of the week, months of the year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • numbers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understanding money 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • problems in the home (e.g. with utilities)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shopping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • booking appointments (e.g. at the doctors, hospital)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • daily life, current affairs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • likes and dislikes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • food, cuisine, menus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • weight and measures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the weather 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • places and descriptions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • official letters / emails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • homes / rooms / furniture / appliances
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the alphabet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hobbies

Whilst we want to personalise the learning experience as much as possible, try to avoid discussing sensitive topics, and don't in any way force students to talk about their background. We focus very much on the here and now.

However, if students do bring up past experiences, listen and show empathy without trying to problem solve too much. Possible responses include phrases such as:

- "That sounds really difficult"
- "What do you think would be helpful?"
- "I hope things will improve for you" (and point out how far they've come)

At Migrants Organise, the staff provides casework support so if we feel like a student needs extra support we notify our coordinators. Unless qualified, it's best not to give specific advice and instead look at ways to signpost to ensure the best support is given.



Creating a good atmosphere

Carl Rogers, an American psychologist, suggested that there are three core teacher characteristics that help to create an effective learning environment. These are respect, empathy, and authenticity. These qualities will nurture a positive environment.

The atmosphere should be professional, but enjoyable. Most of our students are in difficult situations so we hope the class/session is an enjoyable interlude in their

day/week when they can forget distractions outside the classroom, make friends... and learn some English too.

If the lessons are a positive occasion, it is likely that more learning will be achieved as students feel relaxed and able to do their best in an atmosphere that is unthreatening and where no one is made to feel foolish. It is our job to create such an atmosphere.

Tolerance and respect

Promote respect for other cultures and points of view, keeping in mind that students may be just as wary of those from their own culture. We must always steer conversation in a positive direction.

Consider what else might affect learning

Some students may not have a formal education and may not be used to note taking. That is ok: these classes/sessions are for them.

Issues beyond students' control, including mental health, may hinder their attendance and progress.

Students may be less engaged/positive some days. Allow them to be this way and think of it as a good sign when they return to class the following week. For 121 sessions, it is wise to set down clear ground rules and boundaries at the very beginning (e.g. cancelling ahead of time to give the volunteers advance warning).

Students may come for the social aspect as much as the language. This is important even if their English progress is limited.

Don't be discouraged if students don't accept your suggestions/help - you may be helping them in another way.



Patience and different learner style

Take time to consider how your students learn. People learn in different ways, and learning styles are simply different approaches or ways of learning.

Visual learners learn through seeing; e.g. memory games with pictures, spot the difference, pelmanism, words written down.

Auditory learners learn through listening; e.g. listen and repeat, learn songs and poems, practice dialogues.

Kinaesthetic learners learn through moving, doing, touching, e.g. role play, out in the community.

It's wise to vary your activities so that they appeal to different learning styles.

Some learners have very little education and have therefore never been taught *how* to learn but are now having to cope with a new language and an unfamiliar script. In these cases, progress can be very slow and we need to be aware of this.

Our job is to encourage confidence so that students feel in due course they could cope with bigger classes and in the future find a job. Small classes are a great advantage insofar as students feel their voices are heard and they can experiment.

Pairing students to work together and to learn from each other is a good thing. Pairing a stronger student with a weaker one is good so they can learn from each other.

Communicative focus

The three elements of language learning are **meaning** (what do words mean?), **grammar** and **pronunciation**.

Grammar is important but, for complete beginners, only up to a point. For new arrivals, much more important is the flow of conversation and confidence. In this respect, pronunciation is very important, as is acquiring new vocabulary. So, it's important to provide gentle correction and help with pronunciation.

In any language the four skills are **speaking, listening, reading and writing**. In our classes, at the basic level, it makes sense to focus on speaking and listening but, even at this level, many students want to be able to read and write. We should be prepared to help elementary level students with their reading and writing skills; often this entails specific help with formation of letters.

It's a good idea to provide opportunity for more advanced students to practice reading aloud if they are comfortable. But ask volunteers to avoid putting people on the spot.

Try to avoid explaining the meaning of difficult words because the language you use for the explanation will invariably be more complicated than the thing you're trying to explain. Instead, put the word into context and give a number of different examples. It's a good idea when teaching a new word (beyond the absolute beginners' stage), not to just give the word, but put it into a short, simple sentence.



In the real world

Learning doesn't just happen in the classroom. Take the opportunity to go out into the community for a change of scenery and also to practise and role play specific situations. For small or 121 sessions, you can practise in the shops, booking a doctor's appointment, going to the library, making phone calls and the like. Going to museums, places of interest, cinema and cafes are all enjoyable and help with learning.

Invite students to watch TV, read books or newspapers, practice writing something for homework, etc.

Recap and Repeat

At the end of each session make a note of what you've covered. A week/month later without such notes you won't remember what you've done. Real learning comes through practice so don't hesitate to go back over topics you've covered in order to check and consolidate.

Celebrate Progress

Celebrate all achievements - even small ones. At the end of every class encourage students to reflect upon their own progress - this will help when other things are overwhelming. Organise celebration sessions every so often. When students move on, it's wise to have a little review and offer positive feedback and future suggestions.



Inspiration to help you

Internet resources

There are a number of websites that you will find interesting and helpful. Google any of the following. They are all free.

- [Action for ESOL](#) provides ESOL lesson plans and resources based around current affairs and campaigns
- [BBC Learning English](#) is a department of the BBC World Service devoted to English language teaching. The service provides resources and activities for teachers and students.
- [Bogglesworld](#) worksheets, flashcards, lesson plans, and activities for teaching English

- [Breaking News English](#) a website with hundreds of news and current events articles, each one graded at different ability levels - plus related exercises, e.g. phrase matching, gap filling, comprehension etc.
- [City of Sanctuary ESOL](#) > resources > ESOL contains resources for teaching ESOL and resources for ESOL students
- [English Club](#) resources for learning English, or teaching it, from easy guides to grammar to fun games and quizzes
- [English for Everyone](#) lots of good worksheets on reading comprehension, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation
- [English Language Support for Refugees](#) > research > University of Kent provides language learning materials for refugees, migrants, available in the Resources section
- [ESL Gold](#) materials to learn, study and teach English as a second language. All resources are organised by skill and level for easy access
- [ESOL Nexus](#) website from the British Council with videos, listening activities, texts and grammar exercises for ESOL learners at every level
- [My Supermarket](#) an independent shopping and comparison shopping website for groceries in the UK
- [Skills Workshop](#) adult literacy, numeracy, and functional skills resources

Books

If you want to use books as well, I strongly advise you to go to your local library and browse their ESOL shelves. Don't be in a hurry!

The following books are helpful:

- *English Vocabulary in Use*, Elementary, McCarthy and O'Dell, Cambridge
60 units of vocabulary reference and practice
Self-study and classroom use With answers

- *English Vocabulary in Use, Pre-intermediate & intermediate*, Redman, Cambridge, 100 units of vocabulary reference and practice Self-study and classroom use With answers
- *Elementary Language Practice*, Vince, Macmillan Clear explanations of elementary level grammar Practice of all grammar points in a variety of exercises, and elementary vocabulary practice With answers
- *An A - Z of English Grammar & Usage*, Leech, Cruickshank & Ivanič, Longman 600 cross-referenced entries Simple and clear explanations, supported by real-life examples

Encourage learners to read as much as they can. Find out about English Readers. Many publishers, e.g. Macmillan, Oxford, Collins, publish these Readers which are, essentially, graded reading materials which may be fiction or fact. For example, one publisher grades them as follows:

Starter	about 300 basic words
Beginner	about 600 basic words
Elementary	about 1100 basic words
Pre-intermediate	about 1400 basic words
Intermediate	about 1600 basic words
Upper	about 2200 basic words

Arrange a trip with learners to the local library and help them enrol. Hopefully the library will have a variety of these Readers. In any case, the journey to the library and the enrolment process will both provide lots of opportunities for learning new words and engaging in language practice.

Other resources

For beginners you may find **flashcards** helpful as a way of helping your learners to learn basic vocabulary.

TV is also useful. Someone I know, now fluent in English, arrived in the UK with little or no English and began to teach herself English through children's TV - the simplicity and repetition was useful!

Newspapers and magazines all have their uses.

Beyond volunteer support

For the group structure, we must be mindful to push our learners to access formal courses at colleges and community centres, to challenge themselves and build their confidence and local connections. Helping them to identify further goals is helpful, e.g. signposting to advice services or to become volunteers themselves.

It is good for learners to have a clear journey. At Migrants Organise we normally run 121 mentoring for six months only - closing the “professional” relationship at this time. The sense of closure is important but often mentees and mentors remain friends outside of the formal mentor structure. Often our most effective mentors have begun as mentees, and are then able to use their experience to support others.

Take Action

Migration is a fact of life - join us to create a movement of welcome and solidarity for all.

Take action with Migrants Organise!

www.migrantsorganise.org

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