Delivering pre-entry English language: Community ESOL handbook

As demand for pre-entry level ESOL learning (English for speakers of other languages) increases, more and more community organisations are providing this teaching - helping individuals to communicate with neighbours, doctors, teachers and more, enabling personal independence and community integration. This handbook outlines common challenges, and provides tips and resources for delivering pre-entry ESOL in the community.

Key stats:

• 2011 census data showed that 863,000 people self-reported that they were ‘non-proficient’ in English. Of those, 726,000 could not speak English well and 138,000 could not speak English at all.¹

• Census data also shows that those with low proficiency in English are likely to report poorer health and fewer educational qualifications.² If employed, those with low levels of English are twice as likely to work in lower skilled jobs than those with high English proficiency.³

• Funding for ESOL through the main Skills for Life programme has declined by £80 million (from around £210 million in 2008 to £130 million in 2013).⁴ A 2014 survey found that 80% of ESOL providers have waiting lists and 66% of these cited lack of government funding as the main reason for this.⁵

• English My Way⁶ has reached 9,172 learners over 2 years and has been delivered by over 70 community organisations in 38 out of the Department for Communities and Local Government’s (DCLG) 58 target areas.⁷

• All surveyed centres funded to deliver the English My Way programme agreed it had allowed them to reach out to learners not suited to other forms of ESOL support, and 93% of those agreed that the programme had helped them to support community integration in their local area.⁸

All the tips, suggestions and examples of best practice in this document have been provided by UK online centres already delivering pre-entry ESOL.

1. ONS, 2011 Census; detail analysis - English language proficiency in England and Wales, Main language and general health characteristics.
2. ONS, Part of 2011 Census, Detailed Characteristics on Demography for 2011 Census Merged Wards and Middle Layer Super Output Areas in England and Wales.
3. Making ESOL policy work better for migrants and wider society... on speaking terms, DEMOS, 2014.
4. BIS, Skills Funding Statement 2013-2016, Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2014
5. NATECLA Release: Migrants on huge waiting lists for English courses as government funding is cut again, May 2014.
6. English My Way is a Pre-Entry Level ESOL programme funded by DCLG, delivered by a consortium of Tinder Foundation, British Council and BBC Learning English.
7. Target areas defined by DCLG, taken from the 2011 census.
8. English My Way statistics taken from quarterly centre surveys completed by an average of 62% of funded centres per quarter.
Barriers to learning

• Cultural barriers are an issue for some learners. For example, women in some communities are not encouraged to attend any learning, but are expected to be in the home and care for the family. Additionally, men and women from some backgrounds are not allowed to, or are uncomfortable with, attending mixed classes.

• Low literacy levels in their first language and a lack of any formal education often means learners have little knowledge of learning fundamentals such as regular and punctual attendance, and using learning equipment such as a pen or a folder.

• Unemployed people or those on a limited income may worry about any expenses such as the cost for travelling to, or attending classes.

• Some learners struggle with childcare and access to creche facilities, which impacts on their ability to attend sessions.

• Travelling is a barrier for some learners who may not be able to drive, afford transports costs or who may need to remain close to home due to childcare and family commitments.

• A lack of local provision of pre-entry ESOL often means long waiting lists before a session becomes available, leading to frustration, demotivation and ongoing social isolation.

• Much ESOL provision has strict eligibility criteria such as only being available to those claiming benefits (ie. Jobseekers Allowance and work related ESA). Many learners are unable to meet this criteria.

Challenges to delivery

• Delivery can be hampered by a lack of engagement and inconsistent attendance. Learners who don’t or can’t attend regularly are left with knowledge gaps, can feel left behind and hold up learning for others.

• Delivering to a mixed range of cultures can prove challenging, especially in relation to men and women learning together.

• Centres who can’t afford to pay for experienced ESOL tutors must often use volunteer or trainee tutors with less experience and fewer skills.

• Reliance on volunteers means more time and resources need to be invested in volunteer recruitment, retention, management and training to ensure that learners receive sufficient support and that individuals have the necessary skills.

• With no or limited funding, fewer organisations provide pre-entry ESOL at a time when there is growing demand. As a result, those who are delivering often struggle to meet local need.

• Appropriate facilities such as adequately sized rooms can be difficult or expensive to secure. Teaching larger groups of learners is made harder without sufficient space to move around or break out into smaller groups, which in turn can lead to lower learner engagement and retention.
About English My Way

• Developed by Tinder Foundation in partnership with BBC Learning English and the British Council, English My Way is a blended ESOL learning programme which provides a wealth of online teaching resources.

• The 96-hour programme approaches English language learning by focusing on supporting adults with no or low levels of English to better integrate with their local communities.

• Activities like personalisation, participatory ESOL and language experience are included so that learners will develop the confidence to take part in community-based activities and social tasks such as talking to shop assistants and GPs.

• Designed by the BBC, Learning Circles are sessions that happen outside of formal English My Way learning, to complement the programme. They are a chance for community members to take the role of group leader and help family and friends learn English.

• There are a wealth of materials and resources to support Learning Circles, including videos, storyboards, and handouts that will take a group of any level through the everyday English they need to live in the UK.

• Visit www.englishmyway.co.uk to find out how this free programme could support English language learning in your community.

Top tips: Recruitment, retention and engagement

• Networking with organisations your audience is already engaged with, eg. schools, children’s centres, Jobcentre Plus and faith groups can reap huge benefits, generating productive partnerships for outreach work, as well as helping to recruit learners and volunteers.

• Word of mouth is one of the most powerful ways to recruit new learners. Existing learners and volunteers are your best advocates. Ask them to spread the word using minority languages, both digitally on platforms like Facebook, and verbally to family and friends.

• Promote pre-entry ESOL with Tinder Foundation’s English My Way marketing leaflets which are available in English and five minority languages.

• To help retain learners, combine ESOL with other learning and interests that are relevant to individuals - such as sewing, IT classes or employability - and encourage a social element to classes.

• Texting reminders to learners before class can also help retain learners, encouraging them to attend on time.

• Emphasise the benefits of attending - learners will increase their independence and be less reliant on family and friends to communicate. Be sensitive to learners’ situations but do still set limits, eg. persistent lateness will potentially lead to losing a place on the course.

“The Sikh Community Centre is a great venue for English My Way classes. It has the Temple, kitchens from which it serves food, a computer room, and it runs music and religious classes - everything under one roof. I’ve seen people who simply wouldn’t have travelled further afield, and people who would never have stepped into a more formal environment like a college.”

Bhavna Mithani, tutor - Cooke eLearning, Leicester
Where
An ideal venue will have sufficient space, so tables can be moved around, and the class can break out into smaller groups dependent on skill level. This enables an approach to teaching that ensures all students have the chance to actively participate and learn.

Consider the cultural diversity of your learners and be sensitive and accommodating when possible. For example, some women may not be comfortable or allowed to attend mixed classes, or in some cases husbands may wish to attend but not participate.

Consider outreach delivery so classes can be taught in a place familiar to the learners with supporting services such as a creche, if possible.

Language
If you have a bilingual tutor or volunteer, ask them to minimise the amount they speak to learners in their first language. The more they hear spoken English, the quicker their skills will develop.

Conduct an assessment of skill level when a new learner joins a class, to establish their current level of English. There’s a free initial assessment tool on the English My Way website.

Be prepared
Make sure you have all the resources ready to use including lesson plans, a whiteboard, printouts of pictures and handouts that support your delivery.

If using online materials such as the English My Way website, ensure the computers are ready to use before the session begins, and that there’s a working internet connection.

Make it relevant to the learners and the local community
Out-of-classroom learning such as trips to the local market or park are practical learning experiences and can build up the social element of the learning group and support integration.

Use volunteers to support your delivery
ESOL tutors are expensive and volunteers can support your delivery. Source volunteers from:

- Learners who have progressed onto further learning or ESOL level 1 and beyond.
- Local colleges and training providers who have people who want experience.
- Jobcentre Plus work programmes.

Take a look at our ESOL toolkit
Tinder Foundation’s ESOL toolkit contains template marketing materials in multiple languages, a guide to working with volunteers, case studies of successful pre-entry level ESOL delivery and much more.

You can also consider joining Tinder Foundation’s Specialist ESOL Network for further support and to build relationships with other community organisations delivering basic English language skills.