

# ESOL in workplaces

A toolkit for learning providers in the third and community sector, offering advice, guidance, and resources for supporting ESOL provision in workplace settings.



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## Introduction

**Learn English at Home (LEAH) has been working for over 40 years with people whose first language is not English. Our aim is to enable them to communicate independently in the areas of health and wellbeing, education, and in the workplace. Our students come from diverse backgrounds and face unique challenges. They may be living in a women's refuge, navigating unstable housing, or caring for small children, meaning they are unable to attend college and become increasingly isolated through language barriers.**

This is where LEAH steps in. Through language support and signposting to local statutory and voluntary services, we empower people to become active in their communities. We aim to provide a stepping stone to employment, volunteering, other educational opportunities, and other forms of community involvement.

We provide:

- One to one English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) tuition in the client's home or online
- Classes in community settings and online
- In work progression programmes for migrant workers with limited English
- Trips and social activities in the surrounding areas
- Information and support to help people access local services

Teaching is primarily delivered by our team of trained volunteers. Our services offer clients a means to overcome isolation and improve their chances in life through improved English language skills, increased confidence and self-belief, and greater knowledge of local services and community life.

This guide has been developed by LEAH for those delivering non-accredited ESOL interventions within a workplace and is based on our experience of delivering a work based ESOL project funded by Trust for London. It includes tips, checklists and resources to get you started.

If you are interested in finding out more about how to introduce ESOL into your workplace or use any of the content to develop your own programme get in touch with us at [info@leah.org.uk](mailto:info@leah.org.uk)

## The language landscape in London

London's diversity is one of its most defining and celebrated features, with over 300 languages spoken. People from all corners of the globe come to the city seeking better opportunities, including education and employment. However, the linguistic diversity in London can be a barrier for newcomers, as English is often the primary language of communication in the workplace.

### Working Londoners

Over a third of Londoners are born outside the UK, and proficiency in the English language is a prerequisite for most jobs and career progression in the capital, but some 260,000 working age adults in London reported that they could not speak English well or at all (**Census 2021**). There is clear evidence that the increased risk of poverty faced by economic migrants can be partly attributed to the labour market. Nearly 40% of those that can't speak English well or at all are employed in elementary occupations - roles that require a minimum general level of education. Occupations at this level often require work-related training in areas such as health and safety, food hygiene, and customer service. Being unable to complete this training can be a barrier to getting into work or moving up the workplace ladder.

According to a report by the **Guardian**, figures from the Office of National Statistics indicate that in 2022 migrant employees typically earn less than those born in Britain. Non-UK-born black employees registered the highest pay gap in 2022, earning 12% less than UK-born white workers.

### Enhancing employability through ESOL

ESOL interventions are designed to help non-native English speakers improve their English language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Interventions can be both accredited and non-accredited ranging in formality from conversation clubs to more advanced courses tailored to specific contexts, such as workplace communication. By improving their language skills, individuals can confidently apply for jobs, participate in interviews, and interact effectively with colleagues and supervisors.

### Overcoming workplace learning barriers

Unfortunately, employees with low levels of English are often unable to access learning given their long hours, irregular shift patterns and confidence levels. Workers often cite situational challenges such as work and time pressures as barriers to learning (**Barriers to learning for disadvantaged groups August 2018**). The COVID-19 pandemic also posed challenges as it forced a shift to online learning, which is not accessible to all learners, particularly those with limited digital skills. To tackle this issue ESOL interventions should be provided within the workplace.



## Hear from learners

Sagina, a 42-year-old mother of three from Hillingdon, started working as a cleaning operative for Mitie ten years ago. She had a good level of education in her home country in India, but her busy home life meant she had little time to continue her studies. However, that didn't dull her desire to learn and when Mitie announced they were offering English lessons she grasped the opportunity with both hands.

Sagina joined an entry level 2 class for a year supported by LEAH and Mitie, with thanks to funding from Trust for London. The impact on her life has been transformational, impacting on her work life, family, and her motivation to continue learning.

**“I can understand better, and I feel more confident to talk with my manager.”**

The lessons enabled Sagina to pass the assessment and interview for her Business, Tourism and Management degree. The change in her English language skills has been so marked that she received the most improved student award at her university. Sagina said that when she received the award her **“...legs were not working. I felt like I was flying.”**

Mitie have felt the rewards too, as Sagina is now better able to support herself and other staff.

**“Before I used an interpreter to speak with my manager and now, I interpret for others in meetings.”**

At home there have been other changes with a big impact as Sagina now chats with her oldest daughter in English rather than Hindi. Sagina has inspired a whole new generation to understand the impact that learning can have on lives. As Sagina's daughter told her, **“You are the greatest mum because you show me you can do what you want.”**





## Hear from learners

**Sharda is a 56-year-old mother from Hillingdon. She arrived in the UK in 2011 and started working at Mitie 9 years ago.**

She was hesitant when she heard about English lessons being offered at Mitie as she **“...thought the class would be like school with writing and spelling.”** Sharda joined an entry level 2 class and realised the class was **“helpful for everyday life.”**

The lessons delivered by the Training and Support Coordinator at Mitie embedded skills that would help staff in their roles. Sharda has grown in confidence helping her in her role.

**“The airport has so many people and I’ve learnt how to answer customer questions. This has made my English better and I feel more confident to speak to people. I feel more confident to tell my manager about problems.”**

The lessons have helped bring the cleaning team together, and they feel more positive about the organisation.

**“We now talk together in English more easily. I feel that Mitie has taken care of us, and we have been recognised.”**

Mitie recognises the benefits the lessons have brought to the organisation and have invested in upskilling their in-house trainer to continue the lessons for staff.



## Hear from learners

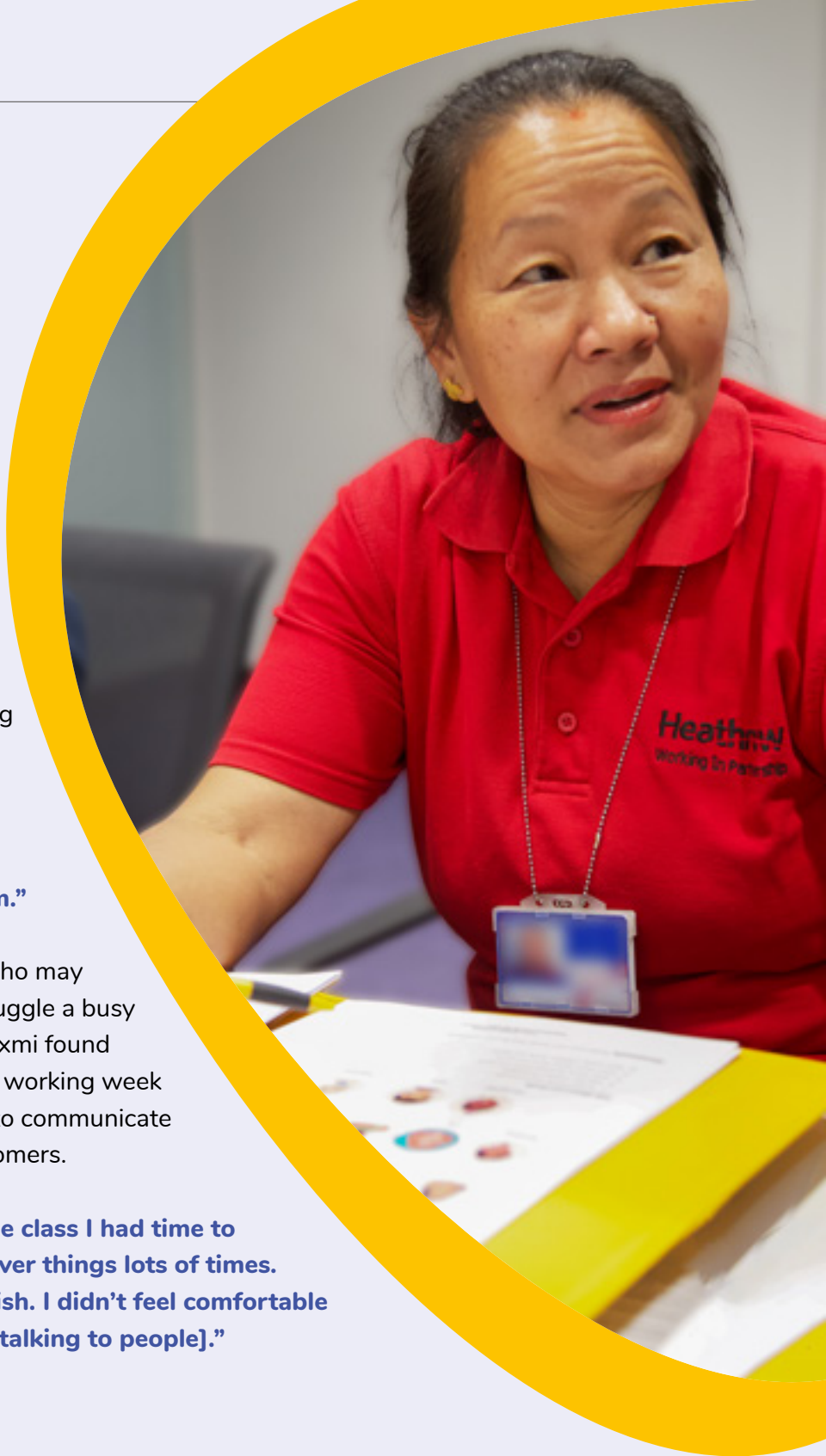
**Laxmi is 55 and has worked for Mitie as a cleaner for the last 17 years. The classes at Mitie gave her the space to learn.**

Laxmi joined an entry level 1 class for a year and the patience and guidance from her tutor led her to have a better working life. Previously, key information was being missed as Laxmi didn't understand how this was being communicated.

**“The teacher said check the noticeboards. So, I now check them.”**

Patience is key with adult learners who may take longer to learn or may have to juggle a busy home and work life with learning. Laxmi found that this ring-fenced time during the working week enabled her to build her confidence to communicate with colleagues, managers and customers.

**“At home I do everything and at the class I had time to learn. The teacher is happy to go over things lots of times. I feel happy that I have learnt English. I didn't feel comfortable before, now I feel more confident [talking to people].”**



## Getting started

### Funding

Changes in government funding have meant that the responsibility to meet the English language needs of workers now sits with employers. To fund your ESOL intervention you can consider the following routes:

- Speak directly with the employer to see if you can access their learning and development budget.
- Get in touch with **Unison** as they may be able to offer brokerage services.
- Seek grant and foundation funding such as the grant that LEAH accessed through Trust for London.
- Contact your local council to find out if the skills and employment department can access funding to support ESOL learners in the workplace.

### Gain local understanding and insight

To gain a deeper understanding of your area, start with the **Census** to assess English proficiency and employment rates. You can manipulate numerous variables to help you with identifying potential learners. Many councils have data platforms that offer valuable insights into the local demographics.

Engage with local employers through your regional skills and employment partnership, Chamber of Commerce, or the employment and skills department within your local authority. These connections can provide insights into the specific needs of employers in your area.

Reach out to your local adult education provider, as they often have experience working with the community and can offer valuable insights into both employer requirements and learner needs.

Additionally, connect with unions to find out what they offer and to understand what workplace learning networks may already exist in your area.

### Effective employer engagement

To successfully engage with employers, it's crucial for them to recognise the advantages for their business. Here are some tips to help you do this:

**Showcase the impact of your existing learning offer.** Present case studies, reports and/or outcomes from your existing learners.

**Detail the learning offer.** Include content and explain how it links to workplace needs. For example, ESOL lessons may improve employees understanding of product labelling enabling them to pass mandatory health and safety training.

**“Staff who used to fail their mandatory training on the 1st/2nd attempt(s) are now passing with the highest marks.”**

(Operational Trainer, Mitie)

**Take a flexible approach.** Your existing programme might not fit the workplace schedule, so consider how employees will be supported to access training. The learners will need flexibility too.

**“The nature of ESOL is flexibility! Always keep in mind that a successful learning programme needs to be tailored to the learner’s needs and each learner is unique. Be ready to adjust your programme as you go and make use of the learners’ unique experiences to enrich your project!”**

(Coordinator Team Leader, LEAH)



## Getting started

**Be curious.** Ask questions to find out what issues the employers are facing, or what restrictions they may have to impose. Perhaps they need a higher pass rate on their health and safety courses, or they have very few internal applicants for vacancies.

**Speak to employees.** This is not always possible at the initial stages but if you can, try to understand the barriers that employees may face attending a class. Ask employers to survey staff to get their input.

### Engaging employees

**Understand the communication channels.** Speak to the learning and development lead or frontline staff about how and where you can advertise the learning offer. Consider what channels your target audience might be more likely to engage with, e.g. a poster in the coffee room may be seen more than an advert on the staff intranet that staff may only be able to access when they get home.

**Plan an assessment day.** The assessment day will enable you to find out who is interested in ESOL lessons and what the levels of English are. Market the assessment day as a non-threatening informal opportunity. Entice people in with food and make sure you are somewhere visible such as the staff canteen. You may want somewhere private to carry out the assessments themselves.

**Be clear about time commitment.** Clarify with the employer whether staff will be training in their own time or during work hours. When businesses permit staff to learn during work hours, it not only boosts engagement but also enhances retention and learner success rates.

**Use noticeboards.** Make a colourful poster to advertise the new ESOL classes. Include details of the registration day and contact details for any enquiries. Ask the company to advertise the classes to all potential students.

### Ensure your promotion is inviting



## Setting your scheme of work

Setting a scheme of work (SoW) is an essential part of planning and delivering your learning programme. A SoW is a schedule of lesson plans / curriculum that will provide learners with language and vocabulary skills suitable to their level of proficiency.

Here are our top tips to get you started.

**Understand how the company works to identify needs.** Key areas to consider are the structure, mandatory learning, industry specific skills and key issues within HR or learning and development. Ensure you have a named stakeholder from the company who will be responsible for communication; contacting students when their attendance is low or when they are sick.

**“A key contact who can reach both learners and decision makers is your key to success. We began our project with Trust for London communicating with different departments within the same organisation. We soon found it was particularly challenging to communicate with departments where employees had a heavy workload and as a result noticed that learners’ attendance in the organisation dropped.”**

(Coordinator Team Leader, LEAH)



**Identify the needs of your learners.** Conduct individual assessments on registration day. You can use the samples in the toolkit to help you understand learners’ prior knowledge and skills and their interests and learning goals. You may need to split your group into different levels.

**“Always take time before you design your scheme of work to get to know the learners. Assess your learners, ask them what they need and try to manage their expectations.”**

(Coordinator Team Leader, LEAH)

**Learning requirements of the organisation and learners.** ESOL curriculums should ideally be learner-driven. It’s important to understand and identify learners’ needs and incorporate them into your curriculum. Embed work-related topics e.g. a lesson on clothing could include safety wear.

**“Work-related topics may not always be fun and interesting for some learners. Make sure you make those lessons creative and include realia (posters from the break room, online job advertisements from the company, etc.) or ideas from the learners’ daily working life to draw their attention. We started with general ESOL and added work-related topics later.”**

(Coordinator Team Leader, LEAH)

## Setting your scheme of work

**Set clear learning objectives.** These provide a framework for you, the company and the learner, enabling you to track progression and support motivation. It's important to be flexible: each group is different, and some learners may require more time for a certain topic.

**Allocate time.** Determine the total duration of your course. We suggest a 36-week course (three 10-week terms and a 6-week summer term)

**Resource assessment.** Identify the resources available, both physical and digital, such as textbooks, computers, software, and internet access.

**“Most companies won't be able to provide learners with tablets, laptops or Wi-Fi connectivity. That can be challenging when trying to improve their digital skills. Try to be creative and ask the company what resources are available before you start designing your SoW – you may need to rely on learners using their mobile phones!”**  
(Coordinator Team Leader, LEAH)

**Lesson plans and activities.** Develop detailed lesson plans that align to your learning objectives for each session within your scheme of work. Incorporate basic literacy workshops on topics such as messaging, writing formal and informal emails, etc.

**Be flexible.** Be prepared to adapt your scheme of work as you go along, considering the changing needs of your learners and any unforeseen circumstances.

**Assessment and evaluation.** Plan how you will assess and evaluate your learners' progress before you start. Periodically review your scheme of work and gather feedback from learners. Ideally, ask for feedback either in the form of a questionnaire or a discussion at the end of each term. In addition to speaking, listening, reading and writing skills you could also consider additional outcomes that will positively impact the workplace and learner such as wellbeing or understanding of internal recruitment.

**Accessibility and inclusivity.** Consider the diverse needs of your learners, including any accommodations for students with disabilities. Cultural awareness is an important part of ESOL so include key celebrations or topics in your scheme of work.



## Delivering sessions

Delivering ESOL workplace sessions can be highly beneficial for both learners and employers, as it helps employees improve their language skills and, in turn, enhances their job performance and integration into the workplace. However, there are challenges related to space, time, and learner engagement that you may encounter. Here's how you can address these challenges.

### Working well with employers

**Ensure you have a memorandum of understanding.** This is helpful to clarify the expectations on both sides.

**Keep an attendance register.** This may need to be shared with the employer to pay any overtime agreed.

**Communication.** Maintain clear and consistent communication with the employer and the learners. Share schedules, updates, and reminders to keep them informed. Provide them with a welcome letter with all relevant details and dates at the beginning of the term.

**Changes in staff.** Having a named person in each department can help with continuity, particularly in organisations where there is a high staff turnover.

**Paid tutors vs volunteers.** LEAH has a volunteer tutor model of delivery however we found in the workplace we had to recruit paid ESOL tutors to deliver lessons. This was due to organisations frequently changing lesson timings which meant it was difficult to find a volunteer at short notice.

**Accessing the premises.** Check whether the tutors/ volunteers need to complete any mandatory training or require a pass to access the building. Walk through the premises with the employer so you understand where there might be issues with access.

**Discuss GDPR policies.** Be clear about how learner's personal data will be used, stored and shared.

### Logistics

**Limited space.** If you have limited space, consider scheduling sessions during non-peak hours. You can also explore the possibility of using common areas such as a cafeteria, conference room, or an unused office space. Always make sure that you provide a safe learning environment with enough space, desks, and a whiteboard. You should also consider the materials that will be needed and include them in your budget (printing, pens, notebooks, folders, highlighters, refreshments, etc.).

**Risk assessment.** Make sure you conduct a risk assessment if the sessions are delivered in a venue that is not in the company premises. Make sure that learners have access to the room and if not make sure that someone will be around to assist them.

## Delivering sessions

**Online sessions.** Consider conducting online ESOL sessions using platforms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams. This can eliminate the need for physical space and allows for flexible scheduling.

**Scheduling conflicts.** Many learners may have conflicting work schedules. Try to offer sessions during breaks or before or after shifts, if possible. Flexible scheduling can accommodate different work shifts.

**Short sessions.** Conduct shorter, more frequent sessions instead of long, infrequent ones. This can be less disruptive to the workday and help learners retain information better.

**Decide on how to group learners.** You may have to be flexible and group them according to shift patterns rather than ESOL levels.

**Ensure managers are aware of provision for staff.** Make sure managers are notified of any classes and are aware that they need to release staff that have are signed up to attend sessions.

### Keeping learners coming back

**Engaging content.** Ensure that the content is relevant and interesting. Tailor your lessons to the specific needs and interests of the learners. Using workplace-specific scenarios and materials can make the sessions more engaging.

**Interactive activities.** Encourage participation through interactive activities. For example, roleplaying, group discussions, and practical exercises can all make the learning experience more enjoyable.

**Feedback and progress tracking.** Provide regular feedback on learners' progress. Highlight their achievements, and address areas that need improvement. Tracking learners' progress can motivate them to continue attending sessions.

**Incentives.** Consider offering incentives, such as certificates, recognition, or small rewards such as stationery for attendance and successful completion of ESOL sessions. This can serve as a motivation for learners to keep coming back. Check if your learners are getting paid for the time they spend for the lessons. If they aren't go back to the employer to see if staff can be released during working hours or paid overtime.

**Cultural sensitivity.** Be sensitive to the cultural backgrounds and needs of your learners. Create a welcoming and inclusive environment where they feel comfortable and respected.





## Lifelong learning

### Get feedback from your learners and employees

As well as assessing your pupils' progress in English language skills you may want to consider the wider impacts that your intervention might have on the business. Ask all those involved in the programme for feedback. Revisit your learning needs analysis and the original discussion with the employer to develop your evaluation.

### Speak to the HR team or learning and development department

They may be able to share anonymised information about your learners on:

- Internal applications for roles
- Passing mandatory training
- Uptake of any other additional training



### Celebrate the learning

- Encourage learners to share their stories with the wider organisation through their internal communication channels.
- Hold an awards ceremony to mark the end of the course.
- Give learners certificates to mark their progress.

### Sustain the learning


Discuss training a staff member to become an ESOL tutor.

**“After a project ends, learners usually find it hard to identify ways to continue their learning. Languages need practice and ongoing improvement. At Heathrow, we collaborated with Mitie to train one of their learning and development team to deliver ESOL lessons. Mitie supported the employee to attend a CELTA course and with our guidance and ongoing support the trainer started teaching 4 of our groups. We have provided all the materials that he needs to continue his teaching and our ESOL project after the completion of our collaboration with Mitie.”**

(Coordinator Team Leader, LEAH)

## Get in touch

If you have any questions about these guidelines or need further advice please contact us. If you are interested in finding out more about how to introduce ESOL into your workplace or use any of the content to develop your own programme get in touch with us at:

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## Useful links

Top tips to get you started: [Supporting low-paid workers with an ESOL need to progress in work](#)

Exploration of models for delivery based with reference to ESOL Plus – Employer Partnership Programme: [Guidance for Adult Learning Providers and Employers](#)

Easy read guide for employees to understand their rights at work: [Your rights at work](#)

Lessons to improve language techniques for emails: [English for emails](#)

Lessons to improve interview and recruitment techniques: [You're Hired](#)

Lesson plans on jobs and workplaces from the English Hub for Refugees

- **Entry Level 1**
  - [Jobs](#)
  - [Jobs 2](#)
  
- **Entry Level 2**
  - [Looking for a Job](#)
  - [Looking for a job 2](#)
  
- **Entry Level 3**
  - [At work](#)
  - [At work 2](#)
  - [Cover letter](#)

