

Supporting English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learning in the workplace: Guidance for UNISON branches, activists and organisers

Government withdrawal of ESOL funding for people in work has made UNISON's ability to organise workplace ESOL classes increasingly challenging.

The responsibility to meet the English language needs of workers rests with employers. Many employers are keen to offer ESOL for their staff but not to fund it.

Although UNISON would not wish to subsidise what employers have a duty to provide, we can still do much to support ESOL learners and ESOL learning in the workplace.

Ways UNISON can support workplace ESOL

UNISON is well placed to

- Assess and raise awareness of the need and demand for workplace ESOL
- Facilitate opportunities for non-formal workplace ESOL learning
- Negotiate and broker workplace ESOL

learning opportunities with employers and providers (some provision will be dependent on identification of funding and meeting minimum learner number requirements)

- Support workers while they learn, then celebrate and share their success
- Organise around ESOL to build workplace strength and power

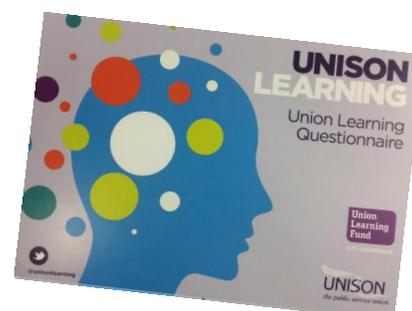


Assessing the need and demand for ESOL learning

Workers may raise the need for ESOL learning with you, or you could introduce the idea through informal conversations.

If your conversations identify potential for workplace ESOL learning, you could follow up with a wider learning survey or listening event. You will then have contact details of potential learners and something to use in discussion with the employer.

UNISON's Inclusive Learning project has produced learning questionnaire postcards or you could develop your own survey. Contact learningandorganising@unison.co.uk to request postcards.



Non-formal learning opportunities

UNISON support for non-formal workplace ESOL learning could take place before, during and after formal ESOL classes are arranged, as well as where ESOL classes cannot be negotiated. Coaching support for self-directed learning can be empowering. Short taster activities can build confidence and skills that help people progress while giving workers a positive first experience of UNISON. Ideally, employers will release workers to access these opportunities but if not, much can be done at lunchtimes, breaks or shift changes.



Possibilities include

- A conversation or reading group
- A support programme of self-directed learning with non-directive coaching
- Bite-size sessions on your rights at work, the role of trade unions, etc.
- Activities on payslips, credit unions, budgeting, record keeping
- Opportunities for sharing folk stories, quotes, songs and cuisine
- Access to online ESOL learning

UNISON's ULF project can provide up to £250 to support learning with refreshments etc. [Apply for kickstart funding](#) or email kickstart@unison.co.uk for more information.

Non-directive coaching for ESOL learners

The workplace presents many opportunities for ESOL learners to develop their English and we are well placed to support learners take advantage of these opportunities. UNISON support for self-directed learning through non-directive coaching can help learners develop the confidence, strategies and persistence needed to progress.

Non-directive coaching is not about teaching and doesn't require specialist language knowledge. It is based on facilitation, reflective learning and problem-solving. It could help prepare learners for formal learning, support progress while learners attend a class, or used as a stand-alone to provide more opportunities for learning than a class ever could.

For more information about taking a non-directive coaching approach in one-to-one and/or group settings to support workplace ESOL learning, see the section 'Support for ESOL learners through non-directive coaching'.

Contact your Regional Education Team or Clair Hawkins, Learning and Workforce Development Officer, on 020 7121 5275 or c.hawkins@unison.co.uk if you have questions or want to discuss your involvement in supporting ESOL learning in the workplace.

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Negotiating for workplace ESOL learning

Government withdrawal of ESOL funding for people in work has made UNISON's ability to organise workplace ESOL classes increasingly challenging.

However, UNISON can still play an important role in supporting ESOL learners and ESOL learning in the workplace. UNISON is in a great position to bring employers, providers and learners together so our role in negotiating a programme of formal as well as non-formal workplace ESOL should not be underestimated.

UNISON has access to workplaces and workers. We understand our members' needs. We are able to offer ongoing support for learning which aids recruitment and retention (something of concern to learning providers). And we understand how workplace ESOL learning benefits employers and can make this case to managers. UNISON learning reps, activists and organisers are also in a strong position to facilitate and support workplace ESOL learning ourselves.

An effective partnership between UNISON, the employer and (where they are involved) the provider is the foundation of delivering a successful ESOL programme. The best way to do this is through a joint agreement setting out the key features of the programme and the roles and responsibilities of each partner. It is ideal to have this embedded in a signed learning agreement.

Before reaching an agreement with the employer and (where they are involved) a learning provider, find out what is available locally and assess what is possible to negotiate. UNISON has a national partnership with Workers' Educational Association (WEA) so contact your Regional Education Team to see what WEA can deliver in your region. It is also worthwhile having a chat with your local college, adult education service, and community organisations about what they can offer ESOL learners in the workplace, or elsewhere. All learning providers have individual funding contracts and agreements so while some may be able to deliver free and flexible English classes for people in work, others may not.



Employer benefits

- Improved health and safety
- Better integration and social cohesion in the workplace
- Improved communication and team working
- Improved efficiency – fewer mistakes, better use of time
- Improved staff retention and reduced absenteeism

Potential bargaining goals

- Employer to support building a network of ULRs with the recognition and time needed to support English language learning in the workplace
- Employer to pay all costs of providing a programme of support for ESOL
- Paid time off for ESOL learning. If not full time, perhaps 50-50 matched time between employer and employee if classes and/or support sessions are held at shift start or end
- Use of the workplace as a venue for ESOL activities and classes
- ESOL incorporated into in-house staff training programmes

Discussion with learning provider

- Course cost and available funding. Some learning providers draw down Functional Skills funding from government to run English classes for ESOL learners. Some providers can access European Social Fund money to support low-paid workers
- Timing and length of the ESOL course
- Minimum learner number requirements
- Course content: relevant language, materials, context, values
- Teaching methods - especially if classes will have mixed level learners
- Experience of workplace ESOL and working in partnership with UNISON
- Initial assessments, end of course assessments, and progression routes

For detailed information about negotiating a learning agreement, take a look at unionlearn's [Delivering Better Learning Agreements](#)

And for further information on negotiating for ESOL in a local learning agreement, take a look at unionlearn's [Negotiator's Brief for ESOL](#)

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Support for learners on a workplace ESOL course

Negotiating delivery of structured ESOL learning with an employer and ensuring the learning provider meets the needs of UNISON members is success in itself.

However, our involvement shouldn't end there. UNISON's ongoing support for ESOL learning can make a big difference to members' motivation and learning experience.

There are many ways that branches, activists and organisers can support ESOL learning (while raising UNISON's profile) before, during and after classes take place.

Before classes take place

- Encourage enrolment on ESOL classes. Publicity could include posters and flyers; social media; emails, texts and conversations with people who completed a learning survey or attended a taster activity. You could translate publicity into other languages
- Ask the branch to purchase refreshments and learning materials (UNISON pens, notebooks, book bags etc.) for everyone on the ESOL course. If the branch is not able to contribute, [apply for kickstart funding](#) from our Inclusive Learning project
- Be present if the learning provider runs initial assessments. An initial assessment helps tutors pitch classes at the right level for learners. It is not a test but can feel like one so learners may feel nervous. A friendly UNISON face can really help

During the ESOL course

- Attend the first ESOL class and as many classes as possible to maintain learners' link with UNISON, recruit members, be aware of concerns that come up, check progress, identify potential activists, and identify organising opportunities
- Check-in with learners and the tutor so you know who is attending, can follow up absences, and support learners if they have a problem
- Classroom learning will be enhanced by opportunities to practise. You could:
 - Facilitate an informal conversation or self-study group alongside the class to give learners time and space to discuss their learning, get extra support, relate their learning to the workplace, and access online ESOL sites

- Run a branch buddy scheme, where learners pair with someone in the branch who can informally support their learning and union involvement
- Offer non-directive coaching to support ESOL learning. This could be offered one-to-one or in group settings (see section on 'Support for ESOL learners through non-directive coaching' for more information)
- Explore access to other opportunities for language practice – ESOL learning online, local libraries, community groups, family learning etc.

After the course

- Celebrate learners' achievement. Invite learners, UNISON branch officers and reps, the employer, the course tutor and anyone else involved to an event. Consider:
 - Food and drink
 - Certificates
 - Prizes
 - Short speeches
 - Photographs
 - Quotes for use in a write up
- Follow up with learners, the employer and learning provider to discuss what went well, what progression opportunities are available, and what could be improved
- Share success with your UNISON Regional Education Team and with LAOS. Contact Clair Hawkins on 020 7121 5275 or c.hawkins@unison.co.uk
- Share your success widely. Many people within UNISON and beyond will be interested in what you've achieved and how you did it. Write something for your branch newsletter, regional and national website, UNISON's Organising Space, unionlearn's blog, and promote in UNISON migrant workers' networks
- Consider organising opportunities arising from ESOL learning – any workplace issues raised, potential activists identified, possible negotiating opportunities with the employer, members' links to community and other networks outside the union



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Support for ESOL learners through non-directive coaching

The workplace presents many opportunities for ESOL learners to develop their English and UNISON is well placed to support workers take advantage of this. Support for self-directed learning through non-directive coaching can help ESOL learners develop the confidence, strategies and persistence to progress.

This approach is not about teaching and doesn't require specialist language knowledge. It is based on facilitation, reflective learning and problem-solving. It could be used to help prepare learners for formal learning, support progress while learners attend a class, or provide more opportunities for learning than a class ever could.

And let's face it. It is not always possible to negotiate workplace ESOL classes. This might be due to funding, provision, or difficulties getting the required number of workers together at the same time and place every week for the duration of a course.

Here is a brief outline of how UNISON learning reps, activists and organisers can adopt a non-directive coaching approach in one-to-one and/or group settings.

Help learners recognise and access the things that help people learn

- Opportunity to interact in the language
- Exposure to the language
- Noticing the form of the language, i.e. grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.
- Safe places to practise
- Personalised corrective feedback
- Effective personal learning strategies
- Motivational support (language learning is hard work and takes time)

Peer-coaching in group settings with a UNISON learning partner

This approach uses group discussion and pair work based on three short sets of questions. As a UNISON learning partner, your role is to help learners understand what the questions mean and then prepare, share and discuss their answers.

First set of questions (focused on goals):

1. What is your life plan?

2. How much time do you need to reach your goal?
3. How will learning English help you reach your goal?
4. How are you trying to learn English?
5. Who is helping you to learn English?

Second set of questions (focused on action-planning):

1. What are you going to do this week to learn English [outside the group]?
2. Where are you going to do this?
3. When are you going to do this?
4. Who can you ask for help?
5. May we talk about how your plan went at our next session?

Third set of questions (focused on review of progress):

1. How did your plan go?
2. What went well last week?
3. What will you do differently this coming week?

Learning projects in one-to-one settings with a UNISON learning partner

This approach pairs one or two learners with a UNISON learning partner (non-directive coach). As a UNISON learning partner, your role is to meet with your learner regularly (e.g. weekly) for a specified time period (e.g. 10 weeks).

The first session focuses on goal-setting and action planning using the first set of questions above. These additional questions might be useful:

6. What ways of learning work best for you?
7. What is it that you like about those ways of learning?
8. What do you find difficult about learning English?
9. Why do you think that is difficult for you?
10. How could you become a better learner of English?

The learning partner then asks the learner(s) to identify as many things as possible that they can realistically do outside the coaching session to improve their English.

The learning partner ends this session by using the second set of questions above.

At subsequent sessions, the learning partner helps the learner(s) review their activity using the third set of questions above, consider outcomes and plan next week's activity.

For more information and guidance about taking a non-directive coaching approach to support ESOL learning, email Clair Hawkins at c.hawkins@unison.co.uk

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Organising around ESOL learning

Mapping

Knowing where migrant workers are based, their job roles, which languages they speak, what (if any) language needs they have, what barriers to learning they may face, what workplace issues they are experiencing, how they feel about trade unions, and which community organisations they have links with will help inform and structure workplace organising.

Trade unions and rights at work

Talking to workers about ESOL learning provides a great opportunity to share information about the role of trade unions, increase awareness of employment rights and encourage involvement in UNISON. There may be a negative perception of trade unions amongst some migrant workers arising from personal experience in their country of origin so this is an opportunity to stress UNISON's independence from employers, the government and business interests.

Recruitment

Talking to migrant workers about ESOL learning and taking action to meet their needs is a great recruitment opportunity. Some employers may insist formal ESOL classes are open to members and non-members alike but branches have been successful in recruiting a whole class to UNISON before the first session starts.

Make the most of a group of workers learning together

Spend as much time as you can spare attending UNISON supported ESOL learning opportunities. Where possible, encourage the integration of UNISON values and activity into learning tasks. For example, 'talking about UNISON' could be part of a learning activity. Learners could then be encouraged to speak with two workplace colleagues about UNISON using English and/or their own language.

Build strength and solidarity in the workplace

Migrant workers with lower levels of English are often among the lowest paid, most precariously employed people in a workplace. Involving and organising our lowest paid members is a key UNISON priority. Workplace ESOL can increase migrant members' confidence and language skills to enable assertiveness, greater activism and power in the workplace. This could mean greater participation in branch meetings and forums, more members voicing opinions and suggesting ideas, more

involvement in local UNISON campaigns, and greater diversity in members stepping forward to become active members, reps and stewards.

Activist Development

Involvement in workplace ESOL learning is a great opportunity to identify potential activists. You might identify natural leaders, people who are already active in other organisations, and people who are great at supporting others. You can then develop a plan to support your potential UNISON activists into activism. The plan could include to: ask what support would help potential activists become more active; explore branch roles and opportunities; offer a branch buddy or mentor; set small tasks that utilise potential activists' skills (talking to co-workers, translating posters, etc.); establish a branch migrant worker forum and link into UNISON's national migrant workers' networks to promote self-organisation.

Identify workplace issues

Engaging with workers about ESOL learning may identify workplace issues for bargaining and campaigning. Encourage workers to identify ways to organise and tackle these issues collectively. Organising projects might involve challenging racism and xenophobia, or exploring your rights and fears in post-Brexit Britain.

Positive press

UNISON's involvement in workplace ESOL learning can provide really positive media success stories so make the most of photo opportunities, quotes from members about what UNISON has helped them achieve, and quotes from community groups, providers and employers about positive partnership working.



ISS cleaners at Middlesex University gaining the London Living Wage after a local UNISON campaign, which led to the UNISON branch negotiating ESOL classes for cleaners.

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Examples and Resources

- **Examples of UNISON supporting ESOL learning**

Middlesex University – ESOL for ISS cleaners <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/case-studies/middlesex-unison-learners-clean-language-skills>

English for Speakers of Other Languages: a learning story (ESOL for ISS cleaners) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHuCay-ncdU>

- **Your rights at work**

Six short videos designed for ESOL discussion around union issues: Toothbrush, Union Clinic, Packing, Join the Union, Darling, Actimel

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_zXdJhe84U4RbLDxEIW8zA/videos?sort=dd&view=0&shelf_id=0

Working in the UK (TUC guide) <https://www.tuc.org.uk/workingintheUK>

- **Non-directive coaching**

Citizens' Curriculum guide to Non-directive coaching (2017) Braddell, A. Leicester: Learning and Work Institute

- **Support and guidance for union reps and ULRs**

ESOL: Language for life and work training module for reps (unionlearn / TUC Education) <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/esol-english-life-and-work-module-reps>

Language Support for Workers e-note (unionlearn / TUC Education) www.tuceducation.org.uk/eNotes

There is a section on ESOL in unionlearn's Delivering Better Learning Agreements www.unionlearn.org.uk/sites/default/files/delivering-better-learning-agreements.pdf

Guidance on negotiating for ESOL in learning agreements www.unionlearn.org.uk/news/2013/04/24/negotiator-s-brief-esol

UNISON's response to the English Language Requirement <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2016/10/English-Language-Requirement.pdf>

- **ESOL courses, lessons and activities**

The British Council's ESOL Nexus website provides a range of online resources for English language learners. In the English for Work section, materials are customised for specific occupations/sectors, such as care, cleaning and catering

<https://esol.britishcouncil.org/content/learners/english-for-work>. There is also a Rights at Work section <http://esol.britishcouncil.org>

English My Way is a resource to help people who support adults with no or low levels of English with free teaching resources <http://www.englishmyway.co.uk/>

Excellence Gateway contains a collection of ESOL resources for teaching and learning <http://esol.excellencegateway.org.uk/>

Exploring English: Language and Culture could help understanding of British culture and improve language skills in context

<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/collections/exploring-english>

Other free online ESOL courses, lessons and activities:

www.alison.com

www.nln.ac.uk

www.esolcourses.com

www.esoluk.co.uk

www.move-on.org.uk

www.anglo-link.com/index.php?/home

<http://a4esl.org>

www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish

www.englishclub.com/learn-english.htm

www.englishgrammarsecrets.com

www.dictationonline.com

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Appendix A: Communicating with ESOL learners

Do	Don't
Speak slowly and clearly and use intonation in your speech to make important words stand out	Speak louder or cover your mouth. Listeners will want to watch you pronounce your words.
Repeat and rephrase if someone doesn't understand	Use ambiguous words, 'correct' is better than 'right' which could be confused with 'write', or as the direction, 'right'
Check understanding regularly	Run words together, eg: "dya-wanna-join-un-ESOL-class?" or "dya-wanna-cuppa-tea?"
Write key vocabulary down. It can help with understanding and enables the listener to look words up in a dictionary later	Use too many idioms (the coffee machine's <i>on the blink</i>) or colloquialisms (wait there and I'll be <i>back in a jiffy</i>)
Correct the content of an ESOL speaker if necessary <i>after</i> the speaker has finished speaking	Use phrasal verbs, such as "Please <i>hand in</i> the form to me." It's better to say, "Please <i>give the form to me.</i> "
Smile and use body language to show friendliness and interest	Use unnecessary words in sentences
Pause after sentences to indicate when you're moving on to a new point	Confuse low English proficiency with low intelligence or lack of experience
Use non-verbal cues (such as gestures, pictures and concrete objects) to aid understanding	Worry if you don't know something. You can ask/find out later
Give encouragement	Get impatient

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Appendix B: Questions workers may ask about ESOL classes

When talking to workers about ESOL, you may be asked questions about workplace English classes before you've spoken with the employer and providers. If this happens, you will not be able to give specific answers as these will be determined by what is locally available and negotiable but the points below might help.

Cost of an ESOL course

Aim to negotiate ESOL classes at no financial cost to workers. An exception might be a course that prepares workers for a specific qualification, for example IELTS for overseas nurses, if the employer will not meet the full cost of the course.

Level of ESOL course

Depending on numbers and what you are able to negotiate, classes may be mixed or split into different levels (see table below). Even if classes include learners with a range of English language levels it should be possible to differentiate activities. This could involve grouping learners, providing extra support for some and extension activities for others, and encouraging learners to support and learn from each other.

Level	Description
Level 2	I speak and understand very well but sometimes have problems with unfamiliar situations and vocabulary.
Level 1	I speak and understand well but make some mistakes and occasionally fail to make myself understood.
Entry 3	I can speak and understand reasonably well but have problems with complex grammar and need more vocabulary.
Entry 2	I can communicate simply and understand familiar situations.
Entry 1	I can say and understand a few things in English.

Length of ESOL course

General ESOL courses are often 30-45 hours long. However, you may be able to negotiate a longer or shorter course as required. Equally, you might not want to run a general course at all but negotiate for a provider to deliver a series of sessions on specific subjects such as record keeping, letter writing, customer service etc.

Exams and qualifications

There is usually an opportunity for learners to take a test at the end of an ESOL course, but this is not compulsory. Learners are generally entered for a test at the level their tutor believes they can achieve.