WHAT WE HAVE TO SAY ABOUT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING



FaithAction

Prepared by FaithAction and Dr Anne Smith, 2017

FaithAction, a network of faith-based and community organisations engaged in social action, manages Creative English. This is a community-based English language (CBEL) programme funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and also available through a licence. The programme is delivered by volunteers, trained by the Creative English team, in mosques, Gurudwaras, churches and community centres. It uses a drama-based method to engage with those with few or no English language skills, enabling learners to understand and practise the language they need for everyday situations, while having fun and developing friendships.

The Creative English methodology was developed through research conducted by Dr Anne Smith, in partnership with Queen Mary, University of London, into using drama to facilitate a sense of belonging for adult refugees and migrants.[1] Anne, an applied theatre practitioner and researcher with over twenty years' experience working in formal and informal education contexts, developed the Creative English model in partnership with workshop participants. She now works as lead trainer for the programme. Alongside her professional practice, she writes the Creative English teaching materials, trains Creative English facilitators and supports those delivering the course.



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1 Smith, A. (2013), The possibilities and limitations of using drama to facilitate a sense of belonging for adult refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in East London. PhD thesis: Queen Mary University of London
Available at http://bit.ly/2Dc0iQO

Seeking Integration and Belonging

Research by FaithAction's Dr Anne Smith led her to conclude that integration is a two-stage process. Migrants and refugees settling in the UK must have an understanding of services and systems, and the language to engage with them, in order to achieve 'functional integration' into society. This access is important in addressing inequalities, but on its own is not enough: to belong, one must have an emotional connection. 'Fitting in' to external patterns of behaviour is often taken as an indicator of belonging, but can actually increase the sense of alienation an individual feels. If a person can do an activity but still feels isolated, or as though they must compromise their identity in order to take part, they will not feel that they belong. Thus there is a need for functional integration, but equally important is the deeper emotional connection where people feel empowered, valued and accepted for themselves. Creative English was developed to address both functional and emotional belonging: to provide the necessary language for everyday situations that learners desperately want, and the flexibility for people to bring their authentic selves into the room. The programme is shaped around a soap opera-like story, allowing participants to practise language in common situations, but with elements of humour and melodrama which enhance the memorability of the language. As the details of the characters and situations are created by the members of the group, the programme is easily sensitive to cultural difference, with the characters inevitably reflecting the people who are making them – with the focus on the creative task, and the accompanying laughter, allowing difference to be expressed without personal confrontation. This in turn helps facilitate the building of friendships within a group–a basis for building community. **Community, where a person is accepted for who they are, results in wellbeing: being who one is, and not just 'fitting in'.**

Creative English has been running through 'hubs' around the country since 2013. An evaluation by Coventry University[2] found that every single learner who completed the programme reported increased confidence in speaking English to others, with a multitude of stories of greater engagement in community life, further education, schools, health and other statutory services. The faith-based nature of the programme was found to play a significant role in enabling its delivery, in terms of the venues, reach into the community and ethos that faith centres naturally supply.

2 Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University (2015). Evaluation of the Creative English Programme. London: FaithAction. Available at http://bit.ly/2D6KQRQ



What Needs to Change?

FaithAction has found that the current landscape of English language provision is fragmented and does not meet the range of existing needs. Government criteria are rigid and sometimes outdated, creating divides between learners by funding provision for some but not others, and setting up barriers that work against social integration. Based on our experience and research[3], we argue that the following needs to be in place:

English language provision needs to be flexible and capable of meeting individual needs—not 'one size fits all'

As with immigration policy as a whole, provision needs to be flexible, allowing a range of needs to be met. For example, a grandmother who has had no formal education in her country of birth and is illiterate in her first language has very different needs from someone who has studied abroad for a degree in English but lacks confidence to speak the language, especially when faced with different accents and colloquialisms. A range of learning styles and needs should be catered for, with clear pathways and referral processes between them.

Community-based English language provision (CBEL) needs a 'roll-on, roll-off' approach to enable learners to access it as needed. This includes provision for learners who make slower progress to spend longer on the programme than those who learn quickly. If the intention is build social integration and generate a sense of belonging, there needs to be the option of longer term engagement with the English language, rather than a one-off course–especially for those who are not interested in, or ready for, the kind of formal English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes provided by further education colleges.

Two stages of language provision are needed to support integration for those who are 'hard to reach'[4]

For those who are hardest to engage in English language classes, it is important that a sense of safety and welcome is created for learners as a first stage. This can be done particularly effectively through community provision that is supported by volunteers or staff from the same community as the learners. As an illustration, Activities for Us in Oldham is based close to a Skills Funding Agency-funded ESOL provider. This provider, whose teachers are all older white women, is struggling to recruit learners. In contrast, Activities for Us has more demand than it can accommodate in its classes, which are delivered in familiar community venues by women from the same cultural background as the learners. We have found that the hardest-to-reach groups are most likely to engage with English in a familiar venue, alongside others from the same culture.



The confidence developed in this context then needs to be utilised in a next stage that builds further on the social integration that has begun, and reinforces the sense of belonging that individuals will have in their communities. Further involvement in English language might be part of this: for example, when learners are referred on to a more advanced class with learners from a mix of backgrounds.

3 See *Appendix: Further Reading*.

4 We have adopted this widely-used term for the sake of convenience to indicate groups of people whom it might be difficult to approach or influence with the methods traditionally used by public services – while recognising that it is highly problematic. This is so not least because it implies a problem within the group of people themselves, rather than with the methods being used to approach them. For the purposes of this paper, the term applies to members of ethnic minority communities who might not be accessing services because of language or cultural barriers or a lack of awareness of what exists.

Language provision needs to be more accessible – from entry

The opportunity to learn English needs to be accessible from the moment a person arrives in the UK. When people first arrive in the country, they are often particularly eager to improve their language and integrate: not to build on this momentum means a missed opportunity. DCLG's CBEL provision is currently targeted at those who have been in the UK for more than 12 months. We believe that rather than being excluded from provision, new arrivals should be able to self-refer – and be subject to fewer criteria than are in place at present.

Centres that are effective places of integration are often used by people of all sorts of backgrounds, countries of origin and lengths of time in the UK. They may not understand why a particular postcode, working arrangement or length of stay excludes them from language provision. Being turned away from a class can be a very alienating experience.

Community providers, such as Creative English hubs, may allow learners who are not 'counted' as part of the funded contract to attend classes, but this can then create problems in capacity for the hosting organisation. The Hub@Castle Point in Dagenham, for example, is a successful place of integration and belonging but has not reached its DCLG targets as its classes contain learners who do not fulfil the DCLG criteria.

Increased accessibility also requires the delivery of community language provision in more geopgrahical areas. The DCLG has identified areas of need based on 2011 Census data, but this does not account for more recent population movements. Organisations like the Action Foundation in Newcastle report a huge, recent demand for community-based language provision – but the area where the organisation is situated is not currently eligible for DCLG funding.



The Role of Central and Local Government

Based on FaithAction's experience of the factors that facilitate community-based English programmes, and those that act as barriers to their effectiveness, we call on government to prioritise the following.

Infrastructure to support small providers with the best community reach

Small organisations are best placed to engage those traditionally considered hard-to-reach. They need, however, to work under umbrella organisations, who can support them with the skills they lack and facilitate best practice. Whilst small organisations often excel as accessible places of local friendship and connection, they do not have the capacity, skills and knowledge to apply for larger grants. The facilitation of an umbrella organisation addresses this challenge by enabling small organisations to access funding and ensure provision is consistent and high quality.

Investment in service users becoming volunteers

Community language programmes effectively facilitate learners' progression into volunteering if appropriate training and mentoring is in place. When passive recipients become active participants in society, it suggests they have achieved a sense of belonging. Volunteering is an indicator of integration.[5] It benefits the volunteer as a source of new skills, confidence and work experience and the community through the increased capacity for individualised support. Investment in appropriate training and mentoring is needed to enable learners to become volunteer teaching assistants, support workers and facilitators, and to engage in other sorts of volunteering. This generates role models for other learners, and ultimately help to move learners towards employment, addressing inequalities.

Better awareness and co-ordination of what is going on locally and nationally

More partnership working would be made possible by better co-ordination. Better co-ordination would enable providers to refer learners more effectively to an appropriate next stage of their learning journey. Most significantly, visits to or from other services would increase engagement, addressing wider issues around health and other inequalities.

National opposed to regional co-ordination would prevent siloed approaches to immigration issues. Siloed approaches tend to generate confusion, particularly for those who find themselves on the borders of two or more areas – and it should be remembered that immigrants are not necessarily aware of geographical boundaries. Regional approaches would almost inevitably vary in quality as well as types of provision, creating fresh challenges for learners. Action Foundation in Newcastle, for example, reports that asylum seekers are often moved elsewhere after a year and can struggle to access provision in their new area that would enable them to continue to learn seamlessly.

Expertise needs to be shared on a national level. This will ensure best practice and the effective meeting of needs.

A national picture of, and profile for, English language provision is important to ensure sufficient numbers of volunteers are recruited to support CBEL programmes. CBEL programmes can make a positive contribution to addressing wider issues of immigration and integration, since they provide opportunities for people from different backgrounds to work together for a common purpose. The relationships built between individuals help to shift peoples' perspectives as they move grand debates to the personal level.



5 Handy and Greenspan (2009), Bloch (2002)

Investing in Volunteers



Delivering CBEL provision through volunteers *should* have many benefits to the learner and volunteer. Volunteers are motivated by a desire to support people in their community and therefore provide a high level of welcome, localised expertise and often have the ability to help learners negotiate cultural barriers through their own familiarity with that culture. In turn, they benefit from new skills and friendships themselves, developed through the sessions. They can play a key role in wider integration.

Recognising this, it is important that volunteers are given appropriate training which supports them to deliver projects which are structured differently from formal ESOL and encourage cross-cultural friendships and integrated communities to develop, whilst at the same time providing an effective context for language acquisition. Infrastructure within organisations, including faith-based organisations, is important in facilitating the engagement and support of volunteers. **This, however, doesn't come for free and needs appropriate investment.**

Instead of formalising a professional code for volunteers who are not equipped with the same qualifications and skills as a professional teacher, project structures should celebrate the value of volunteers and learners living within the same community and should facilitate the development of mutually beneficial friendships, in which neither party is left with a sense of helplessness.

Creative English is an example of a project which sits uniquely across the boundary of informal and formal provision, with its conscious emphasis on language acquisition for day-to-day circumstances and emphasis on building connection and communicating beyond words. While the perceived need to improve functional English language skills is a common motivation to meet people from diverse backgrounds, friendship is the key to integrated communities. It is an essential driver to maintain English language skills and confidence beyond formalised provision and creates an emotional sense of belonging.

College-based ESOL vs Community-based English

College-based ESOL programmes provide accredited teaching, delivered by professional staff. This is helpful for those who will benefit from a formal educational environment and/or require qualifications to aid their progress into employment. On the other hand, many hard-to-reach participants do not want qualifications – they simply want to be able to function in their everyday lives. To attend a college, a person must be confident enough to negotiate the venue and the assessment and enrolment processes, as well as the public transport needed to get there. Unfamiliarity with systems and a lack of confidence can be huge barriers to access.

CBEL offers a valuable bridge into college-based ESOL, but importantly also meets the needs of those who do not want formalised language learning. As such it offers significant value for money. Creative English costs £378.73 per learner opposed to ESOL which costs £1,264.36 per learner.[6] Both sorts of provision, however, are needed to facilitate integration, reduce inequalities and to address the needs of all individual learners appropriately.

CBEL provision tends to take place in venues that offer activities other than education. They therefore provide a safe, familiar point of access and also provide opportunities to connect with others in English beyond the language classes. This in turn supports the development of wider belonging, e.g. through joining a parent and toddler group or attending a keep-fit class. The informality, and involvement of volunteers, help to build trust with learners who are nervous about formal education. Volunteers also tend to come from the same geographical location and can therefore share a good deal of specific local knowledge, which can help learners' confidence. For example, the volunteer might attend the same doctor's surgery as a learner and therefore be able to explain precisely what will happen on a visit to that specific practice. However, referral pathways in these contexts are ad hoc, and depend on the motivation of volunteers to find out what is available locally or what other services are offered in the venue. This underlines the need for good local coordination highlighted above.





6 Available at http://bit.ly/2mDvPRy

Learners - What Really Matters

Whatever the priorities of governments and learning providers, learners will have issues in the forefronts of their minds that will greatly influence whether or not they choose to engage in learning English. These need to be remembered and actively addressed by providers. We have found that some of the biggest such issues are:

Fear

Fear is a significant barrier for many people who might be considered hardest to reach. Creative English learners have described:

- the fear of working with those from other cultures for the first time;
- the fear that sessions will not be delivered with cultural sensitivity;
- cultural barriers in the that way education is perceived, especially for women;
- fear of failure based on their experiences of formal education;
- embarrassment that they have lived in the UK for a long time without learning to speak English;
- fears experienced by family members holding back learners who are more willing to engage.

Practical barriers

Signing up to any sort of English language or other learning provision can take a lot of courage. Learners have told us that any practical issue that gets in the way of being able to instantly join in with an English language session can significantly reduce the likelihood of their coming back, especially for the most socially isolated learners. Examples of such obstacles include:

- an unfamiliar buzzer or reception system to get into the venue;
- unfamiliar or complex registration, enrolment and assessment processes (e.g. needing a passport or bill, form filling, having to come back at a different time or go to a different place);
- criteria–such as postcode or length of residency–that exclude them from the specific provision.

If on the day a person has the courage to turn up, they can be welcomed into a class and take part, they are significantly more likely to remain engaged.

Childcare

The lack of a crèche, or a facility to bring children to the session, can be a barrier for many of those most in need of learning provision. Sessions that do not fit with school drop-off and pick-up times, or that run during school holidays **but do not allow learners to bring children along, will create drops in attendance – whereas provision of childcare facilitates it.**

Consistency in the programme

Word-of-mouth is the most effective way of recruiting those normally considered hard-to-reach. A Creative English session in Dagenham, which has run consistently on the same day at the same time, regularly receives new learners without any advertising, as it is a well-known source of help locally. Consistent delivery also helps to build trust through the track record of the provider in the community. On the other hand, interruptions to provision caused by funding cycles disrupt this continuity. **A long-term strategy is needed to ensure stability for those delivering classes in situations where word-of-mouth is vital.**

Learner-led decisions about learning

Learners should be able to self-refer to community language programmes. This means that a reduction is needed in the criteria that determine access to learning provision, so that learners can benefit from the provision that they determine will help them.

What Needs to Happen Now

FaithAction wants to share our learning throughout the English language sector so that limited resources are used efficiently and the learners most in need can benefit from effective provision.

The Key Points

Meaningful integration also requires emotional connection and a sense of belonging.

An indicator of success is seen when learners become active participants such as volunteering.

Humour and active melodrama enhance the memorability of language.

Faith groups are an effective way of engaging with hard-to-reach groups in safe community venues.

Our Recommendations

English language provision needs greater flexibility to cater for learners with very different backgrounds and learning styles.

All types of English language classes need to recognise and mitigate the barriers that many learners face.

Offering provision in community venues that feel safe is a crucial ingredient in building confidence.

National coordination is better than regional devolvement for effective organisation of English delivery, the sharing of good practice and access for learners.

Volunteer delivery requires investment in training–and ideally recruitment from the same communities as learners.

FaithAction also calls for a long-term strategy for community-based English language provision. This will help to overcome the disruption and uncertainty of the current arrangements and mean that word-of-mouth recruitment of learners, which tends to attract those most in need, will continue to be effective. It will also help to facilitate the flexibility of opportunities and progression routes that are so important for learners traditionally considered hardest to reach.

A sense of belonging is integral to building individual wellbeing and healthy, fully-functioning communities. Learning English is not the end point, but the start: the start of active citizens who are able to join in, to serve others, to coach, to teach, trade and contribute to a better Britain. Belonging involves not just the ability to negotiate the practicalities of life in society, but the emotional connection that comes when one is empowered and valued–and able to be the solution to the challenges society faces.



Appendix: Further Reading

Smith, A. (2017) 'You are contagious': The role of the facilitator in fostering self-efficacy in learners.' *Scenario*
Available at http://bit.ly/2r7SxFV

Smith, A. (2017), 'I am English now': uses of objects and puppets in an applied drama project to teach English and support the development of bi-cultural identity for refugees and migrants in the United Kingdom. *Applied Theatre Crossings* (publication pending)

Smith, A. (2016), 'They have become my family': Reciprocity and Responsiveness in a Volunteer-led program for Refugees and Migrants. *Arts Praxis* Issue 3, pp. 71-86.
Available at http://bit.ly/2D3CrP9

Smith, A. (2016), Creative English: Balancing Creative and Functional Language Needs for Adult Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants. *Scenario* Vol. X, Issue 01, pp. 1-17.
Available at http://bit.ly/2EItRpq

Smith, A. (2016), 'Laugh your way to confident English': A volunteer-led approach to meeting the needs of migrants. *Research and Practice in Adult Literacy* Vol. 89, pp. 9-14.

Smith, A. and Smith, B. (2015), What's in a Name? Shifts in Identity, Delivery and Impact in a National Volunteer-led Programme Using Applied Drama to Learn English. *Research in Drama Education*, 20: 4, pp. 524-530

Smith, A. (2014), Maximising empowerment in applied theatre with refugees and migrants in the United Kingdom: Facilitation shaped by an ethic of care, *Journal of Arts and Communities*, 6: 2+3, pp. 177-188

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Available at http://bit.ly/2Dc0iQO

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