

# Supporting digital inclusion of adults with low English language skills

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CHANGING MINDS • CHANGING LIVES

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## Foreword: Coronavirus and digital inequalities

This research project was completed in February 2020, before the coronavirus pandemic arrived in the UK. We delayed publication so we could focus on our emergency response – supporting community centres in our network, supporting our people, and working with funders and others to help digitally excluded people to get connected – prioritising people in the ‘shielding’ group and people in poverty and on low incomes.

Community centres and libraries have closed for usual business – some are still operating as best they can to meet crisis needs such as delivering food parcels. Through DevicesDotNow, some of our community partners have been able to provide packages of digital inclusion support to adults who are most in need and their families: a device, connectivity and remote support (by phone or video call) to get set up and started. Community partners, like Being Woman, which have the trusted relationships and experience in supporting ESOL learners and providing basic digital skills support, have been doing amazing work to provide essential digital and learning support to women like Firoozeh Salimi (Good Things Foundation 2020).

Firoozeh and her family came to the UK from Iran 8 months ago. With a household of two adults and two children with no internet or devices, the family relied heavily on community organisations and schools to access the internet. With English as her second language and a disabled member of her family, being able to get online was vital for her to access support needed for the family. The Being Woman centre – one of the centres which took part in this research project – had been supporting Firoozeh for the past few months, and in April they ensured she could get a tablet and connectivity as part of the DevicesDotNow campaign.

One of the challenges faced by us and by community partners has been how to pivot the best practice model which is at the heart of our approach to helping people get online: face to face support, delivered in small groups and classes, located in friendly and

trusted community environments, provided by a mix of tutors, volunteers and peers. Providing remote support (over the phone or by video calls) to help people who are digitally excluded get online, especially if there are also language barriers, is challenging. At Good Things Foundation – we’re trying hard to pivot what we do to this unprecedented situation – learning as we go, and learning with our community partners and people we’re supporting.

The practice insights and ideas in this report came from what feels like a different world now. The call to action remains the same. If anything, it is even more important as coronavirus has revealed the depth of inequalities – digital, social, economic and health – in the UK.

As governments at all levels prepare for a long road to recovery, we need a clear, cross-government and cross-sector commitment to prioritising digital inclusion as a social and economic policy priority – and doing this in a way which ensures everyone in the UK benefits, providing additional support to those, like Firoozeh, who face the greatest barriers.

**Emma Stone,**

**Director of Design, Research and Communications**

## Foreword from the Carnegie UK Trust

Since it was established in 1913, the mission of the Carnegie UK Trust has remained constant – to improve wellbeing. Over 100 years on, the centrality of digital and technology to our individual, community and societal wellbeing becomes more apparent with almost every passing day. For better and worse, technology has and will continue to impact our economic, educational, social and democratic opportunities. It has, in many ways, fundamentally reshaped how we consider relationships, concepts of privacy, understanding of our own independence and personal agency.

This has perhaps never been clearer than since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, as our public and private reliance on technology and digital platforms has never been greater.

However, we know that the benefits and risks of the online world are not equally distributed. There are still many people in the UK today who face significant cost and confidence barriers to accessing digital. The crisis has served to both shine a light on existing digital inequalities and further exacerbate many issues within these, including English literacy and language challenges being intensified in digital-only support contexts.

Conversely, as access to digital grows ever more critical, the numbers who can safely, productively, confidently and affordably access these spaces, without intervention, will diminish.

Digital inclusion has been a core pillar of our work at the Trust for many years. As a society, we need to continue to do more to better understand who is offline, why people are offline, what it means to be ‘meaningfully digitally included’ and what public policy and practice might do to support wider participation and skills development. To achieve this we need to continue to develop a robust evidence base and increase the range of voices heard in this debate.

So the Trust has been delighted to support Good Things Foundation to deliver this project to further understand the needs of community organisations in supporting

learners with both their digital and language skills. And we commend the Good Things approach to continuing to develop their thinking around these core issues as this ‘unprecedented situation’ shifts into the ‘new normal’.

We also wanted to pay particular thanks to all of the individuals and organisations who participated in this research. We hope this practice-led document will provide both useful insights for future practice, but also set a clear direction for future policy priorities.

**Douglas White**  
**Head of Advocacy**  
**Carnegie UK Trust**

## Chapter 1

# Introduction

Over 11 million adults, across all ages, lack the essential digital skills which the UK government has identified we all need for life and work (see Digital Nation 2019, Essential Digital Skills Framework 2018). Of these, around 4 million adults have no digital skills.

Many more have some access to the internet, and may even use the internet on a daily basis, but in a limited way. People may go online for entertainment, gaming or social messaging, but they lack the digital skills and confidence to live well in an increasingly digital world:

- to search and apply for a job
- to get and keep a job, as more employers expect some level of digital confidence
- to access essential government services (like Universal Credit)
- to pay rent or Council Tax or other bills
- to shop online for better deals or services
- to get health information or advice from trusted sources
- to keep their data secure and keep themselves, and those around them, safe online.

Digital inequalities are strongly linked to wider social and economic disadvantage (White 2016, Good Things Foundation 2019). Disadvantage shapes access to the internet (e.g. costs of devices, data), as well as digital skills and confidence. People with no, low or limited digital skills are more than three times more likely to be living on low incomes or have low levels of schooling and qualifications.

For some adults – including young adults – their limited use of the internet is linked with low literacy and numeracy, and to lacking the confidence and motivation to learn new skills and apply them in their lives. Across the UK, there is an additional barrier to digital inclusion for people with no or low English language skills, given the growing need to access and navigate the internet in the English language.

The overlap between digital skills and language skills is what sparked this collaboration between Good Things Foundation and the Carnegie UK Trust.

### About this project – why we did it

As Good Things Foundation, we realised that we were not doing enough to join these dots. We had several years of experience in supporting community-based pre-entry ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) through providing an online resource for tutors (English My Way) to support them to deliver pre-entry classes. Separately, we provide access to free online learning content for basic digital skills (Learn My Way) designed for use as part of blended (community and online) learning. Feedback from community partners in our Online Centres network, as well as insights from our previous research (Good Things Foundation 2018) made us realise that:

- Some learners using English My Way lacked basic digital skills and confidence
- Our Learn My Way platform was inclusive of people with lower literacy, but beyond the reach of people with very low English language or very low literacy
- Some community partners in the Online Centres network were already finding ways to bring basic digital skills and basic ESOL together – but this wasn't widespread and wasn't always well-supported, including by us.

For the Carnegie UK Trust, their interest in this project stemmed from a programme focused on young people: #NotWithoutMe. This innovative research and development programme challenged assumptions about digital inclusion and young people – identifying young people who experience digital exclusion as an overlooked group in policy and practice on digital inclusion. One of the insights which emerged was that low literacy was an almost universal barrier to digital inclusion for young people irrespective of geographies, settings and groups worked with, despite the potential of digital tools to support young people to develop these skills.

So Good Things Foundation and the Carnegie UK Trust worked together and with staff and tutors from community centres to explore these issues. We focused this project on ESOL and digital skills to build on practical work that Good Things Foundation has already started with some community centres in the Online Centres network. We think that some of the issues and insights will also be relevant to young people and older adults who are native English speakers but have low literacy skills (see Buchanan & Tuckerman 2016) and hope to develop this thinking further.

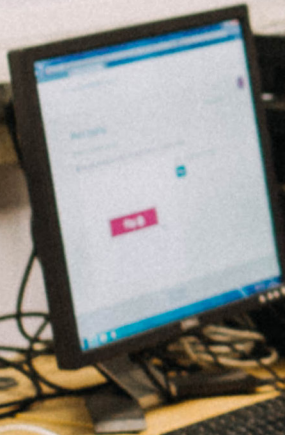
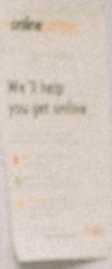
### About this project - what we did

We set out to learn from existing research and from the expertise and practice of community-based tutors, to test out insights and co-produce ideas and recommendations - which could then inform wider discussions with providers, commissioners and policy makers. We did this by:

- A lean research review of academic and industry sources. We had an original list of around 90 sources, reviewed 35 in more depth, and used around 20 for this report.
- Observing four classroom sessions (all in different centres) teaching digital skills to pre-entry ESOL learners. Each session used Good Things Foundation teaching materials (which had been developed for pre-entry ESOL classes following a co-production workshop in 2018 with centres in the Online Centres network).
- A webinar with 3 centres to understand more about whether and how they already bring digital skills and confidence building into pre-entry and entry ESOL.
- A workshop with participants from 10 different centres across the UK to co-design a 'perfect' lesson plan and generate advice and ideas for other tutors teaching basic digital skills and confidence to pre-entry ESOL learners.
- Three roundtable events, bringing policy-makers, providers and commissioners together, to test the insights with them and generate wider recommendations. The insights from these events are shared in a separate report (Carnegie UK Trust 2020).

Overall, we worked with practitioners (tutors, volunteers) from 11 community centres based in England, four of which were involved throughout to strengthen co-production of insights.







## Chapter 2

### ESOL and digital skills

Digital skills and English language skills are key to inclusion in society. Gaining these skills, along with the confidence and motivation to use them in real life, can help people to have better lives.

English language skills support participation in social, economic and civic life across the UK, and are one of the 'necessary capabilities to navigate British society' (Paget & Stevenson 2014), enabling people to 'play a full part in national and local life' (DCLG 2012).

For people with low English language skills, being able to access the Internet independently can facilitate their inclusion while they improve their language skills. For example, using the Internet to translate key information needed to navigate everyday situations, rather than relying on others (Stapleford 2014). This could include translating letters from GPs or hospitals, from children's nurseries or schools, from colleges, job centres, and local councils.

Digital skills and confidence (as well as affordable and reliable access to digital devices and data) are fast becoming essential to life in the UK - from schooling to staying in touch, from employment to entertainment to accessing essential services. Digital literacy has many dimensions. It is more than the ability to use the hardware and software, it also includes the development of information skills and strategic skills - the 'know-how' to navigate the Internet safely and benefit from it:

*... operational skills (the basic skills for using Internet technology) are required before one can engage in the formal skills of navigating and orienting oneself to the Internet and before one can execute information skills (searching, selecting, processing and evaluating information) and strategic skills (using the Internet to attain particular goals and improving one's position in society) (van Deursen and van Dijk 2016).*

Learning providers of English as a second or additional language increasingly recognise the value of developing digital as well as English language skills (see British Council 2019), especially for those seeking work in a jobs market which expects basic digital skills as a minimum, and for those wanting to progress to further

education and training (including making the most of online learning):

*'this 'digital divide' can present particular challenges to students from different cultures, and ESOL learners are potentially more likely to be digitally excluded' (Excellence Gateway).*

Despite this, we found relatively few studies which explored good practice in bringing ESOL learning and digital skills development together for adult learners - particularly adult learners who were more likely to experience wider disadvantages. This reflected our own experience and practice: our English My Way and Learn My Way courses were separate; and Learn My Way language was too high a level for pre-entry ESOL learners. This gap in basic digital skills resources for pre-entry ESOL learners was also identified in our classroom study which observed an English My Way class in Sheffield over 24 weeks (Good Things 2018).





## Chapter 3

### Adult learners – barriers and support needs

Adult learners who are learning English (for the first time or trying again), and who are taking their first or second steps to learning to use the Internet and/or use a PC, may face multiple and complex barriers to learning which extend far beyond the 'classroom'.

In a study by the Learning and Work Institute (2018), the most disadvantaged learners were more likely to describe a 'cumulative effect of multiple barriers to learning'. People in these groups included those in receipt of benefits, disabled people and people with health conditions, single parents, and people for whom English was an additional language (Learning & Work Institute 2018).

For people with low English language skills who may be refugees, new migrants or seeking asylum, barriers to learning can also include:

- Poverty and housing difficulties
- Additional learning needs (such as dyslexia or other learning difficulties)
- Practical barriers to attending sessions, such as a challenging home life or work life (e.g. insecure work or shifts), childcare difficulties, transport and travel, and wider accessibility (e.g. relating to disability, religion, culture)
- Anxiety and stress related to the context within which they're learning new skills – for example, in order to access online services such as Universal Credit, or process applications related to immigration status; or liaise with local schools, GPs or hospitals.

For ESOL and digital skills learners, lack of confidence in their ability to learn new skills, or to use these to achieve personal goals (self-efficacy), can be big barriers; even more so if related to trauma, including trauma of past educational experiences. People may feel embarrassed about not knowing how to use the internet or speak English. They may be fearful of breaking equipment; tutors explained that some learners may have devices at home but they don't trust themselves, or are not trusted by others, to use them.

Learning a new language is hard. Learning digital skills from scratch is hard. It is even more difficult if your basic literacy and numeracy levels are also low. Low literacy can lead to people not using the internet, not seeing the point of it, and not being motivated to learn. Studies confirm that literacy is intrinsically linked to many online tasks – from basic steps (such as logging in, passwords, correctly inputting a URL or an email address), to navigation and information processing skills (van Deursen & van Dijk 2016). Some studies identify literacy as a prerequisite for learning digital skills (van Deursen & van Dijk 2016). Well-designed websites with audio and visual content can somewhat mitigate this, although this can also require other knowledge, such as cultural understanding of what different graphics mean. Low literacy may be an additional barrier for ESOL learners if they missed out on education because of poverty, environmental factors or war (Lifelong Learning UK 2009).

It takes a lot for adult learners to decide to take lessons. They need to see a real benefit, and they need to be access learning in a place where they feel welcome, with people they trust.





## Chapter 4

# Community centres and adult learning

Building trust and relationships with adult learners – across ages – is vital where learners face considerable social and economic disadvantage, and multiple barriers to learning. A local, welcoming and friendly environment, where learning and wider support is provided by people you trust, creates the conditions for learning new skills. Community centres can be a place where people can grow trust and feel at home (Good Things Foundation 2016).

*“If we had to pick just one key ingredient for success across the pilots, it would be trust. Trusted relationships are the gateway to digital inclusion for the hardest to-reach young people” (Social Tech Trust 2018)*

Centre staff felt that the people who accessed informal learning support from their community centres were more likely to have low learner confidence and complex needs than those accessing formal further education. The informal learning support offered in a community centre might be the only option (that works) until people have developed the skills, confidence and motivation to progress to further education or training.

Community-based and informal learning for adults is essential but under strain. From our research review, as well as working with community centre staff on this project, several challenging areas emerged, starting with resources and the role that community centres play (or are seen to play) in local learning ecosystems.

### Resources and relationships with local agencies

Insecure and insufficient funding for community centres and (informal) adult learning emerged as a key issue, and inseparable from other challenges (see also Good Things Foundation 2019).

Centres from different geographical areas described challenges around their relationships with other local agencies. We heard examples of both collaboration and competition, especially with local colleges.

We also heard about tensions with local agencies, such as Job Centre Plus or FE colleges, who referred adults to community centres for basic skills support but without any associated funding. For example, making referrals for digital support with online Universal Credit or job search, or with pre-entry or entry-level ESOL (whether because the local college does not offer this, or there is a long waiting list).

As one community centre tutor said: *“They know we care, so they know we will do it anyway”.*

### Digital technology, devices and learning

Digital devices and reliable broadband were raised as an ongoing challenge by community centre staff and tutors we worked with. Community centres struggle to obtain and maintain ICT equipment. They often rely on hand-me-down equipment from schools or businesses, creating a ‘tech-lag’. One centre worried about what will happen when Windows 7 stops being supported in 2020; most worried about in-house ICT skills, updates and maintenance.

For digital inclusion support, centres felt a variety of digital devices was ideal for learners, so they could try out different devices (smart phones, tablets, laptops, PCs) in the class and get used to moving between these.

ICT equipment such as interactive whiteboards was felt to be valuable for ESOL and digital. Using ICT to enhance learning is recognised as “good practice” (Stapleford 2014), even “a necessity” for adult learning providers (Jisc 2016b). Some centres we worked with had second-hand interactive whiteboards, which made it easier to show and share examples on a big screen and annotate with vocabulary. But such equipment was out of reach for others, reflecting realities for community-based ESOL classes: “where it is still so often the case that access to technology such as computers and interactive whiteboards is restricted or simply not available in the classroom, a situation which is also often reflected in many learners’ homes” (British Council 2019).

## Digital resources for ESOL learners

Research into the use of advanced technology in learning environments continues, but we found little that relates to ESOL and low literacy (NRC 2012). One study found that fun online games can support second language learning, as well as social well-being and confidence (Hudson 2016). Another found that wearables and voice technology can help, and that well-designed digital learning tools for use by people with low literacy can also support ESOL learners - using mixed-media, especially graphics, and simple navigation and interfaces (UNESCO 2018). In one study, installing the TechDis screenreader programme was found to have a positive effect for ESOL learners, while Xerte was praised for its built-in accessibility tools allowing users to choose colours, text size and zoom (Leeds City College 2013).

Outside the classroom, digital translators are increasingly used by ESOL learners to navigate important communications (like communications from schools or hospitals), but it is less clear how this helps in the learning environment (Stapleford 2014). Tutors we worked with had different views about digital translators and voice technology. One concern is that people input text with a speech programme instead of developing their writing skills. Overall, encouraging learners to use voice technology as a learning aid was seen as positive, while noting that voice technology is not (yet) good enough with accents - a problem for some ESOL learners.

### Digital - always evolving

A recurring issue is that digital technology, the internet and online services and platforms are always evolving. Centres highlighted the need for more regular funding so they could keep up to date with changes in hardware and software, and in the online world generally.





## Chapter 5

# ESOL tutors - barriers and support needs

Teaching challenges faced by tutors in community learning centres are similar to other teaching environments, but heightened - reflecting high learner needs and low budgets, and a stronger reliance on volunteers.

### Mixed classes, mixed abilities

Community centre classes (especially ESOL) are likely to be mixes of age, gender and first language spoken. As one tutor put it: "You never know who is going to walk through the door".

Assessments may be used to direct people to certain classes, but learners may choose to join another class that they feel will suit them better - maybe to join those they know, or at a time that is more convenient for them.

Tutors described teaching classes with adults from many different backgrounds, who speak many different languages. Some may have prior ESOL experience, some none at all. Some may be more advanced in writing, some reading, some in speaking aloud. The speed of each individual's progression of learning English will vary.

Digital access and capabilities will also be very varied: some may be skilled users of digital technology but lack access; others may not have a mobile phone or may have a phone but use it in a very limited way. In observation sessions, some adult ESOL learners were learning basic terms for a computer for the first time, while others already knew some terms, and still others were fast to complete tasks and used the remaining time to browse the internet.

### Attitudes, skills and confidence of tutors towards digital

One of the issues surfaced in this project is that digital skills tutors may not have the skills or tools to make their support accessible to people with no or low English language or literacy, while ESOL tutors may themselves lack digital skills, confidence and motivation.

Existing research confirms that learners' digital experiences are strongly influenced by the digital confidence and capabilities of their tutors (Jisc 2016a). Tutor attitudes about individuals or groups

will influence how they teach different learners, and their attitudes to digital will influence how far they integrate digital learning (Hosseini 2018, Stapleford 2014). Tutors may feel anxious about their own digital skills whilst teaching digital, and lack the time to learn new skills (Leeds City College 2013).

Tutors we engaged with talked about the challenge of embedding digital into ESOL lessons given competing priorities on their limited time with learners. They talked about gaps in digital skills and confidence - whether for themselves or colleagues (paid and voluntary). In our observations, we found ESOL tutors had different levels of digital skills. Some used vocabulary inconsistently, which could be confusing (e.g. 'cursor' and 'arrow', or 'browser' and 'search engine'). One struggled to use a website they had asked the students to use. Tutors also talked about being less familiar with smartphone/mobile devices compared to desktop PCs, creating challenges where ESOL learners were more likely to be 'mobile-first'.





## Chapter 6

# Developing practice in ESOL + digital

One aim of this project is to open up discussion and share practical ideas about how to support digital inclusion among adults who lack digital skills and confidence, and who also have little or no English language skills.

So far, we've summarised the challenging context for adult learners, for tutors, and for community centres. Next, we pull out emerging practice in this area – drawing on research and on the practice experience of community-based tutors who worked with us.

### Making learning relevant, useful and fun

Second language learning for adults is best based on teaching 'what you need to know' first, using information, references and examples that relate to people's lives and needs. Teaching practical things that relate to people's lives will allow them to understand the benefits of both English language learning and digital (Lifelong Learning UK 2009, NRC 2012). All the tutors we worked with agreed with this. As one tutor explained: *"They need IT to survive ... so we need to make them understand why it's important. We make it relevant. For example we use flyers that come through the door as a teaching aid"*.

Tutors described pros and cons of teaching which is focused on helping people to do specific tasks or transactions compared to a more holistic approach that supports people to build digital confidence and capabilities. Tutors may be asked to provide transaction-focused support by an external agency or by people themselves, for example to use Universal Credit. While relevant to people's immediate needs, this can also be a time of stress and anxiety for learners, and tutors themselves may struggle. As one explained: *"What the job centre needs changes every day. We can't keep on top of that."*

By comparison, a more holistic approach aims to make ESOL and digital activities fun, interesting and entertaining (Good Things 2016). This encourages people to learn, enjoy the class and want to return. The National Research Council (2012) recommends giving people choices about

activities to increase their motivation, and finding out about people's interests (to tailor activities). Using online games to learn basic IT and alphabet skills was recommended by many tutors and seemed effective (see also GIRDA/Good Things 2019 on games to teach tablet skills). Using websites which are image-heavy (pictures and icons) makes learning easier for people with low literacy and low English skills (Medhi et al 2007).

### Mastery moments

Confidence and self-efficacy can be built through identifying 'mastery goals' and celebrating 'mastery moments', where the learner sees their own successes against their personal goals. For literacy and ESOL learning, mastery goals have been found to be more motivating than performance goals, where a learner's performance is compared against others (NRC 2012). It helps learners to expect to succeed when using goals appropriate to their personal experience, and encourages learners to persist with their learning. Tutors can give specific feedback to encourage helpful goal-setting, reflection and recognising success (NRC 2012). Relevant and bite-sized learning (Stapleford 2014) supports mastery moments.

### Approaches to assessment

In sessions we observed, most tutors set the whole class off on the same task, making assumptions about the level of digital skills. Tutors reflected that, in an ideal world, an initial assessment would be carried out about individual interests, needs and barriers; to assess levels of English language skills, digital skills, literacy and other needs such as dyslexia; and understand underlying attitudes to digital. While centres said they do initial assessments, they felt this was less meaningful than ongoing observation. This reflects the difficulties of assessing people with limited English (one tutor uses pictures to understand digital skills); and the nature of community classes: *"We need to constantly do an informal assessment because whoever might show up – we can't turn them away."*

## Practical ideas - from tutors for tutors

- Show that you are learning and making mistakes too! Learn together
- Help people overcome their fears about using digital devices - create a casual, fun environment - where everybody tries new things, including tutors and volunteers.
- Find out about what digital devices people have and use (if they do)
- Use online games to teach basic skills such as alphabet, typing, using a mouse
- Use emojis or pictures to assess digital skills levels of ESOL learners
- Put print-outs on classroom walls of the alphabet, basic vocabulary, key terms
- Stick labels onto equipment such as 'mouse' and 'keyboard'
- Look up recipes online, and then cook them together in a cookery class, or collaborate to create a cookery book together
- Use Google Maps to find somewhere you want to go, and do the journey together
- Use Google Street View to look up an old address
- Use YouTube and learn how to search for content on things learners are interested in
- Encourage learners with mobile phones to take pictures of new words learned
- Set homework which uses digital skills and English language skills - e.g. asking learners to find a YouTube video they enjoy, and describe it to the class next time
- Encourage learners to set up a WhatsApp group to support their ESOL learning
- Provide image-rich handouts to support learning inside and outside the class

- Try out the British Council's teaching ideas for ESOL learners with mobile phones
- Use Learn My Way to support English language learning (with more advanced learners)
- "If all else fails, just Google it together with the learner"
- Consider the background of the learner, customs, traditions and expectations. Be sensitive to the material and activities chosen and the learning experience.
- Help people to get used to different devices as a key part of digital confidence
- Log-in processes can be a stumbling block - try and build it into language learning
- Use websites and resources which are image-heavy with pictures and icons
- Get a (donated) interactive whiteboard for use to support teaching in the classroom - as it can help to embed digital into ESOL (or other) classes.



## Tutors are key to success

Where ESOL tutors may themselves lack digital skills and confidence, volunteers might be able to fill the gap. The sessions we observed had a lead tutor with support tutors. In one session, the volunteer did not turn up and it was noticeably more difficult for the tutor. In some sessions, volunteers had higher digital skills than the lead tutor, and used these skills to good effect. Some centres have 'digital champions' with community languages as a way to build digital skills and confidence in adults with limited English language.

Supporting more ESOL staff and volunteers to build their own digital skills and confidence emerged as an important issue. Tutors also highlighted the importance of attitudes: having – and displaying – a positive attitude to trying new things online, learning how to use the internet, and making mistakes. As one tutor put it: *“Being open-minded is more important than being an expert on tech, as it is about exploring with learners too.”* Tutors talked about making a virtue of not knowing the answer: *“I ask stuff of other people. That makes it look ok that we have to ask, and less intimidating for the students to do so.”* Some people may panic when faced with a computer; tutors need to recognise and reassure (Good Things 2018).

## Collaboration and peer learning

Working collaboratively and interactively encourages learning and can motivate learners (NRC 2012, Lifelong Learning UK 2009). This can be more challenging in classes where multiple languages are spoken, and few languages in common. One observation session involved students who didn't know each other or the tutor. The tutor took time for introductions, writing names, and finding out people's first language. This allowed people to get to know each other, and to pair up students who shared a language.

There is some evidence that peer learning and conversation can develop more naturally with digital learning. Encouraging learners who are more digitally able to help others can boost the confidence of those who are able to assist (Stapleford 2014); make it easier to help everyone complete a task; and keep advanced learners motivated in classes.

## Outside of the classroom

Tutors we worked with were keen on encouraging people to continue their learning outside of the classroom – setting tasks that can be done at home ready to share in the next session. All tutors agreed that image-rich handouts were important as reminders and for vocabulary. One class provided notebooks for students to note new words in and take home for practice.

Several tutors who were keen to build both digital and ESOL skills highlighted the benefits of setting 'digital' homework, such as finding YouTube videos that interest you to share in class. Lack of access to devices at home and adequate, affordable connectivity may be a barrier to digital homework or practice. Some beginner ESOL learners may struggle with using digital learning tools independently due to language barriers, for example to follow instructions on the screen (Stapleford 2014).

## Embedding digital inclusion in ESOL classes

There are obviously challenges to adding to an already crowded and complex environment: another thing for students to learn; new vocabulary; new demands on tutors – all of which takes more time and planning: *“There are already barriers to English language learning. And although the English My Way materials have proven to be successful, adding digital can be an extra barrier”* (Good Things Foundation 2016).

Tutors we worked with supported building digital skills into other teaching sessions. Some felt this could be even more beneficial than running separate digital classes. One centre had already made this shift, reflecting lower demand for digital-only classes.

Tutors felt that embedding digital inclusion in ESOL classes was not necessarily about identifying a digital learning outcome for every task. It was more about the tutor, volunteers and learners using digital technology and the internet as part of the 'everyday' of an ESOL class: in teaching, in interactions, in individual and group activities in the class, in homework (where possible). Tutors described small ways to do this, such as learners taking photos of what they've done in class, and sharing them on a WhatsApp group with fellow learners.

English language tutors outside the UK are also doing more to bring digital literacy into literacy in adult English language programmes: *“One effective way to do that is to integrate digital literacy tasks right alongside literacy tasks in our classes, ideally doing the same type of task multiple times in different lessons or units” (OUP ELT 2017).*

### Teaching digital vocabulary

Digital skills involve new technical vocabulary – even just to get started using the basics on a computer. Terms that could be taken for granted include: scroll, arrow, cursor, search bar, browser, tab, click, type, button, and press. These are words that are hard to simplify or find more generic alternatives for. One tutor combined teaching nouns, verbs and plurals with introducing digital terms (e.g. ‘click’, ‘clicks’ and ‘clicking’). Putting up print-outs of the alphabet or basic vocabulary on walls, or labelling different parts of a PC or laptop, were other ways to support learning and jog people’s memory.

### Using different digital devices

In an ideal world, tutors felt a variety of devices (tablets, smartphones, laptops, PCs) in the classroom would be helpful, so that learners could get used to moving between these (see also Voslo 2018). Sharing equipment was a practical solution and can support peer learning and collaboration. However, it can also undermine skills development and potential benefits of collaboration where one person ends up dominating its use (CUREE 2013). Centres also talked about the importance (and resource challenges) of reliable and secure WiFi.

### Bringing your own devices

It cannot be assumed that ESOL learners have their own laptops to bring, as many will not. However, most learners will be somewhat familiar with mobile phones and often have their own, so enabling people to use their own devices in class can be a good first step into building their digital skills and confidence. This could reduce some of the pressures on centres, and allow people to use devices they are familiar with (Jisc 2016b).

*“For those learners in particular [i.e. with limited access to computers], using their mobile phones in their ESOL classes can provide not only a motivating way to improve all four language skills*

*but also a key way in which they can start to develop their digital literacy skills” (British Council 2019).*

The British Council (2019) has created a useful list of teaching ideas for ESOL learners where people bring their own mobile devices – around everyday digital functions such as making calls, texting, voicemail, adding contacts, writing notes, and comparing phones.

Tutors felt that ‘bring your own’ can be beneficial, but also raises some challenges:

- Not everyone may have their own mobile phone
- Providing enough charging points for people’s devices
- Encouraging people to use their device in English rather than their own language
- Supporting people who are mobile-only to make the move to tablets, laptops or PCs (e.g. to support their progression to further education, training and employment)
- Teaching a session on different types of devices with different operating systems
- Information and other security issues for community centres and for tutors, including where tutors use their own devices (e.g. mobile phones) to support learners.

### A community of practice

Tutors in community centres described the tensions they face between wanting to boost people’s confidence and aspirations, while being realistic about what could be achieved within limited resources and in such challenging environments. In difficult circumstances, tutors were doing an excellent job of being creative and resourceful – finding different ways to build digital skills and English language learning together.

In the webinar and the workshop, it was clear that tutors were mostly working in isolation, and they valued opportunities like these to share experiences and swap ideas with peers in other community centres.

## Tutor top tips

These ten tips - from tutors for tutors - were co-produced by centre staff and tutors from ten community centres providing pre-entry ESOL and basic digital skills support across England.

- **Holistic digital** - Many people are fearful of digital, or think it's not for them, or not urgent, so often won't enroll on a purely digital course. Finding ways to embed digital (using the internet, talking about computers and phones, building digital skills and confidence) across the full suite of courses run in a community centre can help to overcome this. This will enable people to see the benefits of the internet in everyday life - digital skills in real world applications.
- **Understand your learners** - Your learners will have differing language and digital abilities, sometimes vastly so. Formal assessments of digital skills can help, but observation during sessions is invaluable to understand their skills and how they are progressing. This will allow you to set more challenging tasks for those who are ahead and to work more closely with the ones who need more support. Also get to know them as people, what are their likes and dislikes, what are their needs - this will help you plan sessions that will relate to them.
- **Lesson plans to be practical, real and relevant** - Learning should be where possible, real and relevant to the learners' lives and needs. What do they need to do using digital? What will help them live their lives? What will help them with their families, friends, and in their community? Do they have bills to pay online? Do they need to have word processing skills for job applications? Are they interested in finding out what's happening in their community, or using the internet for their health and wellbeing, or to save money?
- **But more important is for sessions to be fun, interesting and exciting** - Learners at this level often have busy lives. Some of them don't know why they should be learning digital tools. They're possibly suffering from a lack of motivation and/ or confidence to work with digital. Creating space for them that's fun will mean they're more likely to engage and remember what they've learnt. Would they like to call their relatives via an online chat? Why not find out recipes together? Can you look up locations on street view or plan a journey as a class to somewhere interesting using an online maps tool?

- **Peer learning and collaboration** - Just like with other learning situations, learners will learn more effectively with some collaboration and peer learning. Can a session have a collaborative exercise? Can you pair those who are more digitally confident with those who are less confident? This will not only help those with low digital skills increase their confidence, but will also help those who are more confident digitally progress language skills. Can you find volunteers who speak different languages who could be digital champions?
- **Encourage participation** - Get people to use different devices, play around with how they work, show them that the equipment is robust and there's nothing to fear. Get them to speak out and show what they know. This will help increase their confidence.
- **Encourage practice** - Is it possible for learners to do anything at home in between classes? Some may not have their own device available, but for those that do, it will give them a chance to try something out on their own. It can be used as a discussion point at the next session. Tutors can also practice and build their own digital skills and confidence.
- **Devices** - Use whatever is available to you! Remember digital can be found on a desktop, laptop or a tablet or mobile. Consider inviting learners to use their own device; although this presents teaching challenges (different devices, needing to switch the device from their native language to English for language learning outcomes), it can also be a way for more nervous learners to use a device that's comfortable to them.
- **Be flexible** - Devices can break, websites can go down, WiFi can be flakey. Even the best plans can go awry. Tutors need to have a backup plan for if lesson plans don't go the way that's expected. They can also use these contingency plans to help them pivot and go with the flow if an interesting conversation gets learners excited and engaged.
- **Make mistakes!** - For ESOL tutors embedding basic digital skills into lessons - remember you don't need to be a digital genius! Learners need to know that making mistakes is OK. Digital is difficult and vast, if in doubt, you can search for an answer to a question together online!



## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

*Over a decade ago, a report from Lifelong Learning UK found: “It’s not easy to map how literacy, digital literacy and ESOL teaching techniques overlap, correspond or work against each other’ (Lifelong Learning UK 2009).*

This doesn’t seem to have changed much. Our research review was limited but even so we found little research about these overlaps. The research we found tended to focus on the problems, or on using ICT tools to support ESOL, rather than evaluating and sharing teaching methods which achieve both digital and language learning outcomes. We found even less on teaching digital skills to pre-entry ESOL students in a community-based or non-profit setting.

Through this project, what we did find was a real appetite among practitioners working in communities to learn and share from each other.

We also found strong agreement that this is an issue warranting greater attention - and investment - from policy makers, commissioners and adult skills providers.

Adult education is a devolved policy area, and recent years have seen continued devolution of adult education and skills budgets nationally, regionally and locally. This means the delivery landscape for adult learning is complex and fragmented. There is growing recognition that adult and further education has been neglected and requires attention and investment.

Community centres are well-placed to deliver the learning and wider support that is needed by those who experience greatest disadvantage. In this project, we learned how difficult and demanding it is to deliver learning which blends both digital and language skills. Such challenges are heightened in community centres, where learner support needs are mixed, complex and high; and where resources are limited and uncertain. We also found that finding ways to bring these together (and not see these as separate silos) is more important than ever. If we were starting out - in 2020 - to design a curriculum that aimed to build both digital skills and confidence and English language and literacy skills ... what would that look like?

September 2020 will see the introduction of the UK government’s Essential Digital Skills

entitlement, which is aimed at adults who lack the basic digital skills for life and work. The findings from our project are a timely reminder that some people will face significant barriers to benefiting from this new entitlement, linked to low English language proficiency and low literacy.

There is an opportunity now to:

- Review and rebalance approaches to commissioning adult education and skills - recognising the value of community-based and informal learning (especially for people who face disadvantage), and seeing this as a pipeline to further education and training.
- Enable community-based learning providers to build the digital skills and confidence of their own staff, tutors and volunteers - as well as to find ways to embed digital skills and use of digital tools into ESOL and other courses.
- Develop a community of practice to support community learning centres to share tips, ideas, policies, guidelines and teaching materials - rather than working it out alone - supporting tutors around bringing ESOL and digital skills together more.
- Improve access to ICT tools and devices and reliable affordable WiFi, through capital (as well as revenue) funding for community-based learning providers.
- Read-across between teaching techniques around building digital skills and confidence for people with (either and both) low literacy and low English language.
- Design more inclusive websites and learning tools - filling the gaps in digital learning tools for ESOL and literacy learners, and designing online services and learning to be more inclusive of people with low literacy, low English language and low digital skills.

These opportunities are explored in more detail in the companion report from this project, which will be published on the Carnegie UK Trust website in summer 2020.

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## Useful websites

Good Things Foundation's coronavirus pages:  
[www.goodthingsfoundation.org/coronavirus-and-digital-inclusion](http://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/coronavirus-and-digital-inclusion)

Good Things Foundation main website: [www.goodthingsfoundation.org/](http://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/)

Good Things Foundation Learn My Way platform: [www.learnmyway.com/](http://www.learnmyway.com/)

Good Things Foundation English My Way platform: [www.englishmyway.co.uk/](http://www.englishmyway.co.uk/)

Online Centres network platform: [www.onlinecentresnetwork.org/](http://www.onlinecentresnetwork.org/)

Carnegie UK Trust #NotWithoutMe programme website: [www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/project/notwithoutme/](http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/project/notwithoutme/)

Education and Training Foundation's Excellence Gateway: [www.excellencegateway.org.uk/](http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/)

ESOL Excellence Gateway: [esol.excellencegateway.org.uk/](http://esol.excellencegateway.org.uk/)

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