Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment (OTLA) Action Research Project

Supporting second language learners in vocational courses

Oldham College – June 2022

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Oldham College

SUMMARY

This project brought vocational and ESOL tutors together to collaborate on embedding language learning in vocational programmes. Through regular consultation with learners, we developed responsive strategies and helped learners use vocational vocabulary more confidently. We have identified digital and spoken skills as our next areas for development.

RATIONALE

ESOL and vocational tutors often have few opportunities to learn from each other and plan collaboratively. At Oldham College we have run ESOL vocational programmes for several years, but the vocational and ESOL elements have been planned and delivered separately by the respective specialist tutors.

Vocabulary and self-expression can be major barriers to progression for both ESOL learners and other learners on vocational programmes. Research shows that embedding language into vocational teaching can boost motivation, retention and achievement (Casey et al, 2006). This project aimed to bring vocational and ESOL tutors together to identify teaching and learning approaches that could help to bridge the gap between ESOL and vocational courses.

Other Contextual Information

This research took place at The Oldham College, a general FE college. We offer a wide range of vocational programmes of study, as well as ESOL classes from Starter level up to Level 2. ESOL learners who are working towards Level 1 have the option of choosing a vocational pathway to study alongside their language classes.

For this project we worked with a 16-19 ESOL business group, and two adult ESOL vocational groups, one studying Health and Social Care and the other Beauty. Both ESOL and vocational tutors were involved in developing and trialling teaching strategies.

APPROACH

Teachers were recruited via an internal college bulletin email and by direct invitation to those teaching on ESOL vocational programmes. Participants had an initial conversation with the project lead to discuss the aims and methods of the research.

Both ESOL and vocational tutors used observation and class discussion to identify where learners felt they required support with language for vocational learning. Learners identified work-specific vocabulary and understanding the spoken language of vocational tutors as areas for development. The Beauty tutor also noted that lack of digital skills was a barrier for adult learners who had very low engagement in online coursework activities.

Tutors subsequently met to discuss possible interventions from a range of ESOL and vocabulary teaching strategies. Frayer models and similar vocabulary recording methods (Appendix 3) were chosen as a simple and time-effective way of teaching and recording vocational terms. One ESOL tutor decided to use authentic vocational texts to reinforce vocabulary in ESOL lessons (Appendix 5).

From December, tutors began using a range of vocabulary activities in classes and recorded reflections, observations and learner comments on a visual template (Appendix 6). Examples of learner work were also collected as evidence of engagement and understanding (Appendix 4). Teachers met regularly with the project lead to discuss progress and further areas for development.

In order to address the digital skills gap identified with the Beauty group, the ESOL tutor planned an induction to Google Classroom. Learners took part in a group discussion about access to digital resources and it emerged that mobile compatibility was a key issue. The ESOL tutor planned a three-week programme of ESOL work on Google classroom to build digital skills and confidence. Learners were shown how to access and submit work on mobile phones. This strand of the work was then linked to vocabulary building through the use of [Wordwall](#) matching activities (Appendix 8). Engagement with resources was monitored, and learners were interviewed at the end of the programme to evaluate impact.

Throughout the project, visual templates were used to aid communication between teachers, students and researchers. In January, interviews were conducted with learners using a visual capture sheet. The template used the metaphor of a hot air balloon and a mountain to promote reflection about what supported their learning goals and what barriers still existed (Appendix 7). Several themes emerged from these interviews. One commonly mentioned issue was a lack of confidence in spoken English and the desire for more opportunities to practise speaking. This will inform future discussions with vocational tutors to identify opportunities to embed oracy into lessons.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Teaching, Learning and Assessment
The biggest impact of this project is that it has increased collaboration between ESOL and vocational tutors, raising awareness of the specific needs of ESOL learners. Vocational tutors have tried a range of vocabulary strategies and reflected on their impact. This has led to further development of resources such as a vocabulary dictionary and matching activities (Appendix 9). Learners have engaged with the activities and demonstrated a better understanding of vocational terminology. In Business classes, learners have used technical language more accurately and frequently. Observations and discussions with learners in Beauty demonstrate that learners feel more confident in their understanding of subject-specific vocabulary. Learners commented on the value of using pictures and having support from the tutor with spelling. Learners have also been able to make links between their vocational and ESOL learning, commenting on the value of repeating learning across the different strands of their programme.

On the Beauty programme, engagement with online learning has increased. Learners have submitted online assignments and used uploaded slides to prepare for vocational lessons. They have also learned to create their own slides to make presentations. In interviews learners have said that they particularly value online quizzes due to their ease of access, instant feedback and repeatability. Consequently the project lead is now working with vocational tutors to plan further online vocabulary activities to support the work done in classrooms.

As a result of the research, there has been increased dialogue with learners leading to a better understanding of what they value in their learning and the barriers they perceive. One finding has been that many learners find that Level 1 vocational learning doesn't meet their expectations. For example, learners on the Beauty course wanted to learn a range of techniques for make-up and hair and found that the content was too generic. In the early stages of the project a Beauty tutor queried why learners were limited to Level 1 when they were capable of a Level 2 qualification. This raises issues about entry requirements and perceptions of ESOL learners' capabilities, providing valuable data to inform planning for next year's programmes, including discussions about which qualifications should be offered.

Organisational Development

The project has enhanced cross-departmental relationships and communication. This has led to a more coherent study programme for learners on ESOL vocational courses. Feedback from learners and conversations between different subject specialists have identified areas where programme design could be improved to meet learner needs and expectations. The project has highlighted the importance of taking time to consult all stakeholders when planning a programme of study and ensuring that tutors working with the same group of learners are allocated time to meet, plan and problem-solve collaboratively.

The college is now planning a further piece of work looking at embedding maths and English into vocational courses. Learning from this project will help to inform next steps, which will include creating opportunities to bring vocational tutors together with English and maths specialists.

One of the outcomes of the project was the creation of a short digital induction for adult ESOL learners, providing an introduction to the college's main learning platform. The Quality Department are now in the process of creating a digital strategy document and considering the introduction of a learner entitlement around access to digital skills and resources. Resources created for this project and feedback from learners will help us plan a digital induction programme.

Professional Development

Professional Standard	How our project outcomes demonstrate this standard
6. Build positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues and learners.	The most important outcome of the project has been the improved communication between teachers from different areas and learners. Vocational and ESOL tutors have met regularly, leading to a better understanding of each other's subject areas and collaborative problem solving. For example, in Beauty we were able to identify digital skills as a barrier to progression in the vocational course and work together to improve learner access to their online coursework. Learners have been consulted regularly about their perspective, leading to a greater understanding of their needs. While the project initially focussed on vocabulary learning, open conversations with learners generated a more nuanced view of the challenges of studying a vocational subject as an ESOL learner. This is leading to further work around the embedding of oracy in vocational learning.
10. Evaluate your practice with others and assess its impact on learning.	The use of a visual template to record reflections has allowed teachers to quickly note the impact of new teaching strategies. Teachers have identified the most helpful resources for vocabulary building and refined their approaches based on learner responses and their own reflections. There have also been opportunities to meet with other tutors and share techniques. Tutors have invited learners to try a range of templates for recording vocabulary and choose which ones they find most useful. Impact has been assessed through observation of learners in class and through learner evaluations.
16. Address the mathematics and English needs of learners and work creatively to overcome individual barriers to learning.	The project has focused on the English needs of learners. By consulting learners from the early stages of the project, we identified a range of barriers. Working collaboratively has brought a range of perspectives to the task of addressing learning needs. Tutors have shared and adapted templates and experimented with new ways to teach and practice vocational vocabulary. Methods have been adapted to suit different subject specialisms. For example, in Beauty there is a lot of technical vocabulary which can be explained through pictures and diagrams. We therefore used online matching activities to help learners understand and practise the terminology.

LEARNING FROM THIS PROJECT

Some of the most useful learning from the project came from the process of conducting action research. Taking an exploratory approach has helped us to work more responsively, adapting and refining strategies to meet learner needs. While vocational tutors initially chose the Frayer model (Appendix 3) to teach vocabulary, they quickly found that different activities were better suited to their learners and vocational areas. In Business, the written glossary (Appendix 9) was a jumping off point for encouraging learners to use subject-specific language in their spoken and written work. The glossary allowed the tutor to set expectations about use of language in class. In Beauty, a different approach was needed due to the high number of technical terms. Pictures and repetition were important to help learners acquire and retain the unfamiliar vocabulary.

Vocational tutors were already confident about teaching vocabulary as this was seen as a key part of vocational learning for all learners. However, the project has prompted a renewed focus on providing different ways for learners to practise. Increased consultation with learners has led us to explore different avenues such as planning speaking activities with a vocabulary focus. Learners have said that they appreciate regular practice and consistency of approaches between vocational and ESOL tutors. One vocational tutor introduced regular spelling tests as a result of the project and found that it motivated the group and helped them to retain knowledge: "I wish I'd done it from the start".

The success of visual templates to guide learner discussion and tutor reflections was another learning outcome from the project. One group of learners was given a picture of a mountain and a hot-air balloon (Appendix 9), representing challenges they face and what supports them to progress. In the absence of specific questions that might be asked in a focus group or survey, learners were free to have wide-ranging conversations which identified many issues beyond the scope of the project. These included pastoral issues and expectations about their programme as well as concerns about language proficiency. For tutors, a visual template provided a focus for reflective practice (Appendix 6) without over-burdening participants with paperwork. Tutors made short notes which efficiently captured key learning points and next steps.

Next steps

One area for further work is the practicalities of releasing tutor time for collaborative work. Although funding was available, the constraints of timetabling and staffing difficulties meant that we have so far been unable to organise peer observations as initially hoped. There are ongoing conversations between Quality and Heads of Faculty about how to enable staff to collaborate more effectively, and where there could be more flexibility in timetabling. The college is considering ring-fencing more time for continuous professional development (CPD), which may create more opportunities for this kind of work.

While learners did express concerns about vocational vocabulary at the beginning of their programme, more in-depth interviews in January revealed that spoken English was now their primary concern. It has been relatively easy to address vocabulary learning through resource development, whereas it may be more complex to agree on interventions to address oracy. Developing speaking requires time, teaching expertise and changes to the way lessons are planned and delivered.

Our next steps will be to arrange peer observations and further discussions between ESOL and vocational tutors to shape strategies for developing speaking in vocational classes. As we begin to

plan next year's programmes, we intend to undertake a language audit with vocational tutors to analyse the functions and lexis needed for specific subject specialisms (Colquhoun & Delaney, 2009). Both ESOL and vocational tutors will then be better equipped to embed bespoke language learning in vocational programmes.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: The Project Team

Project Role	Name	Job Role	Contact
Project Lead	Eve Sheppard	Advanced Practitioner and ESOL Tutor	Eve.Sheppard@Oldham.ac.uk
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Project Team	Kasim Iqbal	16-19 ESOL Tutor	kasim.iqbal@oldham.ac.uk
Mentor	Emily Bryson	ELT Specialist	EmilyBryson@Outlook.com
Research Group Lead	Rachel Öner	English Specialist	rachel.oner@btinternet.com

Appendix 2: Learner Case Studies

Case study 1 – Adult student on ESOL Beauty programme

I talked to one adult student about the impact of the project on her learning. Hafsa* started by saying that she had learned a lot of new words and reeled off a list of technical beauty terms. She talked about the importance of pictures to understand vocational vocabulary and stated a preference for resources that included images. She noted that the vocabulary recording templates used in vocational classes reflected a similar resource used by her ESOL teacher. The use of a template with spaces for a definition, synonym and an example sentence helped students to engage with vocabulary learning and promoted discussion:

> "We are very curious about this thing, …oh tomorrow, six more words! And when we find… and use the dictionaries and speaking with our friends: 'Do you find the meaning of this one? What is the synonym of this one?'"

Hafsa also talked about the impact of digital resources. Prior to the digital induction given in January she used Google Classroom to view resources but didn't know how to create and submit assessment work. During the three week digital induction she learned to create slides, add pictures and save and submit work to the teacher.

She talked about the difficulty of completing online work independently due to lack of access to a laptop at home. Using Chromebooks in class allowed her to develop digital skills and she said she would like to use them regularly to support classroom learning.

In terms of what had worked at home, she mentioned that the Beauty tutor regularly shared materials in Google Classroom in advance of lessons. This allowed Hafsa to preview vocabulary and prepare for new learning. Again she talked about the value of seeing pictures online both to aid understanding and as a prompt for writing:

> "only you see one picture and we can imagine, with our imagination, we can write down our story, or … whatever we want to write".

She also mentioned WordWall, an activity that works well on mobile devices. She valued the instant feedback it offered and the scaffolding provided by having a choice of options rather than open questions.

Case study 2 – 16-19 student on ESOL Business programme

I interviewed one of our 16-19 ESOL students. Denisa* said with emphasis that she had improved her English 'a lot'. However, she did not feel that vocabulary learning was a big part of her English learning on the Business course:

> "We're not using big, big words… because we are Level 1. Mostly we know all of those words".

New vocabulary was sometimes encountered in reading texts and could often be understood from context. What Denisa felt had been most useful was a group project where students had set up their own business selling plants in college. This had involved team work and planning how to speak with customers, with support from the vocational tutor. Denisa said "We have learned how to talk with

confidence" and this was reflected in feedback from other learners who mentioned presentations and debate as some of the most valuable parts of their vocational learning.

Denisa placed a high value on the ESOL classes and felt that her language skills had improved greatly, allowing her to bring those skills into vocational classes:

> "I don't think we need to [learn English in our vocational class] because … Kasim already taught us something … I don't know, it comes from us".
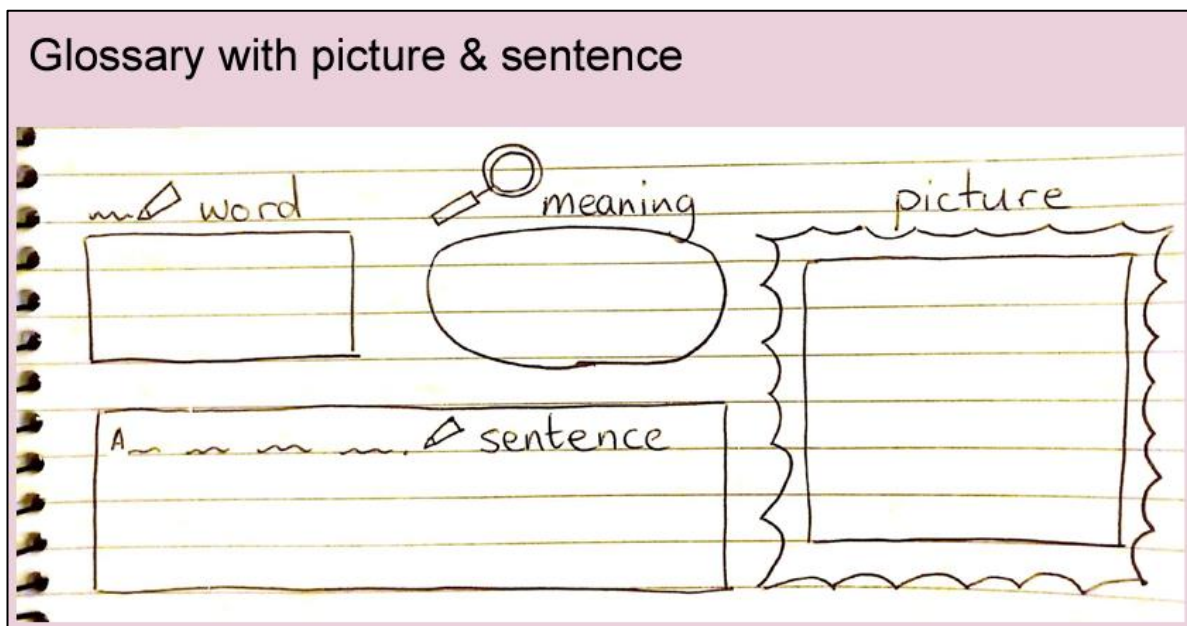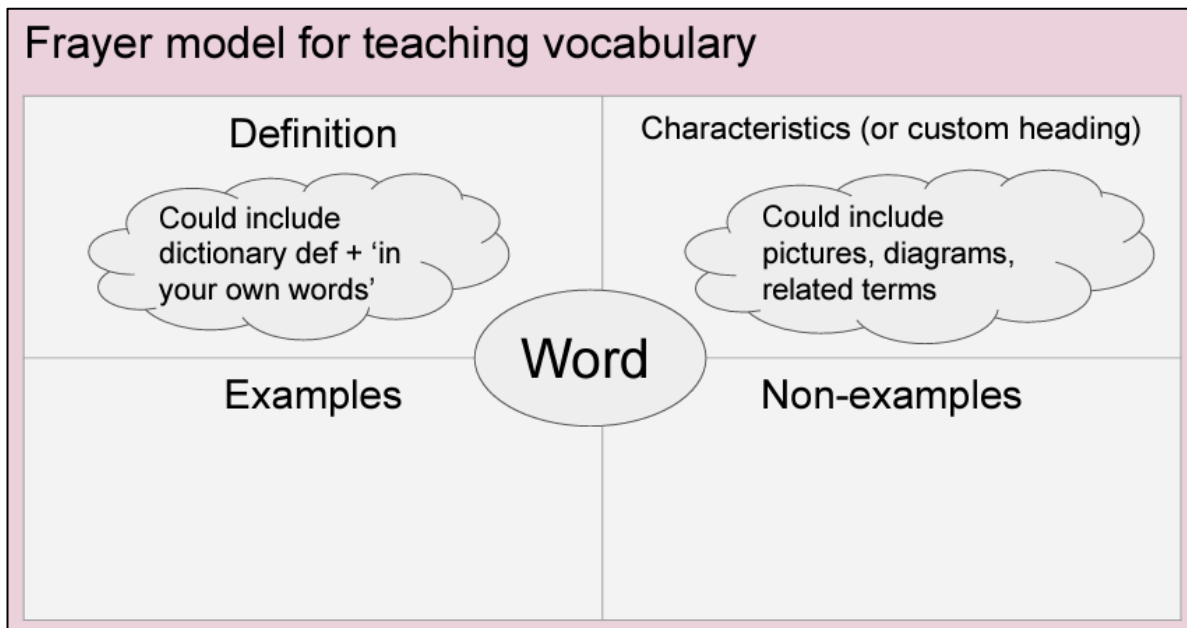
For Denisa, the vocational tutor's role in language development was to provide opportunities to speak, to offer encouragement and build confidence.

This case study brought a different perspective to the idea of embedding language learning into vocational programmes. Rather than teaching language skills, the vocational class had provided an opportunity to use the skills learned in ESOL classes by providing an authentic context for speaking.

*Names changed

Appendix 3: Vocabulary Recording Templates

These templates were used with ESOL Beauty students to record vocational vocabulary.

Frayer model for teaching vocabulary

Definition	Characteristics (or custom heading)
Could include dictionary def + 'in your own words'	Could include pictures, diagrams, related terms
Examples	Non-examples

Word

Glossary with picture & sentence

word   meaning   picture

A~~~~~~ sentence

Appendix 4: Examples of Student Work

Vocabulary sheets completed by students.

(Handwritten notebook page — top)

word   meaning   picture

Massage

refresh; relax; enjoyement; rubbing and kneading of the body to reduce pain or tension.

refresh; relax; enjoyement.

A _____ sentence

Today, i went to do a massage for my body, it was very nice and relaxing.

Check wording.
Good use of dictionary
Use this layout in future

(Handwritten notebook page — bottom)

Fariha Arshad   25.01.22 Tuesday

Teaching vocabulary

Definition	Characteristics / Picture
cuticle is the part of the nail. its the skin on the nail plate.	
sentences (Word)	**Non-examples**
① A product to clean the ② cleanser skin.	
③ free edge is a the top part of nail.	
④ massage is a treatment using hands to make you relax.	

Appendix 5: Vocational Authentic Texts

Examples of authentic texts used in ESOL classes to develop learners' reading and writing skills in a vocational context.

Research Task

Butterflies Nursery

https://www.oldham.ac.uk/college-life/butterflies-nursery/

Look at the information on the website for Butterflies nursery. In pairs make 10 questions from the information you read.

For example:
How can you register for a place at Butterflies nursery?

Homophones

HOMOPHONES in English — Same Sound but Different Meaning

Why are there so many homophones in English?

In many languages, words usually sound like they're spelled. However, English has got many vowel sounds, many silent letters, and lots of words that come from many other different languages. As a result, there are lots of homophones in English. In fact, there are over 12,000! In your writing exam they will ask you to identify and spell correctly some words. They **always** include homophones!

Bury Tots Day Care Centre (adapted from an authentic poster)

Come visit us in our lovely day care centre with ate bright bowled and colourful rooms. It's the perfect space to care four you're suite little one, from berth to five years. We offer a fun and exciting environment, every day of the weak. Weather just mourning, afternoon or full daze, you will find are prices are cheep and the service is amazing! All our childcare workers are approved by Bury counsel and DBS checked by lore. You're child wood love too pay us a visit and meat some friends and we will make sure their cared for, happy and protected. All our staff are also Makaton trained.

Bury Tots Day Care Centre

Come visit us in our lovely day care centre with ate bright bowled and colourful rooms. It's the perfect space to care four you're suite little one, from berth to five years. We offer a fun and exciting environment, every day of the weak. Weather just mourning, afternoon or full daze, you will find are prices are cheep and the service is amazing! All our childcare workers are approved by Bury counsel and DBS checked by lore. You're child wood love too pay us a visit and meat some friends and we will make sure their cared for, happy and protected. All our staff are also Makaton trained.

Appendix 6: Tutor Reflections on Visual Template

Completed visual capture sheets with tutors' reflections on teaching strategies trialled during the project.

ESOL Vocational Project

I am going to try...
To adapt authentic texts on the subject of Health and Social Care (childcare, the elderly etc) in my classes.

I'd change...
Being able to make these links with more accuracy (I was unaware that some vocab had been covered in the Vocational class)

Response from students
They made links with their Vocational subject independently. ("We did this with Zoe about Makaton") They said they gained knowledge about caring and respite and about homophones (my aim of the ESOL session)

...went well
The interest the learners showed in the topic. Teaching pronunciation of specific vocab, exploring their prior knowledge.

Next time...
Access Health and Social units to make broad links to my curriculum in sync with my SOW.

ESOL Tutor, Health and Social Care Programme

ESOL Vocational Project

I am going to try... Frayers Model for new words.

👍 Most learners used this some did not.

...went well

↩ I'd change... Nothing apart from some learners did not feel the need but still happily sat and listened.

Response from students. They liked the help from tutor on spelling and meaning breakdown

Next time... I would ensure there was another task for learners not needing the spelling.

Beauty Tutor, ESOL Vocational Programme

ESOL Vocational Project

I am going to try...
Vocabulary dictionary

👍
Great response from students and much better use of business language and the technical words needed in the subject.

...went well

↩ I'd change...
Where it is, I would have it in a separate book next time, so that it can be reused from unit to unit.

Response from students
They engaged well and really tried hard to make sure the words were used as much as possible.

Next time...
Get "dictionary" books, so they can make their own personal dictionaries.

Business Tutor, ESOL Vocational Programme

Appendix 7: Student Reflections on Balloon Visual Template

Two examples of the visual template used to elicit learner reflections and a summary of all the responses.
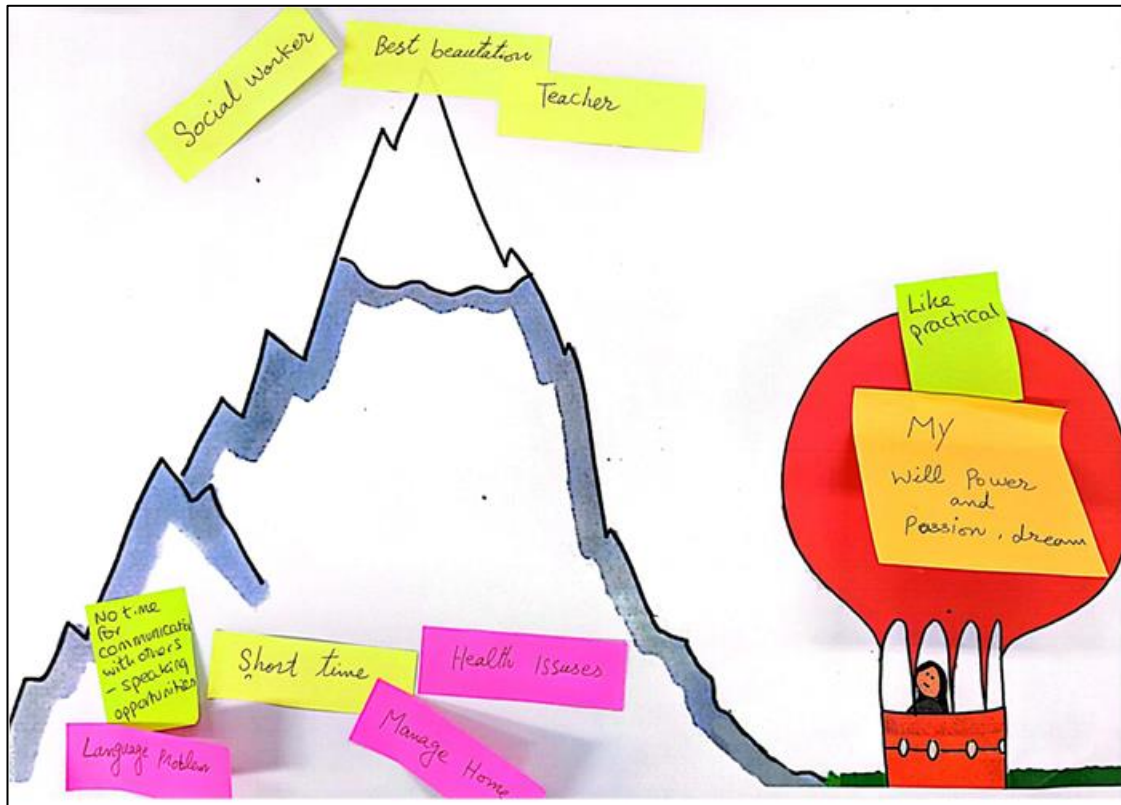
Summary of balloon and mountain visual capture sheet/discussions

Summary of balloon and mountain visual capture sheet/ discussions

Categories	Number of responses
The top of the mountain: future career aspirations	
make-up artist	3
beauty therapist/ beautician	2
hairdresser / stylist	1
receptionist	1
childcare	1
flight attendant	1
social work	1
teacher	1

On the ground - barriers	
Personal barriers • Caring responsibilities / house work (3) • Health problems (3) • Lack of time (2) • Money; transport costs (1) • Lack of energy/ motivation (1)	10
English skills • Lack of speaking skills/ opportunities for practice (4) • Unspecified English language difficulties (2) • Not understanding teacher/ speaks fast (2) • Grammar / writing (1)	9
Vocational class not as expected/ too basic/ unable to access preferred course due to lack of previous quals.	5
Digital skills	1
The balloon – what lifts us up	
Learning about vocational subject / practical techniques	5
Own personal qualities: motivation, confidence, hard work	2
Vocational class helps English	1
Teacher support - "step by step"	1
Learning IT	1
Reviewing tenses	1

Appendix 8: Online Resources: Wordwall

Screenshots of two matching activities used for Beauty vocabulary, with links to the Wordwall activities on beauty vocabulary and contra-indications.

Sample WordWall resources – Beauty Vocabulary

0:10

phalanges		smaller bone in your forearm
matrix		bones in your fingers
cuticle		the biggest bone in your forearm
metacarpals		bones in your hand
ulna		the area where your fingernails and toenails start to grow
radius		The skin at the bottom of a nail

Submit Answers

0:03

Contra indication		a habit of biting fingernails
Bruising		red skin
Onychomycosis		a medical issue that prevents all or part of a treatment.
Erythema		an area of discoloured skin caused by an injury.
Onychophagy		Itchy dry skin caused by an auto-immune condition.
Eczema		a fungal infection of the nail

Submit Answers

Contra-indications

Share

Appendix 9: Additional Resources Developed for ESOL Vocational Classes

A selection of resources used in ESOL Business classes, including key words glossary.

Language development resources used in Vocational Business classes

Key words

Key Words

It can be helpful to compile a list of key words that you will use across this unit. This will help you with key concepts and how to spell key words.

Key Word	Meaning

Gap filling

Alternatively, you might find it helpful to complete the following statement:

I want to _____ by _____ so I will _____

_____

_____ to meet my goal.

Case study

Read through each job advertisement and answer the following questions.

Community Bakery

We are looking for a PART-TIME FRONT-OF-HOUSE ASSISTANT to start as soon as possible. You must be outgoing, responsible and able to learn quickly. We would be looking for someone who has worked in the sort of environment before and has a customer service role previously.

You will be required to work Mondays, 7:30am-4.45pm, and occasional Saturdays, 7.30am-4.45pm. Holidays and other cover will be expected.

Appendix 10: Participants and Stakeholders

No of learners?	30	No of staff?	8
No of organisations?	1	No of employers/ stakeholders?	1

Appendix 11: Research/ Evaluation Approach

Participant/observer (e.g. practitioner reflective accounts, logs)	X	**Interview/survey** (e.g. polls, questionnaires, learner interviews)	X
Observation of practice (in person, video, observation notes)	X	**Document analysis** (e.g. learner work, session plans, annotated resources, policies)	X
Custom test/assessment (of knowledge, skill, attitude, participation) for your 'intervention'		**High-stakes learner assessment** (e.g. A Level results, End Point Assessment, BTECs	
Before/after assessment (e.g. measures of progress or change in attainment, participation)		**Comparative trial** (e.g. comparing participants' outcomes against a 'control' group	
Other (specify):	Action Research.		

Thankyou

https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/prep/