

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

**Introducing participatory ESOL  
approaches into volunteer-led, informal  
ESOL settings**

**SAVTE – June 2022**

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For further information regarding the Shaping Success Action Research programme and this project go to <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-8/>.

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# Introducing participatory ESOL approaches into volunteer-led, informal ESOL settings

## SAVTE

### SUMMARY

This project aimed to combine an understanding of adult learning theory with the use of participatory tools and techniques in community based English conversation groups run by SAVTE Language Volunteers. The project aimed to identify an effective approach for the introduction of participatory approaches in informal, volunteer-led ESOL settings.

### RATIONALE

The project aimed to enable volunteer ESOL teachers to facilitate participatory, localised ESOL speaking and listening activities in SAVTE conversation groups. The aim of introducing participatory approaches was to both change the role of a volunteer from that of 'teacher' who may sit apart from learning being experienced in the room, and to expand the experience of conversation groups for learners, into a more collaborative and experiential experience with direct relevance to issues and changes in their own lives. For further information on the relationship between adult learning theories and participatory ESOL, please see Appendix 3: Participatory ESOL and links to Adult Learning Theories.

The action research focused on the activities of SAVTE ESOL conversation group volunteers in Sheffield. Sixteen volunteers were involved in the initial stages of the project, representing ten different community-based conversation groups (many of which were running online at the time).

SAVTE conversation groups are volunteer led, meaning that trained volunteers, often working in pairs, plan and facilitate sessions to meet the interests and needs of adult learners in their groups. Volunteers are trained in informal methods for identifying language topics to explore in groups, how to exploit the opportunities for speaking and listening skills development within sessions and how to balance participation within groups as well as maintaining a safe, accessible learning environment.

Participatory ESOL approaches would not necessarily be a new idea or facilitation method to all volunteers, but this project aimed to introduce a session methodology and toolkit that could be used by all volunteers whether experienced educationalists or new to teaching.

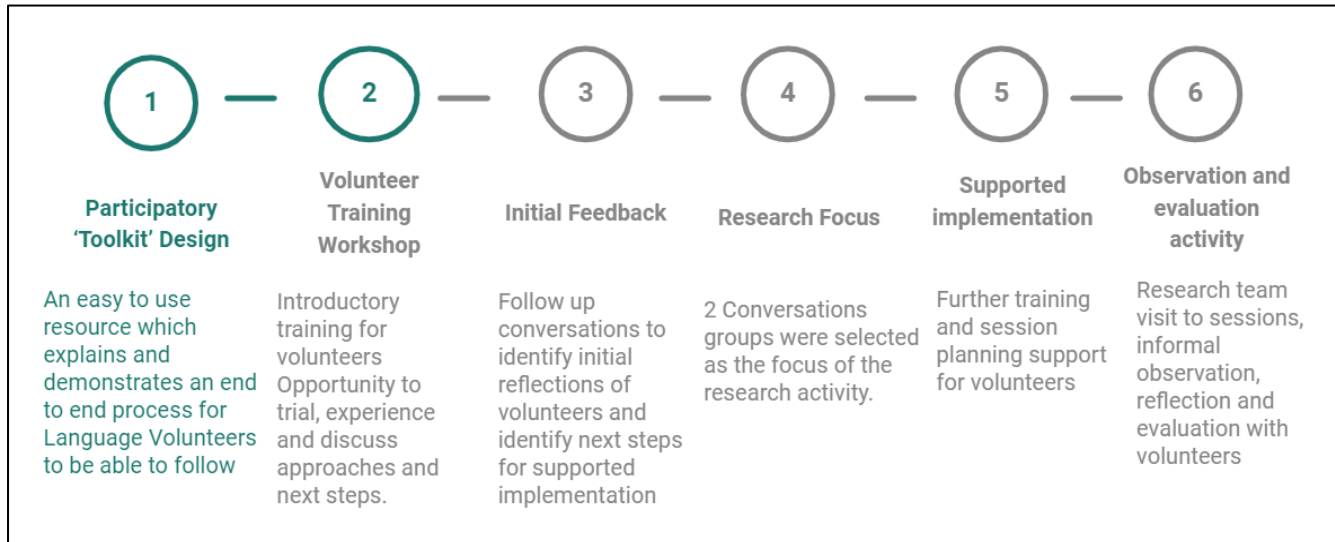
Expected outcomes included:

1. use of participatory approaches by volunteers to guide their groups of learners through the exploration of local issues, relevant to the lives of learners in the group
2. increased 'ownership' of conversation group activities, focus and outcomes by learners within the group through their participation in the selection of topics for discussion and direction of focus, progression and outcomes, with volunteers stepping back to a more limited role of guide for activities
3. increased community-engagement of learners in locally relevant issues through the collaborative

analysis of issues and development of plans for collective action.

## APPROACH

The screenshot below shows an overview of each stage of our action research project:



The initial stages of the project followed expectations; however, following feedback it became apparent that implementation of participatory approaches by volunteers would need to be supported in more depth than originally anticipated. In addition, it was decided to focus on a smaller selection of conversation groups. It became apparent that two groups in particular would provide an interesting research focus.

These two groups were chosen for a couple of reasons:

- Both groups are running in an area in Sheffield subject to redevelopment and several learners were in the process of discovering how that would impact their homes and neighbourhood, in particular whether their houses were due to be demolished.
- Both groups are run by volunteers who were keen to engage with this local situation and to support the groups' participants to both understand the impact of the planned changes and have their views represented in the local council consultation.

Volunteers were supported by members of the research team to deliver participatory sessions, which followed a similar format to methods described by Bryers (2015) and The Learning and Work Institute (2017).

The table below describes the process we followed during our action research project. Some images that were generated during the participatory sessions are also shared:

Input	Facilitated Discussion	Problem Analysis	Outputs
<p>Visual inputs to the session as conversation starters and visual prompts to generate prior-known vocabulary, in this case, relating to the local neighbourhood - photos of housing (old &amp; new), green spaces, roads, public transport, litter. Shops. Facilities and local Councillors (Image A).</p>	<p>To capture the range of views and experiences and identify a specific subject familiar to all, that participants want to explore further as a group.</p>	<p>A problem tree diagram (Image B) was used in both sessions to analyse an issue in greater depth. Identifying a problem or issue specifically, identifying the impact of this issue (Image C) for participants in the group, the possible causes (Image D) and then moving discussion onto exploring solutions or action that is needed.</p>	<p>Recording ideas and identifying next steps that the group can either take themselves or plan to put in place to make improvements, either directly or by raising awareness and making their voices heard and their views represented.</p>

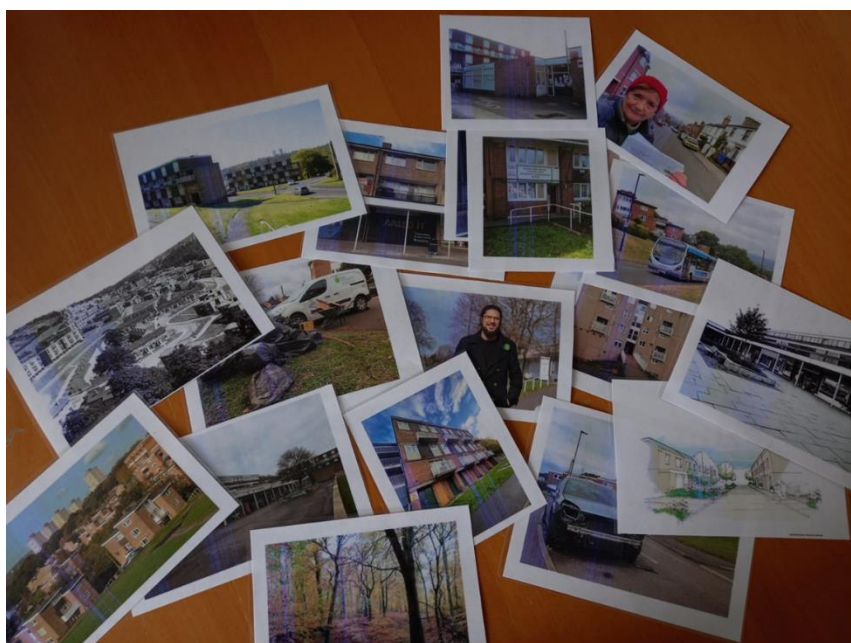


Image A. Our neighbourhood.



Image B. Problem Tree diagram.



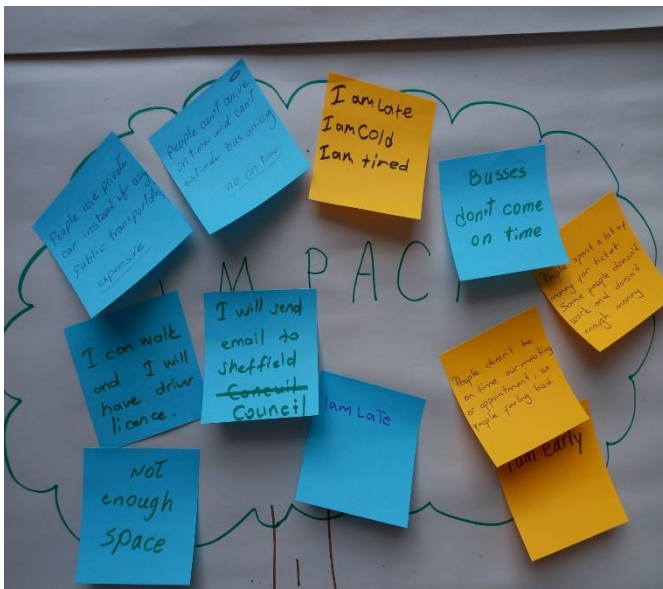


Image C. Impacts.

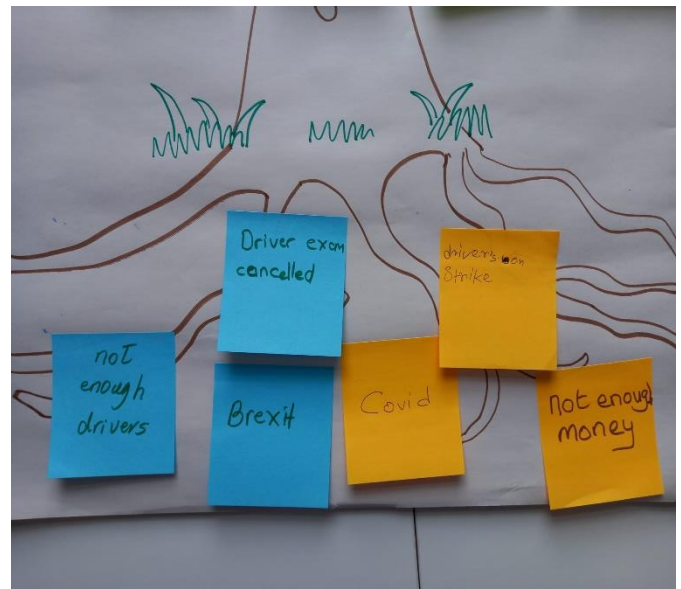


Image D. Causes.

## OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

### Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Evaluation discussions with volunteers who participated in the sessions focused on two areas of the activity:

**Supported volunteering** - Several volunteers raised the need for additional support to carry out participatory sessions with their group. Suggestions included watching a session in full being ‘modelled’ by a staff member, having access to pre-prepared materials, for example, picture packs of visual prompts, pre-prepared flip charts for problem analysis and a simple session plan. These comments gave useful suggestions for the next stages of this project.

**Topic relevance** - All volunteers described the importance of ‘knowing what is familiar to everyone’ and finding a topic that is ‘relevant to all’ that ‘gives everyone an equal voice’ and acknowledges ‘everyone is starting in the same place’. These are valuable comments that give weight to the importance of careful planning to ensure familiar and universally relevant visual prompts for participants in a specific group are used. It highlights the important role of volunteers in building rapport with participants in their group. Being familiar with the lives and experiences of everyone is vital to achieve a genuinely participatory session.

Observations of the group sessions identified other important aspects of the research focus.

**Language levels** - Conversation groups use speaking and listening skills primarily in all their activities. Participatory approaches can be wholly speaking and listening based, but giving learners the opportunity to make their contributions and see these reflected visually on a flip chart or diagram requires them to be able to write comments or be comfortable with other participants scribing for them in a way that evidences their input accurately.

Observations of two different groups with differing levels of language (see group profiles, Appendix 4) evidenced that speaking and listening skills from Entry Level 3 and above provided a strong basis for topics to be explored in depth in English. Observations also highlighted the importance of this minimum level being common throughout the group, especially if there is no shared language within the group that can be used to support the understanding of participants with lower levels of speaking and listening skill.

**Role of volunteers** - Observing volunteers with their group highlighted the invaluable range of experience and expertise they bring to the sessions. In both sessions, the volunteers contributed their own experiences and knowledge to the discussions. This was a major contributing factor to the 'success' of each session - i.e. enabling the participants to reach a conclusion where they identified their next steps and agreed a plan of action to take the subject forward. As such, volunteers that bring a shared lived experience to the group can be viewed equally as participants in a group alongside the ESOL learners (Appendix 6). For example, volunteers who live in the same local area as learners will have a similar lived experience of local transport, facilities and services, schools and in some cases housing.

The impact of everyone participating in the session being an equal 'expert by lived experience' was observed as a key success factor to effectiveness of the session. In terms of the depth of discussion, the genuine relevance and importance of the content influenced the action planning that resulted.

In addition to learners supporting each other with suggestions to resolve particular issues, locally based volunteers were able to share locally relevant information about the changes to housing being proposed, how to contact local councillors, what a Tenants and Residents Association (TARA) is for, how it can be contacted and how local tenants can get involved in influencing improvements. In group 1, there were learners who became aware that their homes were planned to be demolished and who then planned how they would input to the consultation on this. In group 2, all learners were previously unaware of their TARA and as a result of the session planned to invite the TARA representative to their group.

## Professional Development

Professional Standard	How our project outcomes demonstrate this standard
<p><b>1. Reflect on what works best in your teaching and learning to meet the diverse needs of learners.</b></p>	<p>This project has used collaborative learning methods, which meet the needs of learners with 'spiky profiles' - those with lower literacy levels are still able to fully participate.</p>
<p><b>6. Build positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues and learners.</b></p>	<p>This project activity has demonstrated the 'bridging' role of a participatory activity where everyone in the room is a genuine participant with shared experience of the topic being explored. As such it offers an approach to overcome traditional perceptions of where 'power' lies in a classroom, as all participants can contribute and collaborate equally.</p>
<p><b>9. Apply theoretical understanding of effective practice in teaching, learning and assessment drawing on research and other evidence.</b></p>	<p>This project builds on theories of adult learning which highlight the importance of using immediately relevant subject matter which is of importance to the adult participants to maximise engagement and reflection.</p>



## **Organisational Development**

This OTLA 8 action research project has highlighted the important role that Language Volunteers, with a degree of lived experience shared with the ESOL learners they support, play.

As an organisation, this emphasises the importance of reaching and engaging potential volunteers within the same communities as the ESOL learners who participate in SAVTE activities. These communities may be a local area or neighbourhood, or similarly a shared lived experience of migration, asylum or resettlement in the UK (see Appendix 5, Locally based steps into language volunteering).

This finding gives direction to SAVTE's organisational aim of widening participation in volunteering and overcoming any barriers to volunteering that individuals may face, particularly those from under-represented communities in terms of locality or experiences of migration.

## **LEARNING FROM THIS PROJECT**

There were several features relating to the groups and participants involved in this project that were critical to its success.

Firstly, the identification of groups where there was a 'hot topic' immediately relevant to participants' lives, both learners and volunteers, and that was equally important to them. This provided motivation in both groups to engage with different activities and approaches as the subject was significant for everyone involved.

Secondly, the willingness and enthusiasm of volunteers to be involved and try something new. This engagement was, again, aided by the fact that they themselves were connected to and interested in the subject of the sessions.

More time is needed to trial this approach with a wider number of groups, in different localities and looking at a wider range of issues. Future research activities should also aim to evaluate the impact of the experience for learners in conversation groups.

Identifying methods to achieve equitable involvement in sessions amongst participants with differing levels of literacy would also be a useful contribution.

To date, published participatory learning guides and articles focus on use of participatory approaches by experienced, often qualified teachers in ESOL classes where reading and writing skills are also being developed. This research activity offers a new insight into the use of these approaches by trained volunteers in informal, community based, conversation group ESOL settings and, as such, provides a new contribution to the field of ESOL volunteer recruitment, training and support, which can be built on to introduce improvements to the sector and new experiences for all participants.

## REFERENCES

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: The Project Team

Project Role	Name	Job Role	Contact
Project Lead	Hannah Thornton	Programme Director	<a href="mailto:hannah@savte.org.uk">hannah@savte.org.uk</a>
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## Appendix 2: Learner Case Studies

This case study focusses on Cynthia, a volunteer participant in our action research. It outlines what we have learnt about her, her background, her role as a volunteer and the significance of this to the success of the participatory activities this research involved.



Cynthia is a relatively new volunteer to SAVTE, having joined in 2021. Her journey into language volunteering was not the typical, SAVTE volunteer start. Although not having any prior teaching or educational work experience, Cynthia has several strengths and skills that she brings to her role as a community-based language volunteer. Firstly, having worked in social work in Sheffield, she has a good awareness of communities and families' needs locally. Additionally, she has lived experience of arriving in the UK to resettle, in her case, from the Caribbean. Although schooled and proficient in English, she recounts her experience as a child of being excluded from mainstream education and marginalised into alternative provision, based on ill-informed assumptions of the abilities of migrant children and their prior experience of education.

*"I'm still learning and I mean, I've been at school such a long time ago. And it's sort of digging back into those very early stages of learning the English language. Although when I changed schools, as we relocated all the children who were Caribbean African background, we were sent to the language centre to see if we could speak English. So it has given me an insight into what's happening now. SAVTE assess the learners before they go on to conversation groups."*

A further strength that Cynthia brings to her role as a community-based language volunteer is her everyday life experiences, as someone who lives in the local community where many of the community group learners live and a regular user of local facilities, services and transport.

All of these aspects of her life experience, combine to enable her to be a very effective language volunteer, bringing both a sensitivity to the challenges that adult ESOL learners face in terms of both language development and navigating everyday life. During the action research participatory ESOL activities this was very apparent as Cynthia was able to listen and empathise to issues the group were raising, but crucially, she was also able to guide them towards possible solutions to explore enabling them to plan their next steps along the process of looking into an issue and finding out who could help them locally.

As a result of Cynthia's inputs to the session the group have been visited by the local tenant's association and plans are in place to involve them in the ongoing local consultation and potentially, for some members of the group to join the Tenants Association Committee.

*"In the past, the residents have got together to sort out the problems, like with the buses. And the*

*fact that a lot of people are in social housing around there, and they pay I think 10 pence a week after their rent, to be members of TARA [Tenants and Residents Association]. And that's five pounds a year which now there's a lot of money to be just given away. They were quite surprised - that they were paying out money for that, and said they've never heard of it. Nobody had discussed it with them as well. They were quite surprised at what support they could get out of it and what they could put into it as well. Because one voice doesn't seem to get you anywhere but as a collective voice from the community, a collective voice from the community will get attention.”*

### **Appendix 3: Participatory ESOL and links to Adult Learning Theories**

Research shows that adult learning arises out of the adult's own experience and is unique to that individual (see, for example, Tusting and Barton, 2003). Adult learners build on their existing knowledge and experience, and as such, most adult learning occurs in response to real-life problems and issues. Learning arises through a combination of making sense or analysing these problems, considering or taking action in response to the issue and reflection on this experience.

Building on adult learning theory and approaches, this project aimed to bring reflection and action into the community-based ESOL conversation groups using participatory approaches. There is little recent research on the impact of these approaches in informal ESOL provision, particularly that which is led by volunteers in the community sector.

Action and reflection can be found in participatory approaches in formal ESOL practice incorporating the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972) with that of Elsa Auerbach (1992).

Drawing on Freire's view that learners should not be seen as 'empty vessels' to be filled by a 'banking education' model where learners are encouraged to learn by rote a predetermined curriculum, participatory ESOL encourages co-creation of class content based on their personal experiences, needs and motivations.

Freire's Reflection-Action approach calls for educational approaches that move people from a passive or fatalistic view of the world, where they believe change is not possible, towards a more active view, enabling people to perceive the social, political and economic contradictions of their lives and to take action against them ('conscientisation').



## Appendix 4: Group Profiles

### Group 1



- The majority of learners in this group had a shared language other than English - Congolese.
- All learners had spiky profiles - most working towards ESOL Entry Level 2 speaking and listening, pre-entry or Entry 1 writing.
- The majority of learners in the group have lived in Sheffield for 5+ years.
- All learners in this group lived locally, and many were parents with children at the local school.



### Group 2

- There was no shared language within this group, other than English.
- Speaking and listening levels in the group ranged from Entry Level 1 to Level 1, writing levels ranged from Entry Level 1 to Entry Level 3. Some learners had very spiky profiles.
- All learners in the group have lived in Sheffield for less than 5 years.
- All learners in this group lived locally, and many were parents with children at the local school.

## Appendix 5: Locally Based Steps into Language Volunteering

A key outcome of this research is an organisational understanding of the importance of reaching and engaging potential volunteers within the same communities as the ESOL learners who participate in SAVTE activities. These communities may be a local area or neighbourhood, or similarly a shared lived experience of migration, asylum or resettlement in the UK. As an example of this, here's an outline of Cynthia's journey into language volunteering:

Already an active volunteer locally, Cynthia is well known at the local, community-run library where she has regularly supported children's activities in the past. Helping out in the library was her initial step into local volunteering - wanting to get involved and support activities, particularly with children. Through this activity, Cynthia gained an awareness of local adults with English language needs as a result of them coming into the library for help and support, or by observing the help the children gave to their parents to understand conversations and information in the library. It was these observations and her awareness of this local need, particularly amongst the local Nepalese community, which encouraged Cynthia's interest in volunteering in English language support with adults.

*"Well, it's sort of - I was already helping people as a one to one in the library and then I thought, do I have the confidence to go further with this? Well, I was storytelling to these primary school children which was something very small and then helping the adults - that was a little bit more challenging."*

Many potential volunteers find out about opportunities to get involved via an online search, or through an existing network of contacts involved with SAVTE. In Cynthia's case, she wasn't aware of volunteering opportunities with SAVTE, or of language volunteering as an activity. It was as a result of community-based outreach work, raising awareness of volunteering in local community venues and services, that SAVTE was able to find Cynthia, rather than the other way round.

*"It was through the library, one of the team there gave my name to Kerry at SAVTE and then Kerry got in touch and I got to see what it was about. I thought I would take another, new journey."*

Describing her experiences of language volunteering, Cynthia told us...

*"Well, I'm learning as well! Learning never comes to an end even when you get to a certain age! I'm enjoying supporting people in the conversation group, helping them to find places or when they ask questions as well about Sheffield or what's going on. The variety of people, the richness of the cultures as well. And then for those who are involved, it's wonderful, it's just the satisfaction of knowing that even if it's just one person who you have helped to join in and participate in the conversation groups, improve English language and also may have gone on to college or onto a job."*

## Appendix 6: Participants and Stakeholders

No of learners?	<b>20</b>	No of staff?	<b>2</b>
No of organisations?	<b>1</b>	No of employers/ stakeholders/ Volunteers?	<b>16</b>

## Appendix 7: Research/ Evaluation Approach

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

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