

# ESOL plus arts toolkit



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### About ESOL plus arts:

COMPASS was an ESOL plus arts project designed and delivered in partnership with Groundwork London and Counterpoints Arts. The project aimed to interweave language learning with arts-based activities and ran between April 2020 and March 2021.

#### The project aimed to:

- Improve participants' confidence speaking English
- Increase cultural and civic participation
- Reduce social isolation
- Increase positive contact with people from different backgrounds
- Improve participant's digital skills

#### What we did:

The COMPASS project delivered English sessions to 4 cohorts of participants, with each cohort lasting 12 weeks, totalling 48 sessions. The classes focused on informal conversational English and participants were of mixed ability. Due to the Covid pandemic, all sessions took place over ZOOM and participants joined in from across London.

Some of the sessions were designed and facilitated by Dima Karout, a visual artist and educator with international experience. Dima used visual art as a platform to allow the group to focus on a new subject every week, and approach it from different perspectives. The sessions were set around the following themes: bridges, borders, fingerprints and branches. Through short readings, visual presentations, and idea generator exercises and group discussions, everyone shared their experiences and expressed their viewpoints. Using art materials provided by the project, participants created art pieces to reflect on the discussed themes visually, and then presented their work and the thinking behind it to the group.



This project is part funded by the EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. Making management of migration flows more efficient across the European Union.



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## Who we worked with:

The project supported 75 English learners and 12 volunteers. Participants attended virtually from across London and those involved were aged between 18 and 66. Participants spoke 14 different languages and originated from 17 countries.

## What went well:

### The Value of combining art and ESOL

- Art gave participants the opportunity and time to express themselves differently. It provided participants with a platform to express themselves (their experience, knowledge, ideas etc).
- The sessions provided a space for everyone to share their ideas and to learn about London, gain new vocabulary and express their thoughts about the subjects they were discussing.
- Art brings the human side to the surface, giving space to humanity, rather than just learning by instructions. Participatory art decentralises the learning process and makes people feel free.
- These sessions didn't just add art into a session, but embedded art as a concept to have a holistic impact.
- Art was offered as a process not an outcome - the art provided a space for the learning to happen and the opportunity for participants to be themselves. The art was produced at the end of the session and allowed participants to reflect on the topics discussed.
- Art gave the space for learning to happen, and adds opportunities for a wellbeing focus.
- By talking about nature, parks, branches etc, everyone can experience these things as happy moments and learning then becomes happy. When there's a positive context, this increases learning.
- The art helped form a sense of friendship and connection.
- The safe and warm environment encouraged everyone to participate and formulate ideas.
- The art gave a shared activity as a focus and facilitated a feeling of escape.
- Overall it was felt by the visual artist/educator and English tutor that the art allowed a focus on wellbeing, increased confidence and improved language.
- In previous art projects, English is usually a secondary incidental outcome, but here both art and English learning were equal.
- Sharing examples of previous participatory art projects created by the artist educator, and providing techniques to simplify the making part of art while focusing on the essence of the idea behind it, gave a sense of inclusivity to everyone participating and offered a new medium that allowed ideas to be expressed and shared.
- Dima's own experience living in different countries allowed her to bring an understanding of the participants' experiences in London to the project, and gave her insights into what

is relevant and how to focus the sessions on things that matters to them and to their sense of being part of a new community and have a sense of belonging.

### The partnership

It was felt that a strong partnership was inherent to the success of the project, ensuring both parties had the same aims, a clear partnership agreement, combined with shared values including flexibility, reflective learning, participatory approaches and a main focus on the participants. This fostered an ethos that worked for the project and ultimately led to achieving the aims.

### Covid-19

The sessions were held during the pandemic and so all delivery took place online. It was felt that this actually encouraged people to come who might not usually (because they could access from their homes without travel) but it was also noted that those who were less digitally engaged may have missed out. Not meeting other British people in person and physically sitting in smaller groups had limits. It was felt that if the project was repeated, a mixed method of delivery would be recommended, including both in-person and digital delivery of sessions.

### Participatory methods

Participatory methods were at the heart of the project. All of the sessions were designed with participants in mind and sessions were adapted between cohorts based on participants' feedback. As the themes were abstract and open to interpretation, learners were able to choose to take the conversations in their own direction, allowing space for independent thought. Although participants were provided with the same core materials, they varied in colours allowing participants to create artwork based on their unique interpretation of the topics.

The warm and inclusive nature of the group enabled participants to freely share personal anecdotes, recipes and uplifting songs which were then incorporated in future sessions.

### Practical tips:

- Beginning a session with an informal conversation - this helped to create a warm welcoming environment and minimised any disruptions due to participants arriving late.
- Background knowledge of participants - by having an understanding of participant's country of origin and language spoke, facilitators were able to adapt the session to benefit participants.
- Sending key words in advance to those with low levels of English - this allowed participants with low levels of English to practice key vocabulary whilst allowing those with a higher level of English to respond creatively in the class.
- Asking participants to select a word - participants selected a word from a paragraph and provided an explanation behind this choice. This helped to expand participants' vocabulary and allow participants to create a unique sentence.

- Volunteers - having fluent English speakers attend the session allowed participants to hear a variety of accents. Volunteers were also able to facilitate conversations with participants in small groups.
- London focus approach - participants valued focussing on London as they learnt new information about their local environment.
- Working with the same artist throughout the project - this meant delivery could be adapted between cohorts and any participant feedback could be incorporated.
- Flexibility amongst delivers- the partnership between Counterpoints and Groundwork London worked well as team members listened to each other as well as participants and adapted the project when necessary.
- Dima attending a session in advance- this enabled Dima to introduce herself and the participatory art method, and start to build up a rapport with the group.

Creating PowerPoints - these were shared on screen during the class, enabling participants to read words on the screen and look at any associated pictures.

## Project outcomes:

We used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods to assess whether the aims were met.

## Participant feedback:

We regularly asked participants for feedback to ensure that the project met the needs of those involved. A sample of participant feedback can be seen below:

- *"I meet a lot of friends and enjoy the art and it helps people speak English. It's interesting."*
- *"It really helps with my English. I feel I'm improving every week."*
- *"I am much happier and this has improved my confidence. Before I was afraid to speak fearing to say things wrong."*
- *"I really enjoyed the speaking and listening practice because I don't have much connection with native speakers."*
- *"I arrived here during lockdown and this has been my lifeline."*
- *"I really enjoyed the sessions and thought they were a great challenge for everyone. It really felt like people were learning and enjoying it and connecting with the tasks. I think writing the extra song verse was such a good idea!"*
- *"These English and art sessions added colours into my life"*

## Surveys:

- Surveys were sent to participants at the start, mid-point and the end of the project. Responses from the majority of participants, became more positive as the project went on. Participants were asked to rate the following statements on a scale of 1-5:
  - I feel strong and empowered
  - In general, I feel good

- I know nice people in my area
- I am happy to speak English (e.g. in a shop/at the doctors)
- I am good with technology

From both the verbal feedback and survey results, we feel confident to say that the project fulfilled the aims and led to:

- Increase in participants' confidence when speaking English
- Increase in cultural and civic participation
- Reduction in social isolation
- Increase in positive contact with people from different backgrounds
- Improvement in participant's digital skills

In addition to the above aims, participants also showed:

- Increased understanding of London and its landscapes
- Discovery of art as a medium that improves wellbeing, self-expression and communication

### Participant artwork:

Below is a selection of some of the art work produced by participants.



## Facilitator feedback:

*“The themes and visuals engaged participants and tutors alike. All shared ideas, experiences and creativity in an environment that promoted inclusion and equality. The welcoming atmosphere encouraged those with early skills to make their first steps towards being understood, and those with a high level to expand their vocabulary and polish their pronunciation. As a tutor, I now use the skills and techniques I learned from Dima. I have wonderful memories of the time; it was a very positive experience for us all.”* **Tracy Farron, ESOL tutor**

*“Working closely with Groundwork team and meeting all these wonderful participants was a great opportunity that allowed us to exchange ideas, get insights into different cultures, views and values and to hear unique experiences from everyone attending. I felt very privileged to be able to share my knowledge and love for art with everyone, and to witness their talents, positivity, love for learning and the progress they’ve achieved in a short time. These sessions offered an inclusive space that expanded our knowledge and widened our understanding of diversity and the world around us.”* **Dima Karout, Visual Artist and Educator**

*“This project has shown the real benefits of collaborating to bring arts approaches and ESOL learning together. The sessions clearly made a real impact on participants' language learning and also contributed to their broader sense of well-being. It's great to have the learning captured in this toolkit and we hope this can be the beginning of an ongoing partnership.”* **Tom Green, Counterpoints Arts**

## Tips for next time:

- Correct participants' pronunciation - we originally avoided this to keep participants motivated but feedback informed us that participants valued correction.
- Upskill English tutors - we recommend allowing time for the Visual Artist/Educator to train the ESOL tutors on how to embed visual arts in their delivery. This 'train the trainer' method would expand the pool of people who are able to deliver these sessions and ensure more participants benefit.
- Mixed methods delivery - when restrictions allow for delivery to take place in person, we recommend the continuation of online delivery. A mixed method approach will enable a wider range of people to participate.
- Breakout rooms - these help to facilitate longer conversations in small groups.
- Art sessions- incorporate the art sessions a few weeks into the cohort, this allows the group to settle in and understand expectations.
- 121 sessions - before the group begins, provide 121 sessions for participants with extremely low levels of English. This will help build their confidence before joining the group.
- Camera on - encourage all participants to have their camera on, set this expectation from the start and continue to remind people to turn their camera on.



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