

In our series “Everyday Neighbours” we share and celebrate some of the daily acts of quiet, unobtrusive service that our parishioners undertake during the week, putting our faith into practice for the benefit of our neighbour. Find out here about volunteering in ESOL classes at Guildford College.

## Volunteering with speakers of other languages at Guildford College



Have you ever been to Guildford College on Stoke Road? Would it surprise you to know that it's the largest Further and Higher Education college in this area, with over 7000 students and 100 courses on offer?

ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) at Guildford College is just one of many educational courses offered at this busy place. Becoming an ESOL volunteer was something I just slipped into. I trained in basic skills as an Adult Education volunteer many years ago when I was living in London. This is a role in which the volunteer works alongside someone who needs help reading and writing English. Once I moved to Guildford I carried on for a year or so, quite enjoying it, before being asked to transfer to ESOL as they were desperate for volunteers. From the moment I started I knew it was something I was much more drawn towards, and I've now been volunteering with ESOL classes for 17 years.

As a classroom volunteer my role is to support both the teacher and the students by helping with the work the teacher provides. I work either one-to-one, or with small groups, but I also work generally and support the whole class – I've even become quite adept at coaxing the dreaded photocopier! For several years I thought marking work and correcting students were the key elements of the job. Over the past few years I've learnt that just being a friendly and, hopefully, trusted face in the classroom is equally, if not more, important.

I volunteer with Entry Level 2, which is the second lowest ESOL level. Students at this level have some basic knowledge of writing English and are able to understand very simple conversations, but may need considerable help with speaking, writing and grammar. The people who attend our classes are so varied in background it is impossible to generalise, but over the years they have included students from Afghanistan, China, Ecuador, Brazil, France, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Bulgaria, Rumania, Czech Republic, Moldova, Russia, Iran, Syria, Malaysia, Bangladesh – to name just a sample. The age range is also very large. I think the youngest person we've taught was 16, and the oldest in their 80s. Teaching ESOL English is a bit unconventional, as the main emphasis is on grasping usable English as fast as possible. A lot of classroom activities are related to things students may need to do in everyday life such as talk in a shop, visit the doctor, or fill in different forms. Conversation is a very important part of the class, as is getting to know each other.

All our ESOL students come from different situations and have different levels of education. The only entry requirement for ESOL is that students are legally living in England, whatever their status. Some students are very nervous and need a lot of reassurance, as it may be years since they last sat in a classroom. One memorable student sat in his woolly coat with the hood pulled up for a whole term until he felt confident enough to take it off. Although our students have to work hard our classes are anything but dull. I'm lucky enough to work with a teacher who has a great sense of humour, and every class is filled with laughter. We had a class one year that included six people

whose names began with an “M” (including mine). Our teacher tied her tongue in knots over which of us was Maria, Mary, Marie, Marika, Mari or Mariella. The end-of-term party is always a highlight as students are invited to bring food from their own country for everyone to try. We’ve had everything from home-fried chicken and curries to Thai puddings, home-made hummus, many home-made pastries and even vegetable soup (not easy to transport). The only banned contribution was a contraband bottle of whiskey: **that** was a step too far!

One of the proudest moments of recent years was the news that one of our ESOL class had won one of the college’s “outstanding student” awards. The student concerned had achieved top results while juggling the demands of a young family, which meant a lot of studying in the evenings. On top of this she was constantly worried about her relatives who are still living in the war zone which used to be her home. She is currently continuing her studies and putting everything she has into her new life in England. Students like her are a real inspiration.

Getting to know such a wide variety of students over the years has been a real privilege and the dedication of the ESOL staff on behalf of their students is outstanding. Anyone who has been to Guildford College won’t forget the seemingly endless corridors (down which one is constantly getting lost) and the large posters which educate and entertain as you walk around. My favourite poster is a statement I always try to keep in mind as it seems to reflect the ethos of the ESOL department: “You are not different; we are ALL different”.

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