

# *A Quick Start Guide to English as a Second Language (ESL) Ministry*



Cooperative  
ESL Ministries



Empowering churches to reach out in love to immigrants and internationals in our communities.

[eslcooperative.ca](http://eslcooperative.ca)

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# A Quick Start Guide to English as a Second Language (ESL) Ministry

## Introduction

Many have felt a burden to reach out to the unchurched, non-English-speaking people living in their communities and to this end the Cooperative ESL Ministries Society (CESLM) aims to help. We are a group of Christian believers who teach or have taught English as a Second Language and want to encourage others to develop church-based ESL ministries of excellence in their own community. This Quick Start Guide will lead you through some important steps to beginning your ministry, but it is by no means exhaustive nor prescriptive. Use this guide as a tool, as you deem fit for your setting. Let the Holy Spirit be your guide as you venture into this rewarding and challenging ministry.

## Preliminary Steps

Starting an ESL class or program is not as hard as you might think. All you really need is students who want or need to improve their English, one or more teachers willing to help, and a place to meet. If you have a vision for a program, or you sense God's call to do something, so much the better. Step number one is pray! (And step number two, and three).

As you consider whether to teach ESL in your church, first look at the location of your church and the demographics of the people in the surrounding area. Visit local shops and schools and/or talk to people to see what language groups might be represented in your area. Regardless of where your church is located, there is likely some need for ESL instruction.

Next, look at the makeup of your own congregation. How many different ethnic groups are represented? You may already have several key people who can help reach out to the surrounding community. Even if your congregation isn't very diverse, ESL may still be a great outreach ministry if you and your church are committed to reaching out to your neighbours.

Finally, look at other ESL programs in your community or in areas with similar demographics. Find out who else is engaged in this ministry. In the Calgary area, check the CESLM website [eslcooperative.ca](http://eslcooperative.ca) to use our ESL Directory of participating churches in Calgary. Find out what they are doing in their ESL ministries. Visit existing programs, observe a few classes, and talk with the coordinators and teachers. Often people with the same vision are happy to share their experiences with you.

## Planning for an ESL Program

As you begin planning, there are many decisions you will have to make in relation to your ESL program. You will need to:

### Define your Mission

ESL learners typically come with 3 felt needs: ESL instruction to improve their ability to continue their education or work, community support and friendships, and (often) spiritual information or help. Some people choose church programs specifically because they want information about Christianity or the Bible.

As you begin, you need to have a clear mission in mind as to the specific purpose of your program. Is it exclusively to teach English to others? Is it to provide a social service to your community? Is it to offer ESL Bible classes? Prayerfully consider the direction of your ministry as this will affect every decision you make.

### Find a Capable Coordinator

The Coordinator will play a vital role in every aspect of the program and whom you select will largely determine the success of your ministry. The Coordinator will be responsible for a number of tasks, such as ordering the curriculum, recruiting, training, and supervising/supporting teachers, recruiting and registering students, keeping student attendance records, dealing with resource needs for the ministry, planning special events, arranging refreshments, making announcements and reporting to the pastor and congregation. Because these tasks take a significant amount of time, it is preferable that he or she not serve as a teacher if you have 3 or more volunteers. If there is an assistant director, that person could act also as a built-in substitute for the co-ordinator, or a teacher when needed.

## Find Space for your Program

Check what facilities are available at your church, or wherever else you plan to hold classes. Room(s) for classes is an obvious need, but also think about storage for supplies (markers, audio/video equipment), records (registration forms, tests results, attendance charts), and textbooks or a library.

## Recruit a Team of Teachers/Facilitators

Once you have a Coordinator in place, begin recruiting other teachers or facilitators. Some ideas for recruitment are:

- Prepare job descriptions. Include duties, qualifications, and any other expectations.
- Pray for the right people.
- Put invitations in the church bulletin and/or newsletter.
- Make announcements in church about your program and that you are looking for possible teachers or other helpers (e.g. teachers, but also people to provide snacks, do childcare, etc.).
- Have a sign-up table after church
- Put a leaflet or an announcement in the church bulletin.
- Post an ad on your church's website.
- Ask for permission to speak to different (small) groups in your church. Always take sign-up sheets or cards to call back later.
- Offer an information evening.
- Network with other members in the congregation to determine who might be interested in serving in this ministry. Look through the church directory and ask the pastor for recommendations so that you don't overlook potential volunteers.
- Invite interested people to view existing ESL classes elsewhere.
- Speak to retired school teachers in the congregation.
- If you can find professional teachers in the congregation, maybe they can teach in the program, help organize it, or train others who are willing but don't have experience.
- Offer or arrange for initial training for volunteers and then regular meetings and ongoing training to deal with problems that come up.
- Make it as easy as possible for people to be involved by letting them assist someone at the beginning, or commit for a limited period.
- Invite volunteers from other churches to speak at your church.
- Publicly recognise the efforts of the volunteers to encourage them and to stimulate the interest of others.
- Use the church prayer chain or prayer times to request prayer for volunteers.

Be willing to start small. You can always recruit additional teachers as your program grows. Start with at least two teachers even if you have only one initial class of students. There are several benefits to team-teaching. First, if the prime teacher must be absent, a substitute is already in place. Second, there is a helper for small group activities. And finally, helpers can make the teachers feel supported and confident about what they are doing.

It is preferable to have no more than 12 -15 students per class. As your group grows, the need for a lead teacher may arise. The lead teacher would help with selecting a curriculum, teacher training, classroom methodology and student placement. It is ideal if your lead teacher is a qualified teacher with formal teaching experience; however, this is not necessary.

You may want to have your volunteer teachers complete an application form that indicates their spiritual experience and commitment to your mission as well as their teaching experience, level preference and availability. This provides you with a good reference in placing teachers and planning your program.

Although some feel that it is better if ESL teachers can speak the language of their students, it may be beneficial if the teachers speak only English since the purpose of ESL is to encourage students to use English.

## Decide on the kind of program you want or have staff to run.

- What space do you have available?
- Do you want a drop-in class where students come when they can, or do you want a more formal program with registration?
- Will you have continuous intake to accept students whenever they come, or set terms or semesters only?
- Will you teach conversation only, or all 4 skills (listening/ speaking/reading/writing)?
- Will you teach only one class, run a language or computer lab where several people can work on their own with one teacher circulating around to help, have one-on-one tutoring, or have a range of classes at different levels, and maybe about different topics?
- Will you have daytime or evening classes, weekday or weekend? Once or twice a week? Evening or Saturday sessions work well for students who work during the day but students who are here with their children to get a Canadian education will want to attend ESL during the day so they can be home with their children in the evening and on weekends. Several programs have ESL classes during the week and ESL Bible studies on Sundays. You can also have different volunteers teach on different days. The choice is yours.
- How long will your classes be? Either one and a half or two-hour sessions seem to work well. You may want to allow 15 minutes or so for opening announcements and singing, 10 minutes for a refreshment break, and time, of course, for discussion and group activities.
- How long will your classes last? You will also want to decide how long the classes will last. You may want your classes to be ongoing or you may want to divide them into 10 or 12-week sessions. Many churches prefer to follow the school calendar.
- Will you organize field trips or social events together with church people?
- Will you offer ESL Bible classes? If so, be up front in your advertising and don't make ESL students feel they have to take part in order to be in your program. Hold the Bible classes at a different time or place than regular ESL classes so that students make a conscious decision to take part.
- Will you teach adults only, or offer homework help for immigrant children, or...?
- Will you provide child care? (This is an expensive option if you don't have a lot of volunteers.)
- Will you ask students to only pay for textbooks or to pay a registration fee, and if so, how much? There are differing opinions about charging a fee for the classes. Charging a modest fee to cover the cost of the curriculum and photocopying often attracts students who are serious about learning English. If you decide not to charge, no one will be excluded because of finances but you will need to find funds for the curriculum and supplies from another source. If you decide to charge several hundred dollars for a semester, you may want to look at ways to subsidize needy students after an initial interview to document their need.

## Select and Order Curriculum

Most students do want a textbook if they are in a more formal program. In choosing from the various curricula and ESL materials available on the market, think about your ESL ministry and choose a curriculum to complement it. Consider whether you want to use Bible-based products, language materials, or a combination of both, and whether you want to use a text or teacher-prepared materials. Picture dictionaries are a great tool for beginning students in helping them develop a basic English vocabulary. Intermediate students are often interested in activities that advance their reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Many advanced students not only want to address reading, writing, and listening, but also want to perfect their oral English as this is the most important skill they require in their jobs. You may want to experiment and see what works best with your students.

## Provide Orientation and Training for Teachers

Initial training is very important as experience has shown that the drop-out rate is higher among teachers who do not receive training before starting the ministry. Hold orientation/training sessions for newly recruited teachers shortly before the classes begin so that teachers know one another, and how they fit into the team and the overall use/programs of the church, basic language teaching techniques and resources, and to discuss issues or questions.

You may want to introduce some basic cross-cultural awareness training in areas such as history, government, religion, customs, foods, family traditions, holidays and commerce.

You may use the training session to introduce how to use the curriculum in the time you have allotted for class. Discuss how each session will proceed as well as possible challenges in the classroom.

Also plan together before classes, ground rules for the program or class. On the first day of class, some ESL programs give out a school program handout with maps of the church rooms and transportation, information about the school and the teachers, and rules about absences, meals, fire drills, and other school procedures. (You can ask the CILC staff at First Baptist for a copy of their manual as an example).

Finally, use these training sessions (as well as others throughout the term) to equip both experienced and inexperienced teachers with ideas for instruction. Explain how to plan a lesson using a host of strategies and assessment tools for the classroom. Model a few lessons and activities for teachers. You might want to consider starting a library with books that can be easily borrowed and used in the classroom. Other teaching materials could include reading selections, newspapers & magazines, flyers, dialogue and dictation exercises, flash card activities, games and vocabulary exercises. Also consider using government materials and websites, e.g. for job search, health topics, immigrant issues.

At further meetings, teachers can share ideas or resources they have come across, pray for needs and concerns of both teachers and students, ask other teachers for suggestions about dealing with a problem, or have a guest speaker (pastor, or professional in some aspect of ESL ministry).

Let your volunteers know of other training possibilities (e.g. ATESL annual conferences, or ATESL Calgary or other local workshops). If possible, ask the church for help with paying registration fees for this training.

## Advertise the Classes

Several weeks before your start date, advertise the classes in your community in both English and another language if it is dominant in your area. Make sure you look at the advertising from the perspective of the prospective students. Does it have all the information they need, and is it understandable? Some ideas for advertising are as follows:

- Check with local businesses and libraries to see if they will allow you to post notices about the classes. They are often willing to do so if the classes are a free service to the community. You can also put up posters at the university.
- Contact local apartment managers to see if they will put your notices in their newsletters to residents.
- Check with local libraries to see if they have literature racks where you can put your flyers.
- Advertise in your local community papers. Often you can advertise for free if you do not charge for your classes.
- Put a large sign in front of or near your church.
- Advertise in your church bulletin or send notices home with your congregation so they can post them or hand them out anywhere they have contacts.
- Have flyers available on the church information table or with other brochures.
- Distribute flyers in the neighbourhood of the church, or where you know there are possible students for your program.
- Post the information on your church website, or even develop one for your school so students can find you.
- If possible, find someone who can post the information on the internet on ethnic sites.
- Let local ethnic pastors know about your program so that they can refer prospective students.
- Let CESLM know about your program and ask to have your program information included in their on-line directory of church-based ESL programs by emailing [ask@eslcooperative.ca](mailto:ask@eslcooperative.ca)
- Contact International Student Ministries of Canada (ISMC) staff to let their students know. (Gisela Rohde: 403-282-7519, [serious@telus.net](mailto:serious@telus.net))
- Get your program listed in the (used to be Calgary Immigrant Aid) Immigrant Services Calgary ESL Directory published each spring and fall: [immigrantservicescalgary.ca](http://immigrantservicescalgary.ca). Talk to people you know. As you are talking to people to find your students, you may also become aware of special needs that you or your program could meet.
- Remember that the best recruitment is word-of-mouth from one satisfied student to a possible future one.

With a little effort on your part, it is possible to advertise with little expense to you.

## Register Students

Once you advertise the classes, the church is likely to start receiving calls for additional information. Be sure to inform your church secretary or receptionist of the information they need to field these calls. You may want to have a recorded message to answer calls, informing your callers of the days and times of the classes. In case students wish to pre-register, you will want to provide the secretary with the proper registration cards for basic contact information, or hold registration on specific days. Basic pre-registration information will help you plan your classes.

## Getting ESL Classes Underway

### Determine Student Placement

It is best to start with at least two levels in order to separate the beginners from the more advanced students. If you have a good number of students at different levels, you may want to consider having three levels - beginner, intermediate, and advanced. Students may have a preference for which level they want to be in, or you could administer an oral assessment to help you determine student placement. If the teachers help with registration/assessment, they will have started getting to know the students even before their classes begin.

Some examples of questions to ask in determining placement are:

- Tell me about yourself. Where are you from?
- Tell me about your family.
- Tell me about this picture [any common scene].
- Did you study English in your country? If so, for how long?
- When do you use spoken and/or written English?

If the student is unable to understand the meaning of simple spoken questions or answer you in simple English, he/she should likely start in a beginning class. If the student can understand basic questions, and can answer with conversational responses, he/she should try the intermediate class. Students who are quite fluent and can communicate readily in response to questions should try the advanced class. An oral assessment can be a good starting guide, but students should be given the option of trying another level if the class is not right for them. See the 30-Hr. Training CD-Rom for a diagnostic written entrance test as well.

### Arrange for Child Care

Many adult students will bring their children to ESL and if you have the personnel and resources, you might want to take advantage of this built-in opportunity to hold children's classes at the same time. Depending on the number and mix of children, these classes could be structured with singing, crafts and Bible stories or simply a time of supervised play. If there are babies, nursery care would likely be necessary as well. If, however, you have neither the personnel nor the facilities for childcare, this should be made known in your advertising.

### Consider Transportation

For some students, finding transportation to and from classes on a consistent basis may be challenging. Sometimes it is possible to find someone in your congregation or another student from the same area to provide rides if necessary.

### Plan for the Opening

Consider what you would like to do in your opening sessions before students go into their classes. Some church programs like to have a brief time of announcements and prayer in their openings when students and teachers alike can raise special prayer requests. Others prefer to leave prayer time up to the teacher with his/her individual class. Some like to include singing, a quiz or a special guest in their openings. Try different approaches and see what works best with your students and teachers.

Have teaching materials available in the class space:

- at least something to write on, preferably a whiteboard with markers,
- access to a photocopier,
- access to a tape, CD and/or video or DVD player,
- possibly an overhead projector,
- maybe even computer access (either a laptop for the teacher, or a number of computers that students can use).

## Prepare a Program Schedule

Provide each new student with an information sheet with the class schedule, basic procedures and contact persons. Make sure your church receptionist has copies of these to give out to people interested in your ESL program.

## Plan Refreshments

Having refreshments provides an opportunity for students and teachers to get to know one another informally. Eating together is a vital component of building friendships and trust in many cultures. Some churches like to incorporate a time of singing or sharing personal events in the refreshment time. This helps you get to know your students on a personal level and learn about their personal and spiritual needs. Some of your students are the only ones in their family who have come to Canada and struggle with loneliness and isolation. The refreshment session can become a safe place to build support frameworks and social bridges. Refreshments do not have to be fancy or expensive. They can be as simple as coffee or tea and cookies. You might want to involve other members of your congregation in either bringing or preparing the refreshments. Remember, fellowship with the students gives them a chance to use their English, foster a sense of belonging, and most importantly, build community amongst these new Canadians.

## Arrange a Time to Debrief and Pray

Bring teachers together for a brief time of sharing either at the beginning or at the conclusion of each class session. There are often encouraging things to report as well as prayer requests to share. This time of debriefing allows teachers to support one another, gain ideas from each other, and learn about any important announcements the Coordinator may need to share. Conclude this debriefing session with a time of prayer for students and the ministry.

## Provide Social Service Information

Some of your students may have questions about social services, health care, schooling, and legal matters. It is helpful if you know your community resources and can answer some of their questions. We have found that referring them to the website [settlement.org](http://settlement.org) can be a useful tool as the list of possible questions could be endless. That site is an Ontario site, but could still be useful. The official Alberta immigration site is: [albertacanada.com/immigration](http://albertacanada.com/immigration) and [immigrantservicescalgary.ca](http://immigrantservicescalgary.ca) has links to LINC classes, Immigrant Services, and more contact information from specific groups.

Some churches have even put together a free job finding workshop, a free health fair, an income tax workshop, citizenship classes, or a car care or used car buying seminar. These types of activities are usually greatly appreciated and can be a very successful relationship-building tool.

## Celebrate Special Occasions

Plan a time of fellowship at special times of the year, such as Christmas, Easter, Valentine's and Asian New Year as well as at the conclusion of each ESL term/semester. Students usually enjoy potluck luncheons as they provide opportunities for them to bring some of their own cuisine and enjoy that of other cultures. Sometimes they are willing to plan some of the entertainment by sharing songs and games. Consider giving them a participation certificate or a small gift to encourage them in their studies. It is an idea for students to bring their families to these events. Whether they do or not, remind them to come and invite their friends to the next semester. A party is a wonderful opportunity to fellowship together.

Newsletters are a good way to inform students of upcoming events that may be of interest to them (in the church and in the city). If students are invited to write articles or stories for the newsletter, they have an authentic reason to write, students can learn about each other when they read the articles, and the writers can celebrate when they see their work in print.

## Sustaining your ESL Program and Helping it Thrive

### Build a Budget

It is possible to start an ESL program with few resources but if you plan to maintain such a ministry long-term, you will need to have a budget to meet the expenses that such a ministry will incur. This is particularly true if you decide not to charge or only ask for a “materials fee”. Expenses may include curriculum, supplies, refreshments, childcare providers and party expenses.

### Develop Church Support for Your ESL Ministry.

- Ask church leaders to recognize your ministry as an outreach of the church.
- Meet with the pastor or other staff at least quarterly.
- Make an annual written report about the ministry to the church and occasional reports to the congregation if allowed.
- Regularly display promotional materials about the ministry.
- Make regular prayer requests to the church.
- You could have an open house for church members where they can watch your ministry in action.
- You could recognize volunteers in a church service once a year, and don't forget ongoing training opportunities.
- You might want to consider providing translation in regular services. This could be done through a traditional translator or by means of electronic translation equipment.
- Finally, you could invite your congregation to be a vital part of the ESL ministry by providing refreshments, financial donations, or being conversational partners and prayer supporters (possibly among elderly members who can't be involved in many other ways.) Keep them updated with specific needs and praise items.

### Develop A Sense of Community

Relationships/connections are so important for newcomers. Let students know about social activities and services of the church, but don't pressure them to attend, even to please the teacher or director. If people of other faiths do start to come, it is important that they feel welcomed by Christians, including church leaders. Research has shown that if people don't find a friend in a church in the first 6 months, they will likely leave again. If they show interest in spiritual things try to link them with mature Christians in your congregation, who will take them under their wing, pairing men with men and women with women.

You can begin to involve your church in a variety of ways. There are many ways to incorporate your students into the life of the church. Experiment and find what works best for both your students and your congregation.

- You might want to incorporate a cross-cultural approach to the music. For example, ESL students could present a couple of Christian songs at one of the regular services.
- You could start an ESL or foreign language Bible Study.-
- You could spearhead networking opportunities with members of the congregation and ESL students, offering help with resume writing, interview tips, connections to job openings and immigration information. Your students will certainly see the love of God in your love and concern for other needs besides English.
- More advanced students might also like to join a small group in your church to deepen their relationships with other members as well as learn more about the Bible.
- Church members could work together with your students in serving in an area of the church they are interested in, e.g. choir, sound, childcare, refreshments, greeters, etc.
- You could advertise your church's VBS for the children of your adult ESL students, and even have classes for the adults at the same time if your program has discontinued for the summer.

## Train the Congregation

It will be useful to provide some basic cultural training for your congregation. Language and social barriers may be difficult to overcome if you don't help to bridge that gap. One idea might be to invite speakers, experienced in interaction with other cultural groups or religions to speak to the congregation on cultural awareness. The attendance of ESL leaders and teachers will help in bridging the gap between your program and the rest of the congregation. Hospitality and "welcoming the stranger" are Biblical values. Contact our Coordinator of the Intercultural Project for a free workshop.

## One Last Note

In working with ESL students, we have discovered that you must be flexible. Occasionally your classes will not go as you would like as you address needs that arise in the group. Attendance will often fluctuate as students come and go throughout the year. Often their attendance is related to weather, family and job commitments and, because of this, some churches prefer self-contained lessons that do not rely too heavily on previous lessons. Be aware of the variety of educational backgrounds and experiences as well as the cultural differences that exist in your classroom and be prepared to adjust your lessons accordingly.

We hope and pray that your experience in starting an ESL program will be an exciting adventure for you and your church. Because of God's unconditional love pervading everything that is done, there will be students thirsty to personally know the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Be ready to help them and link them up with someone who will care for their growth to maturity. May God bless you.