

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

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## **Introduction**

Many have felt a burden to reach the unchurched, non-English-speaking population living in their communities and to this end the Southern Ontario Cooperative for ESL Ministries (SOCEM) aims to help. We are a group of Christian believers who teach English as a Second Language and encourage others to develop church-based ESL ministries of excellence. We want to challenge and enable you to engage in this type of ministry in your 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 particular setting. Let the Holy Spirit be your guide as you venture into this rewarding and challenging ministry.

### **A. Preliminary Steps**

As you consider whether to use ESL as a useful outreach tool for your church, first look at the location of your church and the demographics of the people in the surrounding area. Regardless of where your church is located, whether it be in an urban, suburban or rural area, 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, take a look at other ESL programs in your community or in areas with similar demographics. Find out who else is engaged in this ministry. If you are located in the GTA (Greater Toronto Area), consider looking at SOCEM's website (<http://eslministries.org>) where you will find a link for a Directory of GTA church-based ESL classes. 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.

### **B. 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:

## **1. Define your Mission**

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 evangelize the lost? Prayerfully consider the direction of your ministry as this will affect every decision you make.

## **2. 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 and training teachers, registering students, keeping student attendance records, 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.

## **3. Recruit a Team of Teachers/Facilitators**

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

- Put invitations in the church bulletin and/or newsletter.
- Make announcements in the services.
- Post an ad on your church's website.
- Speak to retired school teachers in the congregation.
- Network with other members in the congregation to determine who might be interested in serving in this ministry.

You can always start with a small number of teachers and 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 absolutely 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 actually be beneficial if the teachers speak only English since the purpose of ESL is to encourage students to use English.

#### **4. Select and Order Curriculum**

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. 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.

#### **5. Decide upon the Duration of Classes**

You will need to decide upon the length of the classes. 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. 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. Determine what is best for you in your setting.

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.

#### **6. Determine Whether You will Charge**

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.

## **7. Provide Orientation and Training for Teachers**

Hold orientation/training sessions for newly recruited teachers shortly before the classes begin. 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.

Finally, use these training sessions 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 comprehension, dialogue and dictation exercises, flash card activities, games and vocabulary exercises.

## **8. 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. Some ideas for advertising are as follows:

- Check with local businesses 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.
- 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.
- Post a large banner on your church property if your church sits near a highway or frequently traveled street.
- Advertise in your church bulletin or send notices home with your congregation so they can post them anywhere they have contacts.

These are just a few ideas. With a little effort on your part, it is possible to advertise with little expense to you.

## **9. 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. Basic pre-registration information will help you plan your classes.

### **C. Getting ESL Classes Underway**

#### **1. 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.

Some examples of questions to ask in determining placement are:

- Do you understand what I am saying?
- Did you study English in your country? If so, for how long?
- When do you use spoken and/or written English?
- Tell me about your family.
- Tell me about this picture [any common scene].

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 is able to 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.

## **2. 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.

## **3. 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.

## **4. 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 the 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.

## **5. 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.

## **6. Plan Refreshments**

Having refreshments provides an opportunity for students and teachers to fellowship and 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 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.

### **7. 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.

### **8. 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 [www.settlement.org](http://www.settlement.org) can be a useful tool as the list of possible questions could be endless.

Some churches have even put together a free job finding workshop or a free health fair. These types of activities are usually greatly appreciated and can be a very successful relationship-building tool.

### **9. 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.

## **D. Sustaining your ESL Program and Helping it Thrive**

### **1. 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. Expenses may include curriculum, supplies, refreshments, childcare providers and party expenses.

### **2. Make Discipleship Available**

As students from other faiths begin to attend social activities and services of the church, it is important that they feel safe and supported by other Christians, including church leaders. Try to link these seekers with mature Christians in your congregation, pairing men with men and women with women.

### **3. Train the Congregation**

In discipling these new seekers, it may 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 outreach to 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.

### **4. Involve the Church**

You can begin to involve your church in a variety of ways.

- 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.
- 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 a foreign language Bible Study or Sunday School class.
- 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.

- Finally, you could invite your congregation to be a vital part of the ESL ministry by providing refreshments, prayerful support and financial donations.

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.

### **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 to have 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 and that many will come into a personal relationship with Christ as a result. May God bless you.

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