



Supporting maths and English learning in the workplace

a guide for union learning reps

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Introduction

Most adults have areas of English and maths skills that may need improvement. For instance, even a person with strong maths abilities may struggle to write a report their manager has requested. And though there are great opportunities to improve literacy and numeracy, many adults need encouragement to engage with learning: they may have negative memories from their schooldays; they may be reluctant to admit to a need; they may be eager to learn but not know what is on offer or how to access it.

Union learning is highly effective in improving adult basic skills, and the union learning representative (ULR) role in guiding adults into learning is uniquely valuable. ULRs can provide information on accessing funded learning, and on local learning providers, colleges and learning centres. They can suggest online tools – which may in themselves also improve IT skills. And as well as tackling skills needs, ULRs can also help people develop their confidence, which has the potential to lead to other learning opportunities.



- ▶ English or literacy skills cover speaking, listening, communication, reading and writing.
- ▶ Maths is about numeracy and includes using numbers in varying contexts, analysing and problem solving.
- ▶ English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is literacy learning aimed at those whose first language is not English.



Motivating adult learners



Unions are very successful in promoting learning opportunities for working people. Learning centres in particular have also extended into the wider community. However, engaging and motivating adult learners is not always easy. Here are some ways to get people interested.

Start by finding out from a few individual members what their learning needs are, and bear in mind that the wider workforce might also benefit from updating their English and maths skills.

Explain what courses are about, where they happen and when. Use all communication methods from posters on noticeboards and emailing colleagues to organising learning events. Remember, too, that written media may not be the best means to reach someone not confident with English; instead chat with people informally or make a presentation to a group.



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Tasters make things tangible

- Make use of initial online assessments such as Use-IT www.unionlearn.org.uk/skillcheck
- Organise a short workplace quiz based on questions from initial assessments or the internet – a small prize often encourages participation!
- Look at unionlearn case studies to see other ULRs' engagement ideas www.unionlearn.org.uk/case-studies

Learning is relevant to both working and everyday life

- Think of a wider life context: many people want to help their children with their homework or want a qualification to study further or progress at work.
- Surprise people into thinking of all the things English and maths learning covers. Make it a competition: show photos of various work activities and ask people to imagine how the different activities might need numeracy and literacy skills to be effective.
- Make the connection to personal development reviews and appraisals. Ask your colleagues to think about practical work situations such as reading instructions, responding to emails and writing reports, or using maths skills to make sense of pay slips and pensions.

- Think of the language you use. What is the best way to explain what literacy and numeracy are about? Might it be better in some situations to use the words 'English' and maths'?
- Tag learning on to situations that already exist. For example, ULRs have organised ESOL classes to aid understanding of workplace policies. Guitar lessons in one workplace have led to writing song lyrics. At another workplace maths is practised in conjunction with a weight loss group.

Support is important

- Help people feel more confident by keeping in contact with them and putting them in touch with others in similar situations.
- Celebrate achievements and qualifications to acknowledge colleagues' accomplishments.

Always consider next steps

- Keep records so that you can track your learners' progress and look for new signposting options. Don't forget to tell your union about your activities.

As a union learning rep you will come across a number of reasons why adults are motivated to improve their literacy and numeracy skills. How would you respond?

"I'm trying to get my head around pensions so that I am prepared for the future. Where can I start?"

"My children are learning maths totally differently from how I was taught. I don't know how to help them with their homework!"

"Several times I've sent an email and the recipient has replied saying they don't understand what I want from them."

"I was told at school that you cannot start a sentence with the word 'and'. It killed my confidence in my writing skills."

"I need English and maths qualifications to start a training course I am interested in. What are my options?"

"I'm terrible with maths. Why should I even try?"

"I'm not very confident with writing reports and minutes. Where do I start?"

"The manager gave very long and detailed instructions. I was worried I missed something because my English skills are not up to it."

ESOL learners



Workplace ESOL is not currently government funded, which can make organising classes challenging. However, it is worthwhile having a chat with your local college or learning provider about what it can offer for ESOL learners, or getting in contact with community organisations.

Quick tips for engaging ESOL learners:

- Remember that often ESOL learners are able to understand more than they can say.
- Start conversations with straightforward questions such as 'What is your name?' and 'Which languages do you speak?'.
- Speak clearly and slower than usual. Repeat and rephrase if necessary.
- Check your and their understanding of what has been said – 'You said you can't come to classes in the evening. Is that right?'.

Getting the employer on board

Employers have a major role to play in supporting English and maths learning and offering meaningful solutions.

Here's an example: one barrier employers often face is not realising what their staff's skills levels are and what they could do to help them. When they do find out they may try to tackle this by offering ready-made templates for letters and spreadsheets for calculations. But workers using these templates aren't taught the English or maths behind them. Because of that, if a template corrupts, for example, the user may not even realise it has produced an odd result.

What would convince your employer to work with the union on skills? Consider:

- case studies and stories of how other employers have approached English and maths learning
- advocating study skills courses in English and maths to prepare learners for higher level training
- workplace issues that could be linked to adequacy of basic skills
- getting help from the union in sourcing good-quality, local provision leading to qualifications
- results of any workplace surveys
- generic research information with useful graphs and percentages

An example of a business case for workplace learning in the NHS:

1. Workplace learning improves patient safety.
2. Workplace learning helps engage staff and boost morale.
3. Learning and development budgets go further.
4. Workplace learning creates a culture of learning.
5. Workplace learning creates a workforce that attracts and retains the best and better reflects the local population.
6. Workplace learning delivers on staff pledges in the NHS Constitution.

Source: The NHS Social Partnership Forum
www.socialpartnershipforum.org/priority-areas/learning-for-life

(ask your union if there is sector-specific information)

- exploring opportunities to engage employees to take up progression opportunities, e.g. collaborating on managing change.

Effective workplace engagement

- Hold a Learning at Work Week quiz. Gather questions from online sources, from functional skills initial assessments or from samples of GCSE exercises. Look at www.excellencegateway.org.uk or search for past GCSE exam papers. Ask your employer or union to donate a prize.
- Start a lending library in your workplace and organise a book club. Unionlearn has suggestions for Top Ten books to read in the group www.unionlearn.org.uk/vote-ultimate-list-books-workplace-readers. Or think about having a virtual group using Facebook or WhatsApp. Also remember that there are free online books such as Project Gutenberg www.gutenberg.org
- Ask your union for help to get Quick Reads. A fun activity is to randomly allocate a book to your team and ask them to write a couple of sentences about what they thought of it. You can share these by email or in a Facebook group. Involve the managers because they can lead by example – and you would definitely want to know their opinions if the chosen book was a romantic story! Learning resources to accompany Quick Read are at <https://readingagency.org.uk/resources/?programme=quick-reads>
- Organise a competition by asking people to write poems or stories using only 140 characters. You could publish them on social media.
- Use mid-life development reviews and Value My Skills cards to get people talking about their English and maths skills. See more at www.unionlearn.org.uk/supporting-midlife-development
- Invite people to try out an English and maths initial assessment with the SkillCheck tool in www.unionlearn.org.uk/skillcheck
- Be a maths champion. Take a look at the Usdaw case study in www.unionlearn.org.uk/english-and-maths-learning-case-studies and the Challenge Champion page at www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk/challenge-champions. Make sure you always track your learners' activity and progress.



"Invite people to try out an English and maths assessment with the SkillCheck tool."

Tools and resources

A note about qualifications

Both functional skills qualifications and GCSEs are Level 2 qualifications. The difference between the two is that GCSEs are more academic whereas functional skills are more applicable to everyday situations. Many adults find functional skills more relevant to them but it is always worth having a discussion with the learner on what their objectives are. For instance, some learners need a specific GCSE to access a certain university course.

ESOL Skills for Life qualifications assess skills at Entry Levels 1, 2 and 3. From there the learner can go on to Levels 1 and 2.

Both GCSEs and functional skills are undergoing reform. The new content for functional skills will be in use in 2019.

The GCSE English language and literacy and maths GCSE grading structure changed from summer 2017. The new grading will be from 9 to 1:

- Grade 4 is approximately equal to achievement of a low C.
- Grade 5 is in the high C and low B area.
- Grade 9 is higher than A*.

Adult English and maths skills levels	Comparison to school standards	Comparison to GCSE grading from 2017
Entry level 1	School age 5–7	
Entry level 2	School age 7–9	
Entry level 3	School age 9–11	
Level 1	GCSE D-G	1–3
Level 2	GCSE C-A*	4–9

- The government has set a ‘good pass’ at grade 5 for the new GCSEs.
- Grade 4 will continue to be a Level 2 achievement.
- There is no expectation that employers, colleges or universities will raise the bar to a grade 5 if a grade 4 meets their requirements.

Find out more at www.gov.uk/government/news/new-gcse-9-to-1-grades-coming-soon



Online resources

SkillCheck English and maths initial assessments

www.unionlearn.org.uk/skillcheck

English and maths learning – resources and tools

www.unionlearn.org.uk/english-and-maths-learning-resources-and-tools offers information on materials unions have used.

Trade Union Education eNotes

www.tuceducation.org.uk/enotes

- Language Support for Workers (ESOL)
- Working with Figures
- Supporting Mid-Life Development
- Supporting Learners

The family maths toolkit from National Numeracy

www.nationalnumeracy.org.uk/family-maths-toolkit

Negotiator's guide for Bargaining for Skills

www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/negotiators-guide-bargaining-skills

Delivering better learning agreements: a guide for union reps and officers

www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/delivering-better-learning-agreements-guide-union-reps-and-officers

Five Free Steps to Better Maths

Useful online tools for union reps promoting maths in their workplace, or brushing up their own skills

1

Take an initial assessment at your leisure with **SkillCheck**



UNIONLEARN.ORG.UK/SKILLCHECK

2

Dig a bit deeper into everyday maths and see where you can improve your skills. Take the Numeracy Challenge.



NNCHALLENGE.ORG.UK/UNIONLEARN

4

The **Working with Figures** eNote teaches you to use calculations for union work. Register at:



TUCEDUCATION.ORG.UK

3

Confident with **Level 2 maths**? This course helps you solve the kinds of maths problems that come up at work and in life.



CITIZENMATHS.COM

5

Use **#mathsworkout @unionlearn** to tell everyone how you are doing, or post your successes on:



[FACEBOOK.COM/TUCUNIONLEARN](https://www.facebook.com/TUCUNIONLEARN)

A union learning rep in your workplace will be eager to help you at any stage of this journey

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