

Meet our ESOL Champion

Name: Arthur McKeown

Occupation (& location):

A retired Volunteer with BURC ESOL: providing Volunteer Induction and Training at the Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre (BURC) for other Volunteers contributing ESOL delivery in Belfast and beyond.



Why did you decide to become an ESOL Teacher?

Another student whom I met when we were both in the first year English class at the University of Edinburgh went to Sweden to teach English to adults. Occasional letters told me - and others - of the world of English language teaching in which he was developing his career. I gradually came to see the potential of this career direction for myself.

What has been the path to your current job?

After graduating from Edinburgh with a degree in Homeric and Classical Greek I worked for a short time as a lighthouse keeper in Orkney and Shetland in the north of Scotland. I then applied for a post with the British Centre in Sweden, was interviewed and was accepted. Then I worked for 15 years as a teacher, teacher trainer and centre manager on three different continents: Much of my work in Sweden was with technical English for pharmacists. For three years in Kuwait I worked mainly with Learners who were firemen. Perhaps the most formative period was the four years when I worked in Tripoli in Libya, as director of a big language school. Many of our Learners were adult Beginners who wished to progress to employment where English was a vital requirement. During my time in Sweden time I completed the DELTA. A few years later I was able to contribute to the design, documentation and delivery of the DELTA programme delivered to colleagues who were working in Tripoli and Kuwait. In 1990, for family reasons, my wife Elizabeth and I came back to Belfast. There was nothing in English language teaching; I had to re-purpose my career. Having recently completed an MBA at Henley, I worked in management consultancy before getting a job teaching management to native speakers in the Open University and in the Faculty of Business and Management at Ulster University. One of my last projects was the delivery of several English for Employability programmes for mainly Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian people in County Cavan. Then, encouraged by some of my Ulster University management students, we created a job club on a Thursday night at the Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre in the city centre. Pre-Brexit, its purpose was to help recent arrivals in Belfast: To understand the local job market, to create the paperwork: curriculum vitae, application form, covering letter and to prepare responses to the questions they might be asked in a job interview. This was to provide my encore: as I moved towards retirement and was looking for more to do, I encountered Suleiman Abdulahi, a very entrepreneurial Somali man from the Horn of Africa People's Aid Northern Ireland. Suleiman indicated the huge need for a Beginner English language programme for women from the Somali, Sudanese and similar communities. We revived and revised, refreshed the Tripoli model for the programme and delivered it for over a year at the Belfast Islamic Centre. During this time more and more people were coming forward as Volunteers and helped in the creation of a robust model that has been proved to work. Then, when the first Syrian families arrived in Belfast under the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme and needed an English language programme, we were able at BURC ESOL to re-purpose the Belfast Islamic Centre programme. It regularly attracts 25+ Learners for each of the four 2-hour sessions every week. Since retiring I have been able to contribute as a Volunteer to the design, documentation and delivery of an ESOL Absolute Beginner Compendium to help adult Learners gain the communication skills, confidence and credibility to progress to other programmes available in the wider community where they have come to live here in Belfast and beyond.

What do you love most about your job and / or the ESOL context?

I see how our Learners can gain the knowledge, skills and confidence needed when they move from the non-formal delivery environment we provide to the wider world and meet so many other people of different nationalities with whom they need to communicate effectively and successfully in English. I also appreciate the opportunity to see the volunteers working in delivery teams contribute so much to activities and exercises that help beginners take their first steps in English.

Do you have any specialisms or particular interests within English Language?

My obsession is with the LANGUAGE needs of adult migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who need enough English to take their first steps when they want to be able to get closer to other people in their local areas and integrate more with their local community.

If you could change one or two things (yes, only one or two!) in the adult ESOL context what would it / they be? More awareness and acceptance of the need for more attention to materials and techniques for teaching Absolute Beginners in pre-service training, in-service training and continuing professional development of English. Although this has been changing recently, much of the material for Beginners is culturally insensitive; and much needs to be done by delivery team members to granularise, localise and personalise the material we use for presentation of new language and practise it with our Learners.

More awareness of the contribution made by Volunteers in the church, community and voluntary sector, especially where organisations can show there is quality assurance in the ways in which they provide their services.

What has been your greatest achievement in this field?

I reckon this is providing the widening horizons among various stakeholder groups in the community where I live, so that all can appreciate how they can (however simply, modestly and yet effectively) contribute to making our community a more welcoming place. 'Educating the locals' is a challenge! And I have welcomed the opportunity to practise what I was preaching, using ideas from disruptive innovation.

What has been your best teaching inspiration?

Working at International House in Shaftesbury Avenue in London in 1977 introduced me not only to a large number of interesting students from many different parts of the world but also to a very diverse and high achieving colleagues who went on to contribute in so many ways to English language teaching in the decades that followed.

What else would you like to achieve?

We are currently working on a project to develop quality management systems based on the requirements of ISO29991, the international standard Language Learning Services Outside Formal Education. This is ambitious; but it do a lot to establish the organisation delivery processes, our credibility and our general approach as we move on further in the 21st century.

What has been your funniest moment?

In the break in a session with newly arrived Syrians in Lurgan I was able to ask one of the large group if there was opportunity to use WhatsApp and if they had Wi-Fi at home.

Ali, have you got Wi-Fi at home?

He looked at me quizzically.

No, she is not there. She is not at home. She is in the class. She is sitting over there.

Do you have a mantra you live by? A great quote?

Being a VIRIDUS SENECTUS 'a sprightly and youthful old man' Virgil: Aeneid 6: 304



BURC began in 1984 to provide support, education / training and facilities to the unemployed and other groups suffering from social and economic disadvantage.

www.burc.org

You can find out more about the work Arthur has been involved in over the years here, plus follow his blog:

<http://www.arthurmckeown.com>