

Evaluation of the Creative English Programme

Executive Summary

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The Creative English Programme

Creative English is a community-based, English language teaching programme that provides courses for people with little or no English language skills, using a drama-based teaching method. The original programme, funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) as part of a £6million investment in community-based English language provision, ran between November 2013 and November 2015 and was administered by FaithAction, a national network organisation for faith-based and community organisations. The programme was accessed by over 2,400 people in 36 local Creative English 'hubs' across England.

The context of the programme's commissioning is closely linked to the UK Government's aims around integration, social mobility and English language proficiency and is more specifically related to the policy behind the *Creating the Conditions for Integration* paper published in 2012. This policy approach describes successful societies as those in which all members are engaged and have the ability and confidence to contribute; English language proficiency is seen as an important factor in the ability of individuals to meet these criteria.

The Evaluation

As part of the original contract with DCLG, FaithAction commissioned a team of social researchers from Coventry University's Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations to provide an external evaluation of the programme. The team designed a research process that allowed them to spend lots of time with those closest to the delivery, observing Creative English sessions and working with learners, facilitators, and other volunteers in 8 out of 36 local hubs, as well as FaithAction staff. The research undertaken between April 2014 and November 2015 used four key themes to investigate the impact and success of Creative English:

1. The extent to which the programme meets its aims in **social mobility and integration**.
2. The contribution and **role of the faith sector** in delivering the programme
3. The **language** progression of learners and the effectiveness of **teaching** methods used
4. The **strategic and operational** approach taken by FaithAction in delivering the programme

Key Findings

The Creative English programme has exceeded against all targets set. In total, 2,432 learners participated and 1,536 learners completed the programme, against targets of 2,147 and 1,500 respectively. Working comprehensively towards aims of social mobility and integration, Creative English has recorded over-achievements in its key areas of progression, seeing learners move towards employment and further education, playing a more active part in their local community and engaging more with housing, health and education bodies. Most importantly for learners and FaithAction however is the fact that every single learner who completed the programme reported increased confidence in speaking English to others.

Data collected through this evaluation process, particularly through observations in Creative English sessions, has verified and added a deeper analysis to much of the above success. Most striking from this were the increases in the confidence of learners, witnessed by researchers, as well as improvements in English language proficiency and a multitude of stories of greater engagement and success outside of sessions, in community life, further education, schools, health and other statutory services.

A substantial part of the programme's value for its funders is that at the heart of its design is the ambition to reach people who are traditionally seen as 'hard to reach' – those who have not been engaged in English language courses previously. Data collected aligned with this ambition, showing that over 85% of learners were women, 75.4% of learners were from Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian or Somali backgrounds, aligning well with targets and aims set by DCLG and FaithAction.

The research process found faith to be a key feature across the programme. It was administered by FaithAction, delivered mostly by faith-based organisations and attended by a group of learners, of which

more than 70% were Muslim. Fieldwork in case study hubs showed that the faith-based nature of the programme played a significant role in enabling its delivery. At a physical level, the faith sector provided many of the venues, volunteers and learners for the programme. At other levels it provided the ethos, the values and the levels of mutual trust required for the programme to run and for learners to attend. At most case study hubs, there were a large number of people who most likely would not have felt able to attend courses run outside of the faith sector, demonstrating many of the reported advantages of the faith sector in reaching members of the community who are traditionally excluded from other types of service provision. Faith was certainly found to be a key element of the programme's success.

The research process found some excellent practice in facilitation, leading to improvements in English language proficiency for learners witnessed over multiple visits. Conversely, there was also some less effective practice which meant that learners' experiences were not as positive as they could have been, meaning that opportunities to enhance their confidence and language progression were not exploited. Given that the programme is delivered by volunteers, often with very little experience in training, teaching or facilitation, some variance in practice across the programme should reasonably be expected. Suggested ways to enhance this practice have been included in the evaluation's recommendations (below).

In most cases, however, noticeable progress was being made by learners, in proficiency, willingness to use English, and in their confidence in and outside of class. It was pleasing to hear regular anecdotes from learners, and facilitators, of learners using the language learnt during the programme in new, practical situations outside of the classroom, for example being able to buy clothes for their children, speaking with household repair technicians, and so on.

Insight into the business model deployed by Creative English shows that the programme adeptly provides value in different ways for each of its four sets of key stakeholders: DCLG, learners, hubs and volunteers. Key to its success is a set of distinctive characteristics, including: partnership working, volunteering, faith and fun. By employing these alongside a strong, flexible business model, FaithAction has created a model which holds great promise for sustainability, providing a strong foundation for the success of Creative English to continue.

Recommendations

The Creative English programme is making a positive difference to the lives of low- and intermediate-proficiency speakers of English. Learners are made welcome in an accessible, friendly, fun environment and are given the opportunity to mix with other people outside their own immediate family group, as well as being given the chance to improve their English language skills. The research process has found evidence that the programme is providing a valuable stepping stone towards greater engagement with the wider community and, in some cases, further training and increased employability. Here there is a clear synthesis with the overarching aims of enabling integration and promoting social mobility.

The evaluation's key finding is that the core aims and values of the programme should continue unchanged, along with the underlying methodology which characterises the programme. To further enhance levels of success, however, this report suggests some potentially valuable adjustments to these activities, including the recommendations below:

- Learners could be given more opportunities to contribute to lesson content, for example by providing information about their own family life, habits and personal preferences. This might help make lessons even more relevant and motivating, and would provide opportunities for all participants, including facilitators, to learn more about each other's lives.
- Less emphasis could be placed on performance in front of the entire class, and more time could be devoted to work in pairs and small groups. This might allow learners more talking time, and cater for individual differences more effectively.
- Tutors could be asked to follow a standard template so that the structure of every lesson becomes familiar to learners. Lessons might always contain the same sort of starting and concluding routines, with only slight variations from lesson to lesson, for example. This might be a recap of the same basic facts about the cast of characters, and/or the use of the same series of questions to elicit the same sort of information about the learners' daily lives. This repetition will help learners to acquire, retain and produce more fluent

language sequences. The familiarity of the routine will also help to increase their confidence, and might reassure participants who do not regularly attend, but who drop in from time to time.

- The issues of 'grading language' and certain common 'facilitator behaviours' could be raised with the facilitators at the Hub huddles and made a more prominent feature of the volunteer training programme, with the aim of ensuring that language and tasks are always pitched at an appropriate level for the learners. If learners can be given tasks that they are more likely to be able to complete successfully, then this will have a marked effect on the development of their confidence.
- A closer working relationship with volunteers should be sought by FaithAction, providing more support and communication and more focus on the volunteer experience as a Creative English 'customer'.
- Related to the above, data should be recorded to capture the journeys of the volunteers. Where volunteers are drawn from the cohort of learners, this is an especially strong element of the programme and one that is not currently recorded.
- FaithAction should review their engagement with hubs, with a particular focus on their relationships with smaller, less established organisations, to ensure that the appropriate level of support is provided across the programme and that the delivery of Creative English remains consistent and high quality in all locations.