

# Learning Circles

A guide to setting up Learning Circles



**BBC WORLD SERVICE**  
LEARNING ENGLISH



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## **BBC LEARNING ENGLISH LEARNING CIRCLES**

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## INTRODUCTION

Every day, all around the world, people study English. Most learners want to be able to use English to communicate with others – for work, for study or just for pleasure. But learning English on your own can be a long, difficult journey.

BBC Learning English has a great idea for you. Instead of learning alone, why not start a club for you and other learners of English? You could form a club with your friends, family or fellow students. In 2002, the BBC Learning English started to encourage learners to form their own clubs – known as Learning Circles. By 2003, we found that there were nearly 800 BBC Learning Circles around the world.

This booklet is designed to help you set up and run your own English Learning Circle. If you are already part of a Learning Circle or club, it may provide ideas and suggestions for new activities to try.

### **The booklet will help you to:**

- understand how Learning Circles can be useful – and fun!
- set up a Learning Circle with your own group of friends
- use the Learning Circle to improve your listening and speaking skills
- use the Learning Circle to improve your active vocabulary
- create language games to use in your Learning Circle
- plan English projects for your Learning Circle
- use the internet to support your Learning Circle

If you are a teacher, there is also some information on how you can help your students to form their own Learning Circle.

### **How to use this booklet**

Each page is filled with information telling you how Learning Circles can help improve your English. On each page, you will find:

- a description of how the Learning Circle can help with a particular area of learning;
- ‘top tips’ to help you in your own Learning Circle;

## WHAT IS A LEARNING CIRCLE?

A Learning Circle is a club or group formed by people who are all studying English. All over the world, BBC Learning English listeners have decided to get together with a group of friends to study together and to talk in English. So, if you want to practise English, the best thing to do is to find a few friends who want to do this too. Then you can start your own Learning Circle.

### Introducing Learning Circles

If you are studying English at school or on your own at home, you might find that you know a lot of grammar rules. You possibly find that reading is quite easy for you, and you can identify grammar mistakes in your own written work. However, for many people, actually using English to communicate with others is more difficult.

The reason is very simple. When we study grammar rules, we are learning about English – it's only when we try to put these rules into practice that we actually start learning to use English. And this is where a problem can arise. You may have very little opportunity to talk with other people in English. It can be difficult to find the time and the opportunity to practise what you have been studying. This is where a **Learning Circle** can help.

### 5 TOP TIPS

#### WHY START A LEARNING CIRCLE?



##### 1. It provides a focus for your learning

By deciding on a day and time for your Learning Circle to meet, you give everyone a goal. You might decide to listen to a BBC World Service programme together then discuss what you heard, or to give short presentations on topics which interest you. Whatever you decide to do, setting aside a time when everyone can get together with the goal of practising English will help improve the motivation of everyone in the group. Make your Learning Circle an event in your calendar!

##### 2. It can help build your confidence

Many learners say that confidence is very important in learning a language. By forming a small Learning Circle, you can have the opportunity to use English with people you feel comfortable with. Practising English in a relaxing environment can give you the support and confidence you need to use the language with people you don't know well.

##### 3. You can share what you know

A Learning Circle can give everyone the chance to learn – and to teach. You may know a song in English, or you may have read a book which others would like to hear about. You might even have a new recipe which you could share with others. Try to plan events in your Learning Circle which will allow each member to share what they know – using English.

##### 4. You can practise English – whatever your level

Teaching others is a good way of practising your English. If your Learning Circle has members with different levels of English, it is possible to think of many ways of providing practise for everyone. If your English is at an advanced level, you could help another group member prepare a short presentation for the group. In this way, you practise your English through helping with the language, and your partner practises through making the presentation.

##### 5. You can make learning fun

By meeting together as a group and taking part in different activities, you can enjoy yourself while practising English. Learning doesn't have to be serious and difficult – and having fun in a Learning Circle can help you relax more and boost your confidence in your English skills.

Remember – laughter can lighten learning!

### Setting up your own Learning Circle

If you know some people who are learning English too – maybe your friends, your family or your fellow students – you can set up your own Learning Circle. All you need is a group of people who feel comfortable with each other and who want to learn English.

The first step is to talk with people you know who are learning English. Ask them if they are interested in meeting together to practise English. A group like this can start very simply, by meeting together to chat about things you enjoy doing – the only difference is that you will be chatting in English.

It's important to remember that the aim of a Learning Circle is to create an atmosphere where everyone feels relaxed enough and confident enough to talk in English. So, when you meet together, the members of the group should try to avoid correcting all the mistakes which are made by others when they speak. Learning to speak without fear of mistakes is the first step to becoming a confident user of English.

So – how can you make sure that your group of friends and fellow learners become an effective Learning Circle?

#### **5 TOP TIPS SETTING UP A SUCCESSFUL LEARNING CIRCLE**



##### **1. Be realistic about time**

It's very easy to be enthusiastic about a project at the beginning, and feel you can devote a lot of time to it. However, if you have too many meetings, some members might begin to feel they cannot attend. On the other hand, if meetings are too far apart, it is difficult to create a comfortable club atmosphere. One regular meeting at the same time every week is usually the best way to start.

##### **2. Find a place to meet**

Your meeting place needs to be convenient and comfortable for all members of your Learning Circle. If you have the opportunity to use a room in a school or town hall, this is ideal – everyone can share responsibility for making sure that the meeting room is tidy and comfortable. If you decide to hold your meetings in the house of group members, try to go to a different house each week. This shares the responsibility of making sure the place where you go to study is comfortable and welcoming.

##### **3. Decide how large you want your Learning Circle to be**

There may be many people who want to join your Learning Circle. Remember, however, that if the group is too large, it becomes more difficult to include everyone in discussions. A good group size is around 6 to 10 members. If you have more members, think about creating more than one group.

##### **4. Share responsibilities**

The most successful Learning Circles are the ones in which all members feel they are valuable to the group. Sharing responsibilities for the group's activities is a good way of ensuring everyone feels included. Try to make sure that each member of the group has to take responsibility for one group activity at each meeting.

##### **5. Find out about English events in your town**

In many towns and cities you can find events held in English. These might include talks and lectures at local cultural centres or English language films at the cinema. Make your Learning Circle a centre for English language information by identifying as many English-language events as possible in your area.

### Learning Circles and listening skills

If you are a regular listener to the BBC World Service, you will know that there is a great variety of programmes which are specially designed to make learning English both fun and interesting.

However, listening alone can sometimes be frustrating because you may not understand everything you hear. This is where being a member of a Learning Circle can help. When we hear an interesting programme, we usually tell someone about it. If the person we speak to has also heard the programme, then we have a real opportunity to share our views and have a satisfying discussion. By including listening and discussion activities in your Learning Circle, you can help make listening more interesting and really make the most of the range of programmes which the BBC World Service has to offer.

#### 5 TOP TIPS

#### LEARNING CIRCLE LISTENING ACTIVITIES



##### 1. Listen together

When a subject is complex, it is very useful to listen more than once and to compare what you have understood with other people. Try to make 'Listening Together' a feature of your Learning Circle. Choose a BBC World Service programme which will be broadcast before your next meeting. One member of the Learning Circle should agree to record the programme. At the next meeting, before you start to listen, discuss what you think the programme will talk about. After listening once, tell each other what you understood – were your predictions right? If there are any disagreements, play some sections of the programme again to check who was right.

##### 2. Group discussions

Many BBC World Service programmes can form the basis for interesting discussions. Choose a BBC World Service programme which everyone must listen to before the next meeting. Two group members summarise the information in the programme then provide discussion questions, e.g. Do you agree with the ideas expressed? Are they relevant to your town/country?

##### 3. Radio dictation

Most of the time, we do not need to understand every word we hear – getting the main idea is enough. However, this activity can help you identify every word and practise English grammar at the same time. Choose and record a very short extract from a radio programme (the news headlines are ideal!). Everyone in the group should listen once and write down as much as they can remember of each headline. Then compare what you have written with other members of the group. Listen again to try to fill any spaces. Try to work together to reconstruct the extract, without playing it again. Finally, play the extract to compare it with your finished version of the text.

##### 4. Listening to build your vocabulary

Many BBC World Service programmes introduce useful vocabulary but, when you listen alone, you may not have time to make a note of all of the new words. Use your Learning Circle to gather new words. Listen together to a programme which you have chosen. While you listen, make a note of 3 or 4 new words and their meaning. When the programme finishes, compare the words you have noted with the other members of the group. If you have chosen the same words, make sure that you all agree on the meaning and the spelling. If you have chosen different words, explain their meaning to others in the group.

##### 5. Guessing what happens next

When we listen to a story, we always try to work out what will happen to the characters. Try to use BBC World Service short stories to practise this type of prediction. Choose and record a short story to listen to in your Learning Circle. Stop the recording at an interesting or exciting stage in the story. Then discuss what you think will happen next – try to make a note of all of the different

## Learning Circles and speaking skills

It is possible to use your Learning Circle to discuss programmes you have heard on the BBC World Service. This can help build your confidence and can give you something to speak about with other members of the group. However, there are many other ways in which Learning Circle activities can help you to develop your spoken English.

It is important to remember that we speak in different ways depending on the person we are speaking with and the subject we are discussing. For example, if we are chatting with a friend, we will probably use short sentences and informal vocabulary. In this situation, we want to make sure that our friend feels comfortable in the conversation, so we usually ask questions and use 'noises (such as 'uh-huh' or 'mmm') to show we are listening. However, if you have to give a presentation to a group of people, you will have to use more formal vocabulary and longer sentences.

### 5 TOPTIPS SPEAKING ACTIVITIES FOR YOUR LEARNING CIRCLE



#### 1. Give mini-presentations

Giving short presentations in your Learning Circle can help build your confidence if you have to use English in your work. Members of the Learning Circle can take turns to make a short presentation to the group. It could be on any topic – a hobby or interest, a BBC World Service programme they have heard, their favourite singer or actor – or even a point of English grammar! The only rules are that the presentation is kept short (around 5 minutes) and that there is an opportunity for other group members to ask questions.

#### 2. Try story-telling

Telling stories is a useful way to practise speaking. By telling part of a story, you have to use words and grammar which you may not need when simply chatting with friends. For example, do you have any well-known folk tales in your country? Practise your English by telling them in English in your Learning Circle. Each member tells part of the story, with other group members helping out with new words. Keep a dictionary with you!

#### 3. Check your accuracy

Earlier, we advised you not to correct every mistake which members of the Learning Circle make. However, it is important to think of ways to improve the accuracy of what you say. One way to do this is to record part of a discussion which you have in your Learning Circle. When you listen, try to identify and correct errors which you made when speaking. This is a useful task, because it can also tell you if you contribute too much (were you the only person who spoke?) or too little (did you say anything in the discussion?).

#### 4. Try a role-play

How can you practise the language you need for different situations if you speak English with only a few people? One answer is to role-play situations. For example, you might want to practise for a job interview. Divide into 2 groups: Group A are the interviewers and Group B are the people who want the job. A member of Group A and a member of Group B work together, with A asking 'interview' questions and B giving answers. Try to think of other situations which members of the Learning Circle are likely to meet and practise role-playing these situations in English.

#### 5. Practise active listening

It might seem a little strange, but listening is an important part of speaking. By listening 'actively', we can encourage the speaker to give us important information and to explain information which is unclear. Try to encourage the members of your Learning Circle to be 'active listeners'. When a member of the Learning Circle gives a presentation, always try to think of at least one question to ask. If you agree with what is said, show the speaker by saying 'yes' or nodding your head. By

## 5 TOPTIPS

### ACTIVATING VOCABULARY

#### 1. Start a Vocabulary Box

Whenever you meet a new word at your meetings, one member of the group should write the word on a piece of paper. On the back of the paper, write a definition or an example sentence and show where the stress is. Put the paper in a Vocabulary Box. At each meeting, take 5 words out of the box and test your group members. Can they remember the meaning and the pronunciation?

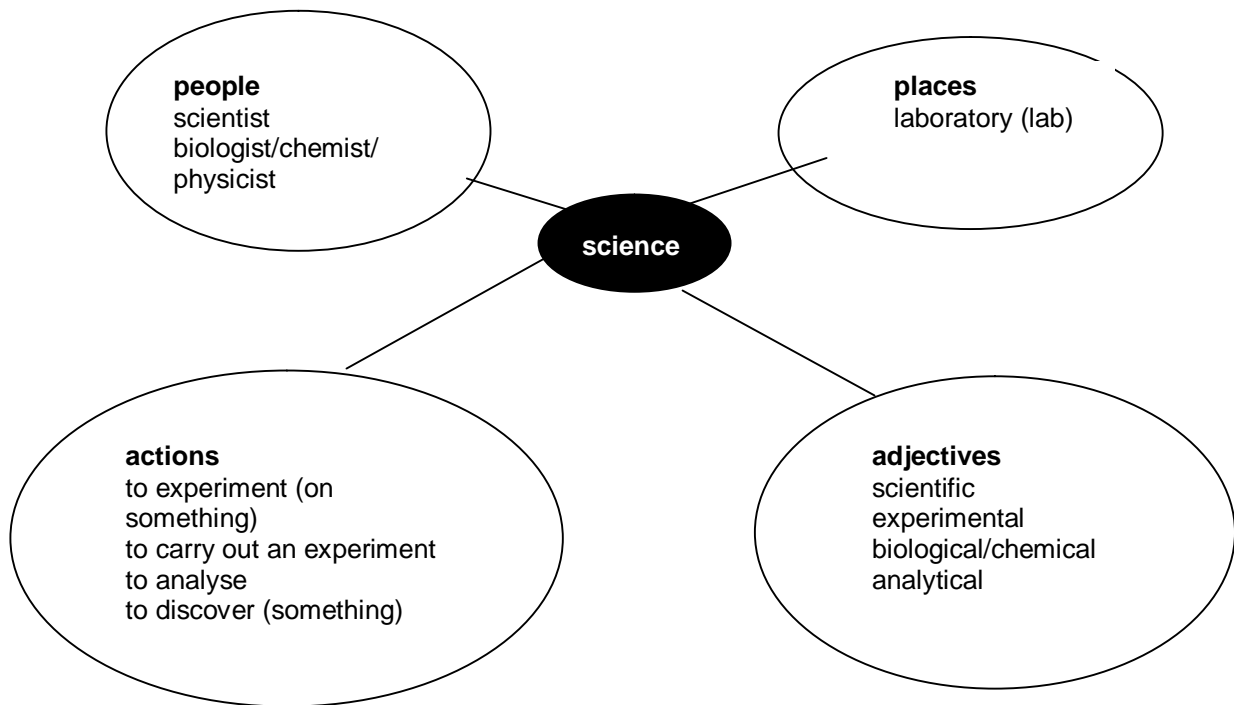
#### 2. Start a 'Useful Phrases' poster

Do you have place in your meeting room for a poster? Get a large piece of blank paper and put it where everyone can see it. At the beginning of each meeting, one member tells the group about a useful word or phrase they have learned since the last meeting then writes it on the poster. The poster provides you with a record of some of the things you have learned in your Learning Circle.

3. Start a 'Useful Phrases' poster



### Spidergram: Science



### Creating language games for your Learning Circle

Many people enjoy doing puzzles in their own language. Perhaps your local newspaper has puzzles and quizzes which you do regularly? One way of making language learning fun is to adapt puzzles so you can practise English. There is an endless supply of games which you can play in this way. For example, if you all enjoy sport, you could ask each group member to write 5 questions about sport in English, with each question on a different piece of paper and the answer on the back. Using these questions, you could then have a team quiz.

Try to think of all the puzzles and games which you play in your own language – then, in your Learning Circle, play them in English. Individual members of the group can also be encouraged to make puzzles which you can pass to other members. **Here is how to make a Wordsquare in 5 easy steps:**

1. Choose a topic. This can be simple – for example, sports, hobbies, countries – or related to your work or study.
2. Think of about 10 words related to this topic which you want to include in your wordsquare. Before you fill in the wordsquare, think about the number of squares you need. If your wordsquare only has 10 boxes in each line, this means that 11-letter words won't fit!
3. Write your words in the square. Remember to write some in horizontally →, some vertically ↑ and try to put some in diagonally ↘. **(You should do this in pencil first to make sure you can fit all your words in)**
4. Fill the other empty boxes with letters, like the example above and, for more practice, write a clue for each word.
5. Give your finished wordsquare to other members of your Learning Circle. Tell them the topic and see if they can find the words.

**An example wordsquare**

Question: What kind of things do you need to learn English well?

**Try to find 11 people or things in this square which can help you to study English!**

P	E	N	F	R	I	E	N	D	S	T	V
A	Q	N	B	A	R	U	O	C	M	I	K
G	Z	O	G	R	A	M	M	A	R	B	L
R	S	T	X	L	D	Y	T	H	P	O	V
P	H	E	Q	R	I	V	I	D	E	O	S
R	A	B	U	U	O	S	Y	R	N	K	A
A	V	O	I	P	D	F	H	A	C	N	T
C	T	O	Z	E	E	S	J	C	I	A	H
T	P	K	Z	A	S	H	T	U	L	L	E
I	G	L	E	Y	U	D	F	G	E	U	B
C	A	S	S	E	T	T	E	S	O	H	B
E	L	O	J	X	E	C	Y	O	J	N	C

**The answer grid**

P	E	N	F	R	I	E	N	D	S	T	V
A	Q	N	B	A	R	U	O	C	M	I	K
G	Z	O	G	R	A	M	M	A	R	B	L
R	S	T	X	L	D	Y	T	H	P	O	V
P	H	E	Q	R	I	V	I	D	E	O	S
R	A	B	U	U	O	S	Y	R	N	K	A
A	V	O	I	P	D	F	H	A	C	N	T
C	T	O	Z	E	E	S	J	C	I	A	H
T	P	K	Z	A	S	H	T	U	L	L	E
I	G	L	E	Y	U	D	F	G	E	U	B
C	A	S	S	E	T	T	E	S	O	H	B
E	L	O	J	X	E	C	Y	O	J	N	C

### **Planning projects for your Learning Circle**

Many Learning Circles meet once per week to discuss what they have heard on the radio and to share new vocabulary. Others invite English speakers to give a talk or a lecture. But there are many other things which you can do to make sure that all the members of the Learning Circle feel that they have made progress in using English. Here, we give you some ideas for **English Projects** for your Learning Circle.

#### **WHAT IS A PROJECT?**

A project is a large task which involves everyone and which results in a **product** – something which everyone can see, use or participate in. Some projects can be completed in a few days, others may take a few months. To keep interest levels high in your Learning Circle, try to mix long-term and short-term projects so that all the Learning Circle members can see the results of their hard work!

Projects work very well if you have an **audience**. By sharing your work with other people in your community, your Learning Circle can feel happy with their work and the members of your community can improve their English too!

Here are four ideas for Learning Circle projects.

#### **PROJECT IDEA 1: LEARNING CIRCLE LIBRARY**

*Many listeners have told us that they record their favourite BBC World Service radio programmes. This project – to create a **listening library** – can help all of your members, and people in your community, improve their listening skills.*

In your Learning Circle, find out which members have a favourite BBC programme – and which members have a radio cassette player. Decide together on which programmes you would like to record. (Remember to think about recording at times when reception is good.)

For the next stage, members of the Learning Circle can work together in pairs or small groups. Each pair or group should take responsibility for making a question sheet about the programme they have recorded. The questions shouldn't be too difficult – try to write questions which listeners can answer quite easily.

When the questions have been prepared, give them and the recording to a different group. Can they answer the questions? Do they think they are useful? When you are happy with the listening exercise you have written, write it out again as a 'good copy'. If you can, stick the exercise onto a piece of card. In this way, it can stay in good condition. Write the answers to the questions on the back of the card or exercise. Write the name and date of the programme on the card and on the cassette. In your Learning Circle, decide how you are going to use your Listening Library. Can members borrow cassettes to take home for a few days? How often are you going to add new programmes to the library?

**TIP:** You could lend your cassettes to the English teacher in your local school. That way, the school pupils will improve their listening skills and your Learning Circle can help your community.

### **PROJECT IDEA 2: LEARNING CIRCLE WALL MAGAZINE**

*The **product** of this project is a magazine or large poster which you can display on the wall of your meeting place.*

First, decide on the different sections of your magazine. Perhaps you would like to include book reviews, recipes or reviews of BBC World Service radio programmes? Make sure that each member of the Learning Circle chooses a topic to write about.

For the first 'draft' of the magazine, each member brings a copy of what she or he has written. Members work with a partner, reading each other's written work and making suggestions for how to improve it. Each writer then writes a second or final draft.

Working as a team, the Learning Circle then decides how to display the work. Does it need pictures or illustrations? Which magazine articles can be grouped together? When the magazine is ready, display it on the wall.

**TIP: If you study in a school or if there is a school in your town or village, why not offer to display your magazine there? That way, many people will be able to read it!**

**If you have a large number of members in your Learning Circle, why not organise teams of magazine writers? Each team can then take a turn to produce a new magazine.**

### **PROJECT IDEA 3: LEARNING CIRCLE LECTURES**

*Many listeners have told us that they invite speakers to give lectures to their Learning Circle members. This project, however, encourages Learning Circle members to go out and speak in English to other people in the community.*

In your Learning Circle, find out which members would be happy to give a short talk in English to a group of people. This might be to students in your local school or college, for example. Other members of the Learning Circle might be happy to help by making visual aids to illustrate the talk (e.g. pictures, drawings or diagrams).

Start by contacting your local school or college, or anywhere where people are studying English. Tell them about your Learning Circle and explain your project. Ask if they would like you to give a talk to their students.

Together, make a short list of topics which you could talk about. For example, you could talk about your hobby or about a journey you have made. You could even talk about BBC World Service programmes and what you have learnt from them!

Work in pairs or small groups to plan the talk. Remember that the talk doesn't have to be given by one person only. You could prepare a talk for two people to give.

When you feel confident with your talk, practise with your Learning Circle. Set aside a Learning Circle meeting for the talk, allowing time for questions at the end. After the talk has finished, ask the Learning Circle members to say what they liked about the talk, and to give some suggestions for improving it. You could also record the talk on a cassette recorder so the speakers can hear themselves later.

Setting up and running a Learning Circle

When you feel the talk is well prepared, contact the school or college where you are going to give the talk to make final arrangements. Try to make sure that some members of the Learning Circle can join you to provide the speakers with help and support.

**TIP: When they have given the talk, the speakers could write about it for the Learning Circle magazine.**

**PROJECT IDEA 4: TWINNING**

Set up a twin with a Learning Circle in another country and write to them. You can use project ideas 1-3 to work with your twin.

For more information on twinning, download the twinning guide @ [bbclearningenglish.com/radio/specials1311\\_worldsharing](http://bbclearningenglish.com/radio/specials1311_worldsharing)

### Using the internet to support your Learning Circle

The BBC World Service is an excellent source of listening material for learners of English. Radio programmes on subjects like music, news, science and business mean that there is something for everyone – and everyone can practise English by listening to interesting programmes.

However, the BBC World Service also provides interesting and exciting learning opportunities via its internet website ([www.bbclearningenglish.com](http://www.bbclearningenglish.com)). If you and other members of your Learning Circle have access to the internet, you can make use of a wide range of resources to help you learn and use English.

Here are 3 ways to use the internet to support your Learning Circle.

#### 1. IMPROVE YOUR SOUND QUALITY

In this booklet, we have recommended that you record some of your favourite programmes. However, what happens when the programme you want to record is on at an inconvenient time? The Learning English website has come to the rescue with a range of programmes which you can listen to. Not only do you have access to the programme when you need it, but you may be able to hear the programme again, wherever you have access to the web.

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## Learning Circles for Teachers

As teachers, we want to help our students learn to speak English well. However, actually getting students to use English with each other is a problem which is often difficult to overcome. How can we help students to recognise the importance of actually using English, and motivate them to do this in the classroom?

Many Learning Circles meet outside of lesson time – but there is no reason why teachers cannot use the underlying principles to help students become better learners inside the classroom too. By setting aside just a little classroom time to Learning Circle activities, you might find that your students become more motivated and begin to really communicate in English.

Don't forget that the internet can also help. For example, the Learning English website helps you to access a huge support network of teachers and language experts including lesson plans ([bbclearningenglish.com/newseenglish/witn/2005/10/051012\\_blatter.shtml](http://bbclearningenglish.com/newseenglish/witn/2005/10/051012_blatter.shtml)) and a place where you can chat with other teachers around the world.

### 5 TOP TIPS

#### LEARNING CIRCLES FOR TEACHERS



##### 1. Find class time

You may be motivated to help organise an out-of school Learning Circle for interested students. However, it is also possible to adopt the principles of the Learning Circle into your scheduled classes. You could begin by identifying one of your lessons per week as a 'club' lesson, with the students participating in the types of activities and projects described in this booklet, and with you taking the role of support rather than controller.

##### 2. Take time to explain the principles

The aim of a Learning Circle is to help learners become more independent. However, your students will need help in deciding how to organise their club. What types of activities can they do? Who is going to do what? Before you start a Learning Circle, talk with your students about the aims of a club like this to help them understand why it is a good idea.

##### 3. Think about regulations and routines

Like normal classroom lessons, Learning Circles need to have some rules and routines to help them to be successful. However, the most successful clubs are those in which the members feel they have some say in setting these rules and routines. By asking the club members to discuss and decide what they feel the club rules should be, you make sure that everyone has responsibility for ensuring the success of the Learning Circle.

##### 4. Provide guidance for decisions

Your students will need guidance on how to choose the best and most interesting types of tasks for the Learning Circle, and on how to approach them. In the initial meetings, it's a good idea to ask the participants to try out some activities to decide which they like and which they don't. If you are setting up larger projects, take time to ensure that the Learning Circle members all recognise and understand the stages which they need to go through to ensure that the project is successful.

##### 5. Share responsibility with your students

In the traditional classroom, the teacher is responsible for setting and for marking tasks. In a Learning Circle, group members create tasks for each other. For example, instead of the teacher selecting a reading text and setting comprehension questions, it's possible for the students in the Learning Circle to choose a text which they find interesting, then set questions on that text for others to answer. This helps the students to improve their own reading (or listening) skills – they have to be able to understand the text in order to set the questions – and helps them become more independent learners by asking them to select appropriate learning materials and tasks.