

# ESOL Qualifications and Curriculum Review

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## 1. The Bell Foundation

The Bell Foundation is a charity which aims to overcome exclusion through language education by working with partners on innovation, research, training and practical interventions. Through generating and applying evidence, we aim to change practice, policy and systems for children, adults and communities in the UK disadvantaged through language.

## 2. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to consult colleagues on English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) standards, delivery, and exams in the light of various Government policy announcements. The paper's expected audience is policymakers, regulators and standards setters working for the Department for Education (DfE), Ofqual and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) as well as funding bodies, and ESOL and further education and skills (FES) providers. Its purpose is threefold:

- To provide an overview of current ESOL qualifications and the curriculum, and to evaluate their impact on ESOL delivery, learners' progress and progression to further study and employment.
- To set out practical proposals, informed by research evidence, to improve ESOL methodology, standards, and qualifications. As recent DfE and Ofqual reviews indicate, the Skills for Life ESOL curriculum and qualifications are 20 years old and in need of revision.

- To put centre stage the extent to which ESOL provision meets the needs of employers, migrants, and refugees. Evidence shows that the latter can make a significant contribution to the economy and the UK labour market, provided they have sufficient language skills. This aligns well with adult learners' motivation to learn English in order to find work.

The structure of the paper is as follows:

- Section 3 sets out key facts on ESOL learners and provision.
- Sections 4-10 provide analysis of ESOL provision and evaluation of its impact on learners' progress and achievement as well as recommendations for improvement.

### 3. Key information on migrants and refugees, ESOL qualifications, and delivery

This section sets out key facts and data on migrant and refugee populations as well as on ESOL delivery. The information given in the box below underpins the content of the rest of this document.

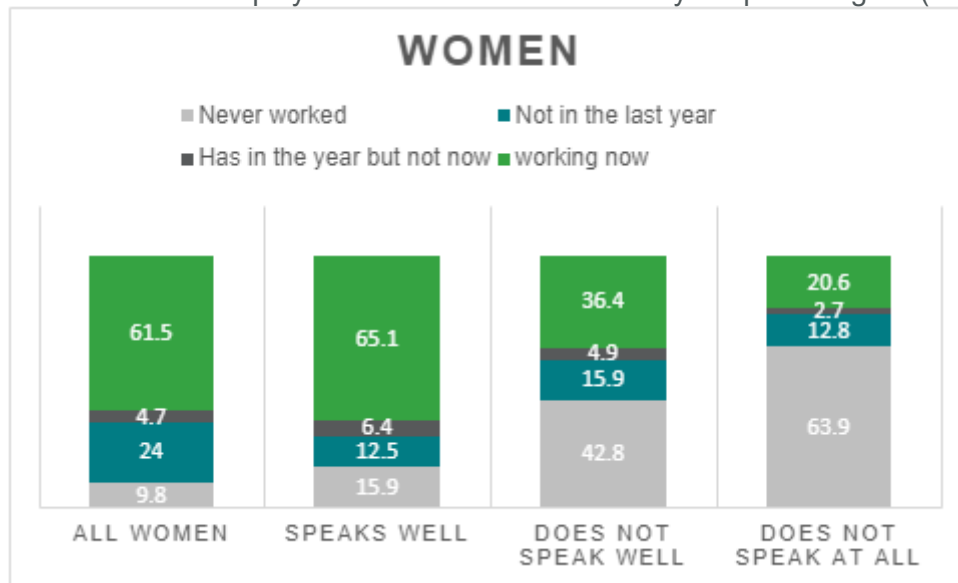
#### The profile of migrants and refugees

- Migrants' and refugees' language skills vary enormously, from no English to complete proficiency in professional domains. Their education, skills, and experience also vary, from no or little prior education in their home country to very high expertise indeed. The proportion of migrants with tertiary education is high and rising: in 2021, 50% were educated at tertiary level (compared to 39% of UK-born citizens)<sup>1</sup>; and the percentage of migrants with degrees increased by 8% in the decade leading up to 2020.
- According to the 2021 Census data for England and Wales, 5.1 million people self-identified as not having English as their first language: 2.7 million females and 2.4 million males. Of these, 77% of women and 83% of men indicate that they speak English well or very well; 19% of females and 15% of males that they do not speak English well; and 4% of females and 2% of males that they do not speak English at all. This indicates that **over 1 million, 621,000 females and 414,000 males, could not speak English well or at all**, a substantial increase from the 726,000 recorded in 2011. The Census data are self-reported and the number of adults needing language provision in England and Wales may in fact be much higher. There is also evidence that second and third generations born in the UK may lack sufficient English language skills to handle day-to-day communication and find employment beyond casual work<sup>2</sup>.
- The charts below correlate employment and self-declared ability to speak English. These show a clear link between language skills and employment/unemployment.

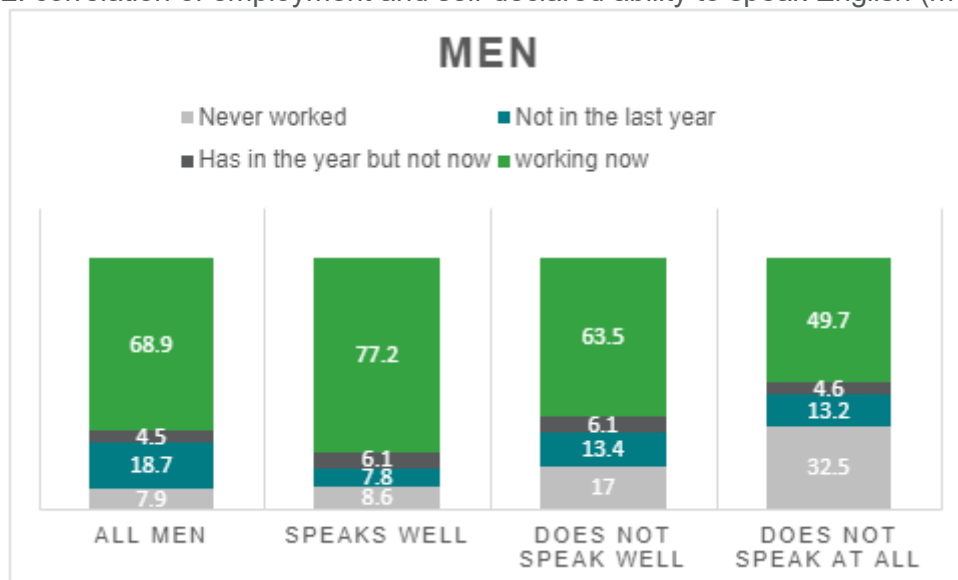
<sup>1</sup> OECD/European Commission (2023), *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en>.

<sup>2</sup> Schellekens, P. (2005) *Full on English*. Birmingham & Solihull LSC.

**Figure 1:** correlation of employment and self-declared ability to speak English (women).



**Figure 2:** correlation of employment and self-declared ability to speak English (men).



- The high level of skills and experience that migrants and refugees bring with them provides a huge economic dividend. But without sufficient English language skills, individuals are unable to unlock their considerable potential. Adult learners attending ESOL provision know this: their priority is language for work and study<sup>3</sup>.
- The vast majority of learners currently leave ESOL provision with language skills of a level too low to make a successful transition to further education and to function in society and in employment. We know anecdotally that many are unemployed and underemployed, working in jobs that are substantially below their educational levels, skills and experience.

<sup>3</sup> Schellekens, P. 2001 *English as a Barrier to Employment, Education and Training*. Sheffield, DWP 2001.

- Learners who did not have access to education in their home country need extra time to learn English. With adequate time to learn, many are able to overcome educational disadvantage. For this group of learners especially, evidence-based teaching and appropriate sequencing of content is key.

### ESOL provision, data on participation and funding

- ESOL provision has been very negatively affected by cuts in funding and eligibility since 2010. As a result, the number of enrolments has fallen dramatically by 36% from 179,000 to 114,000 between 2009/10 and 2017/18<sup>4</sup>. By contrast, the demand for ESOL provision has continued to grow and the need for a skilled labour force with proficiency in the English language is arguably greater than ever.
- The DfE table below shows ESOL enrolment and achievement for 2017/18 to 2021/22<sup>5</sup>.

**Figure 3:** ESOL enrolment and achievement, 2017/18 – 2021/22

		17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22
<b>Adults</b>	Enrolment	114,330	120,490	116,070	97,260	123,730
	Level 2	5,610	6,560	6,510	6,300	6,450
		5%	5%	6%	6%	5%
	Level 1	16,650	18,230	18,050	16,830	18,210
		15%	15%	16%	17%	15%
	Entry	96,190	100,130	95,580	78,920	104,130
		84%	83%	82%	81%	84%
	Achievement	100,150	106,170	99,410	84,770	107,030 <sup>6</sup>
<b>16-18</b>	Enrolment	No data collected				
	Achievement	No data collected				

Two aspects jump out: the vast majority of adult ESOL learners enrol on Entry 1-3 provision, after which numbers taper off markedly to 15% for Level 1 and 5% for Level 2. Secondly, it is not possible to report on the number of ESOL enrolments and achievements for 16–18-year-old learners because DfE data tables do not provide information on the number of young learners on study programmes<sup>7</sup>. We know anecdotally that many FE colleges have significant numbers of young learners on ESOL provision. From a policy point of view, it is of concern that the lack of enrolment and achievement data will have a negative impact on the planning for new initiatives e.g., the Advanced British Standard announced recently.

- Providers, teachers, and managers do their best to help ESOL learners learn English. However, the funding, tools, qualifications and, in particular, the hours available are not sufficient to enable learners to make the progress required to function in society and work. Canberra Technical and Further Education (TAFE) College data, subsequently

<sup>4</sup> DfE Data: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/a8472df2-41bd-4b22-4918-08dbb04c73a2>.

<sup>5</sup> The glossary at the end of this document provides an overview of the ESOL levels and a comparison to literacy and GCSE qualifications.

<sup>6</sup> Please note that the sum of adult participation at Entry, L1 and L2 is greater than the overall total of enrolments. This is because learners who attend provision at more than one level - most likely because they completed their course mid-year - are counted separately for each of the levels that they take.

<sup>7</sup> DfE data tables for young learners: [Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18 and A level and other 16 to 18 results](#) Last accessed 26 Oct 2023.

verified by the Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade in Australia, found that it takes on average 1765 hours for learners to gain independence and employment<sup>8</sup>. On the basis of **four hours' language lessons a week, the average adult learner would need 14.5 years to use English well enough** to get a job or attend a vocational course. A study by the National Center for ESL Literacy Education 2003<sup>9</sup> calculates that it takes 1000 hours to reach survival level, i.e., cope with basic daily interaction.

- Apart from DfE-published data on adult ESOL provision, no data are collected on ESOL learners on other further education and skills programmes, e.g., on enrolment and achievement of functional skills qualifications, on study programmes, vocational training/apprenticeships, and high needs. This means that neither Government departments, providers nor Ofsted have information on the vast majority of second language learners, their progress, retention, and achievement. Equally, pre-Entry and Entry 1-3 provision attracts the vast majority of the Adult Education Budget (AEB) and short-term project funding.
- Illegal migrants are not allowed to access state-funded programmes. Providers are obliged to check the eligibility of all learners who join ESOL classes to make sure that they are in the UK legitimately and are entitled to attend.
- Provision for learners who need to improve their English and maths skills is free for all; whereas access to ESOL provision is not. This is counterproductive in terms of long-term integration and employment prospects. It is also particularly unjust for those who have UK nationality. The 2021 Census data show that **out of 1,040,000 adults who reported that they cannot speak English well or at all, 35% have UK nationality.**
- The recently introduced Ofsted enhanced skills inspections have the potential to identify and monitor the skills development of learners beyond discrete ESOL as well as the contribution they make to meeting local, regional, and national skills needs. The recently introduced Local Skills Improvement Plans also provide an excellent opportunity to plan what language provision is required to make best use of second language speakers' skills and experience.

#### 4. Revision of the ESOL core curriculum and role of the National Standards for Adult Literacy

The DfE has recently announced that the adult ESOL curriculum is to be reviewed. This is welcome as the curriculum is 20 years old, its linguistic framework is out of date and no longer in line with research evidence on second language acquisition. Instances abound of inaccurate sequencing of language development, one of the key tenets of the Ofsted Education Inspection Framework<sup>10</sup>, and well-attested aspects of language learning are missing, for example, vocabulary and listening skills, which are covered below. This misalignment has resulted in a negative impact on the quality of teaching and learning and

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<sup>8</sup> Schellekens, P. (2001) *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> National Center for ESL Literacy Education 2003. *Adult English Language Instruction in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Washington DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

<sup>10</sup> Ofsted (2019) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-handbook-eif>

the progress that learners make. As a result, the funds for ESOL provision are not spent as effectively as they could be.

**Figure 4:** language competence and the four language skills.



Even more crucially, the ESOL curriculum is based on the National Standards for Adult Literacy. This imposes learning objectives designed for first language speakers, who are fluent in English but need help with reading and writing, on ESOL learners who lack the underpinning language competence to communicate in English (see figure 4). Second language speakers need to learn how the English language works, e.g., in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, as well as how English is expressed in the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Schellekens (2012) sets out in detail the differences between the language profiles and learning needs of first and second language speakers<sup>11</sup>.

The imposition of the literacy standards on the ESOL core curriculum and provision has had a detrimental effect on quality. **Government spending is not being used effectively or efficiently** because too much time is being taken to meet first language speakers' goals which are not relevant to the learning of a new language. For example, the Functional Skills English reading curriculum has a strong focus on recognising text genre, when second language speakers are likely to need help with underpinning skills such as understanding vocabulary, and the meaning of tenses such as the present perfect/past: "I have lived/lived in the UK", or the passive voice: "the form should be returned".

The lack of rigour in standards setting has also allowed too much variability between awarding bodies' exams. As the recent Ofqual study on ESOL exams<sup>12</sup> indicates, the result has been an insufficiently robust framework to ensure parity of qualifications and levels between awarding bodies. The Ofqual study also provides evidence that the level of language demand across the ESOL levels is not evenly calibrated. This confirms concerns in the ESOL community that the learning load of the levels and qualifications is inconsistent,

<sup>11</sup> Schellekens, P. (2011) *Teaching and Testing the Language Skills of First and Second Language Speakers* Cambridge ESOL.

<sup>12</sup> Ofqual (2022) [Understanding ESOL Skills for Life qualifications](#)

which in turn has had a major impact on enrolment and achievement rates. Ofqual is to be commended for undertaking this work and for planning further steps to address inconsistencies in the ESOL qualifications framework.

### Recommendations for development

The DfE has committed to a review of the ESOL core curriculum. Below is a summary of key research-evidenced language learning priorities to achieve effective ESOL delivery, standards, and exams:

- Independent ESOL standards and curriculum, aligned to evidence-based second language learning principles. They should reflect the learning trajectory of people who learn English as an additional language, and provide an effective road map for teachers to plan and deliver relevant learning, and for awarding bodies to set valid and reliable exams.
- Use the results of the 2022 Ofqual ESOL study and any further work undertaken to calibrate the learning content across the ESOL levels equally, so that learners and providers are not disadvantaged from enrolling and achieving on courses with overly heavy learning loads.
- A focus on the development of **listening** skills beyond teaching comprehension. This should cover lexical segmentation, i.e. the ability of learners to decode and understand the stream of sound in spoken English. Without explicit instruction on intonation and stress, and the way that words are linked in spoken language, learners struggle to learn to understand spoken English and many never do so to a functional degree. Listening skills are in turn the essential cornerstone from which to develop speaking, reading and writing, vocabulary development and grammar<sup>13</sup>.
- The inclusion and foregrounding of **vocabulary** development. While this aspect has risen in importance in linguistics research in the last 40 years<sup>14</sup>, it is lacking both in the ESOL core curriculum and in the NLS. Research indicates that vocabulary development is key to oral communication and the reading and writing skills for *both* first and second language speakers<sup>15</sup>. Vocabulary size has also proved to be predictive of general levels of language. Vocabulary testing in ESOL exams would hence add a valuable tool to reliable assessment outcomes.
- For most beginner learners, teaching **literacy skills** comes too early, at Entry 1, in the ESOL core curriculum. Research indicates that learners need sufficient vocabulary, listening and speaking skills before reading and writing can be meaningfully introduced<sup>16</sup>. The review of the ESOL core curriculum should take this research into account and plan at which point the teaching of reading and then writing should be introduced.
- The skills of **reading for gist and skimming** feature heavily in the NLS and the ESOL core curriculum from Entry 1 onwards<sup>17</sup>. Yet there is much research evidence that

<sup>13</sup> Field, J (2003) *ELTJ* and Field, J. (2008) *Listening in the English Classroom*, CUP.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Nation, Carter and McCarthy, English profiles: <https://www.englishprofile.org> and <https://www.englishprofile.org/wordlists/evp>

<sup>15</sup> Quigley, A. (2018) *Closing the Vocabulary Gap*. Routledge.

<sup>16</sup> Grabe, W. (2009) *Reading in a Second Language*. CUP.

<sup>17</sup> Schellekens, P. (2011) *Teaching and Testing the Language Skills of First and Second Language Speakers* Cambridge ESOL.

these types of reading are beyond the capacity of learners at Entry 1-3 and indeed Level 1. This is because learners need almost total vocabulary and reading fluency to skim text and read for gist. For example, readers need knowledge of 95% of words to understand text<sup>18</sup>, a finding which applies to first and second language speakers alike.

The application of the linguistic concepts outlined above can be expected to bring improved standards and exams as well as positive washback into the classroom, i.e. a much more positive impact of standards and curriculum on the quality of learning and achievement than is currently the case. This will also result in better use of Government funding and help learners' motivation because they will make better and faster progress.

#### 4.1 The focus on language for work and study

The ESOL core curriculum currently focuses almost exclusively on language for survival, e.g., home and family, shopping, the use of public services and health care. While this coverage is useful, especially in the early stages of settlement, it is not enough. In more recent years, the focus of Government policy has shifted to adult learners' employment prospects as well as participation in life in modern Britain. Consistency with Government policy is crucial, not least because it aligns well with the aspirations of learners themselves. There is no recent research on the reasons why learners join ESOL provision but Schellekens (2001) showed that overwhelmingly adult learners' priority was to improve language for work and study<sup>19</sup> and to be financially independent.

##### Recommendations for development

- Update the content of the core curriculum to include **language for work**, especially from Entry 3 onwards. For example, the appropriate use of formal and informal language in the workplace, both in speaking and writing; strategies such as asking for clarification and repetition; writing a brief report; and understanding health and safety regulations.
- Build targeted language development for learners with **prior skills and experience** into the ESOL standards and curriculum. For example, local Skills Development Plans may provide useful information to establish local, national, and regional skills needs and employment trends.
- Incorporate **language for study** into the ESOL standards and core curriculum. Many learners aspire to progress to mainstream<sup>20</sup> provision, such as health and social care, engineering and construction, IT and childcare. Others need to take GCSEs to (re)qualify as nurses and social workers. Both adults on discrete ESOL provision and 16–19-year-old learners on study programmes need explicit instruction on language

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<sup>18</sup> Nation, I. S.P. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weir, C and Khalifa, H (2008a). 'A cognitive processing approach towards defining reading comprehension'. *Research Notes 31*. Cambridge: Cambridge ESOL.

Weir, C and Khalifa, H (2008b). 'Applying a cognitive processing model to main suite reading papers'. *Research Notes 31*. Cambridge: Cambridge ESOL.

<sup>19</sup> Schellekens, P. (2001) *English as a barrier to Employment, Education & Training*, DWP: Sheffield.

<sup>20</sup> The term 'mainstream' provision is commonly used to refer to general vocational and educational courses.



for study, so that they are able to make a successful transition out of discrete ESOL to vocational/educational courses.

- Establish the language levels and types of skills required for entry to mainstream provision (for examples of courses, see the previous bullet point), and feed these into the ESOL standards and curriculum review.
- Ensure that Ofsted includes in its enhanced inspections a focus on the extent to which discrete ESOL and progression to mainstream provision meets the needs of employers and second language speakers.

## 5. Learners' ability to function independently and progress to further education and employment

Since 2001, when the Skills for Life strategy was launched, Government policy has increasingly become focused on the delivery of ESOL provision at beginner levels. As DfE data in section 3 show, the vast majority of learners leave ESOL provision with Entry 1-3 qualifications.

Currently, learners who have passed Entry 3 are deemed to have sufficient language skills to make the transition to mainstream provision. However, the fact that many learners struggle and drop out indicates that this language level is not sufficient. Entry 3 is too low for learners to make a successful transition to mainstream education and training, e.g., health and social care, motor vehicle maintenance, engineering, or business administration courses. This is because learners of ESOL experience language overload, such as understanding teaching input and course content which, after all, keeps first language English speakers on their toes. Writing assignments puts even higher demands on the learners. The sector lacks data on retention but anecdotal evidence indicates that many ESOL learners drop out at an early stage, because they lack the necessary language skills to cope with course content.

Equally, adults who leave ESOL provision are not able to communicate sufficiently well in day-to-day situations, e.g., talk to their children's teacher or understand information given during a doctor's appointment.

### **Recommendations for development**

- Abandon the de-facto approach to set ESOL Entry 3 as sufficient to transfer to mainstream vocational/education provision and employment; and raise it to a sufficient level that enables second language speakers to cope with the language load of their vocational and educational course. This will vary from course to course, depending on their language demands.
- Awarding bodies, employers and providers - in consultation with Ofqual and IfATE - to assess the language load of mainstream vocational and education courses, such as catering, IT, and GCSEs in order to create language profiles which describe the minimum levels of English required for a successful transition from ESOL to mainstream provision. This is likely to be at ESOL Level 1 or 2 or even higher, e.g., courses in childcare, counselling, business administration, teacher training, and Access Courses to HE, which have high language demands.

- Since it is highly likely that the language load of a good proportion of vocational and educational courses exceeds both GCSE English and Level 2 ESOL, policymakers should consider the need for a Level 3 ESOL qualification.

## 6. Advice and guidance and Functional Skills English

In recent years, the number of ESOL learners who move from ESOL Entry 3 to Functional Skills (FS) English Level 1 has risen dramatically. Providers state as the main reason for the shift to FS English that it attracts more generous funding and that it is free to all learners; whereas many learners on ESOL provision have to pay. Many managers and teachers also perceive FS English to be more appropriate than Levels 1 and 2 ESOL. This view is not borne out by experience in the classroom, however. Both teachers and learners struggle with FS English content because it was created for learners who speak English as their first language. This puts pressure on English language teachers who do not have the skills to teach English as an additional language and do not necessarily teach it well as a result. Nor is there focus and time to work on language-specific aspects such as grammar, pronunciation etc., set out in section 4.

The Education and Training Foundation (ETF) commissioned research on the suitability of FS English for ESOL learners in 2021<sup>21</sup>. Over 110 providers responded, and the key findings were:

1. Learners of ESOL made up more than 60% of learners on FS English courses for over a quarter of providers. This was especially the case for 16–19-year-olds on study programmes. This means that in many colleges there are more learners of ESOL on FS English provision than there are first language speakers.
2. Respondents expressed concern that FS English courses do not meet the needs of people whose first language is not English. This is in line with Schellekens 2012 study on the needs of ESOL learners and the suitability of the FS English<sup>22</sup> curriculum.
3. Participants reported that FS English teachers do not have the skills to teach learners of ESOL and, as a result, learners do not make the progress of which they are capable.

The ETF ESOL-Functional Skills English responses confirm that FS English does not align at all well with the needs of learners whose first language is not English. But this does not just affect ESOL students: FS English delivery to mixed first and second language speaker groups has a negative impact on the learning opportunities for first language speakers as well. This is because teaching classes of mixed first and second language speakers is especially taxing, with a constant conflict of differing priorities.

### Recommendations for development

- A different Further Education and Skills funding model is needed to ensure that providers offer provision that is appropriate for the ESOL learner and their goals. The aim should be to enable learners of ESOL to make good progress which results in access employment and further study opportunities as effectively as possible. Unless

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<sup>21</sup> [Participation of ESOL learners on Functional Skills \(FS\) English courses](#)

<sup>22</sup> Schellekens, P. *Teaching and Testing the Skills of First and Second Language Speakers*. Cambridge Assessment 2011.

there is a clear indication to the contrary, ESOL rather than FS English provision should be the option of choice.

- Providers should apply the Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) principles and the Gatsby benchmarks<sup>23</sup> used in the sector to learners on ESOL provision. They should establish learners' existing skills and experience, and their short and long-term aspirations as well as provide in-depth advice and guidance on how learners of ESOL might achieve their goals. This should include explicit and realistic guidance on the likely level of language skills needed, as well as the best course options available. As a result of CEIAG, learners should understand the options available to them, including the levels of language they will need to operate in their chosen sector.
- Ofsted should check that providers apply the CEIAG principles and Gatsby benchmarks to learners whose first language is not English; and that learners have a good understanding of their career options and progression routes.

## 7. Data on learners of ESOL

As we saw in sections 3 and 5, data on ESOL are limited to the DfE's annual data returns on discrete adult provision. This means that Government departments, providers, teachers and their managers as well as Ofsted have no idea how many second language speakers are on FES mainstream vocational and educational programmes. This includes study programmes, functional skills and GCSE English and maths, vocational training, apprenticeships, A' levels, and high needs provision for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. As a result, the sector does not know how many enrol and how they fare once on a programme, how many drop out and at what stage, and how well they achieve.

This is a major issue as the number of second language speakers on FES provision is considerable. For example, further education colleges in metropolitan areas have stated that the number of second language speakers on programme is over 50%. But rural areas often also have higher numbers of second language speakers than one might expect, because of resettlement programmes, accommodation scarcity and cost in major cities, or because second language speakers work for local employers, e.g., in hospitality, agriculture or manufacturing.

There is another longstanding phenomenon for which no data, only anecdotal evidence, are available: men are vastly underrepresented on adult post-19 provision, with typically 70-80% of adult ESOL learners identified as female. The FES sector needs data to identify and investigate causes and plan improvements, so that provision can be targeted equitably and the impact of initiatives to improve can be monitored.

### Recommendations for development

- The rationale is clear: the DfE, funding bodies, leaders and managers, and Ofsted need to know how many second language speakers enrol on FES provision and how well they achieve across all provision types. Data collection on the needs and levels of proficiency of ESOL learners must be a priority for action. This information is key to understanding the size and nature of the ESOL target group and its progression across

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk>

different provision types; and to informing course provision and monitoring of impact at sector, provision type and local provider level.

- The DfE and ESFA should add an additional field marker to the **individualised learning record (ILR)** which identifies learners whose first language is not English across the learning journey, from discrete ESOL to vocational/apprenticeships and educational courses.
- Once the ESOL ILR marker has been introduced, providers should use enrolment and outcome data to monitor impact on learning and learners' progress, and to inform course planning and quality improvement.

## 8. The capacity of the sector to assess and teach effectively

While ESOL teachers support their learners to the best of their ability, an out-of-date ESOL core curriculum and exams have affected the quality of teaching, assessment and subject-specific knowledge and skills. This means that there is work to do to upskill the teaching workforce.

In addition, the long-term funding focus on learners who are at the beginner stages of English language learning has had an impact on the capacity of many teachers to teach the higher levels of English required to achieve ESOL Levels 1 and 2. And last, initial and in-service training have lacked focus on the assessment of learners' language skills as key to the planning and monitoring of learning.

### Recommendations for development

- Improve teachers' assessment skills across the learning cycle, from initial and diagnostic to on-course and final assessment, with the last aspect especially relevant when learners' progress is not externally assessed and validated. The target should be assessment outcomes with sufficient quality and depth to enable effective planning of learning and the monitoring of progress.
- Design and implement staff training and teaching practice that is informed by sound, evidence-based research and strategies to promote effective learning across all levels of learning, with a particular focus on higher level ESOL beyond Entry 3.
- Develop the capacity of teachers to provide appropriate stretch and challenge in lessons and ensuring that learners make the progress of which they are capable.
- Develop teachers' capacity to incorporate vocational training and work content into discrete ESOL course planning and delivery.

## 9. The economic argument for ESOL provision

Funding for ESOL provision has been a key consideration for both policy makers and ESOL providers. However, it is not the only financial factor to be considered. As stated in sections 4.1 and 5, learners need to have sufficient language skills to find employment. Once in work, they can be expected to pay tax and to need fewer or no benefits. Being in work also

promotes wellbeing and integration into society. From an employer point of view, second language speakers are a valuable source of labour, especially considering the high level of prior qualifications and skills that so many have. However, without sufficient English, migrants and refugees are likely to remain un- or under- employed and to require long-term financial support through benefits.

The Bell Foundation has commissioned a cost-benefit analysis to quantify the return on the cost of providing language provision against the cost of providing state benefits to second language speakers, such as unemployment benefit, housing and council tax support. This report will be published under separate cover. The Bell Foundation research will also investigate the positive impact of learners' conversion to employed status in terms of taxes paid and independence from state benefits.

## 10. The need for a national policy and strategy

In the last two decades, political parties, think tanks and a multitude of reports have explored the nature of ESOL support for recent refugee and migrant arrivals as well as those communities which have been resident in the UK for many years<sup>24</sup>. They have called for investment in ESOL and a national strategy. However, the reality has been very different. ESOL policy, strategy and funding have lacked clarity and direction and have been characterised by stop/start initiatives, cuts in the overall amount of funding and changes to eligibility criteria and multiple funding streams. This has resulted in an overall lack of coherence and central direction. While responsibility for the delivery of ESOL is increasingly decided at a local and regional level, there needs to be an overarching strategy, vision, and plan for the future of ESOL provision and delivery based on both need and data at local, regional and national level.

### Recommendations for development

- Produce and implement an ESOL policy which sets out the vision and plan for the delivery of ESOL in England. Cross-government coordination is especially key considering the very many organisations involved with aspects such as policy, standards, qualifications, delivery, funding, examinations, teacher training, audit and inspection. The policy should incorporate Ofsted's enhanced skills agenda and the promotion of community cohesion.
- Use national policy to ensure that funding for ESOL and the time allocated to language learning are spent effectively. Of primary importance is the need for the policy and implementation to be **informed by research evidence on adult second language acquisition**.
- Establish criteria with the sector to assess and monitor the impact of ESOL provision on learning, achievement, and progression to mainstream provision and employment.

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<sup>24</sup> For example, Kone, Z. et. al (2019) *Refugees and the UK Labour Market*. Oxford: Compas. <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2019/refugees-and-the-uk-labour-market>;  
Pager, A and Stevenson N. (2014) *On Speaking Terms* London: Demos <https://demos.co.uk/research/on-speaking-terms>

## **Annex 1 - abbreviations and glossary**

### **AEB: Adult Education Budget**

The aim of the Adult Education Budget is to provide learners aged 19 and over with the skills and learning they need to progress into work or improve their skills while at work. The AEB budget funds the vast majority of discrete ESOL provision.

### **CEIAG: Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance**

The aim of CEIAG is to provide learners with the knowledge, understanding, confidence and skills that they need to make informed choices and plans for their future learning and career. Appropriate advice and guidance is especially relevant to learners who come to settle in the UK, as they may not be familiar with education and training practice and choices in the UK, the process of applying for jobs and job interviews, and how best to use prior qualifications and experience when applying for jobs. The Gatsby Benchmarks provide a useful framework to underpin quality CEIAG, <https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk>.

### **ESFA: Education and Skills Funding Agency**

The ESFA is an executive agency sponsored by the DfE. It allocates and monitors the use of funding to academy trusts, local authorities, colleges and training providers for the education and training of children, young people, and adults.

### **Discrete ESOL**

ESOL classes which form the main learning aim for learners. For ESOL this is to develop English language skills; as distinct from language learning which is embedded into another subject, such as plumbing, childcare and GCSE.

### **ESOL: English for Speakers of Other Languages**

The term ESOL refers to the teaching of English to adult learners whose first language is not English and who are resident in the UK. English as an Additional Language (EAL) is used for pupils who are in primary or secondary school education. Please note that if 16-18 provision is delivered by schools it is classified as EAL; if delivered in further education, adult, sixth form colleges, apprenticeships etc., it is classified as ESOL.

### **DfE: Department for Education**

Government department in England responsible for children's and learners' education and services, including early years, schools, further and higher education, apprenticeships, and wider skills.

### **ESL: English as a second or additional language**

This refers to individuals who have had exposure to a language or languages other than English from birth and have developed or are developing ability in English later in life.

### **ESOL core curriculum**

The Adult ESOL curriculum was published in 2001 as part of the Skills for Life strategy. It was derived from the National Standards for Adult Literacy and sets out the skills and knowledge that adult learners need to learn to demonstrate achievement and teachers to plan programmes of learning. The ESOL core curriculum was subsequently adopted as the base for the design of ESOL qualifications.

### **ESOL levels**

There are five levels of ESOL Skills for Life qualifications: Entry 1, 2, 3 and Levels 1 and 2. Learners enrolling for Entry 1 ESOL are at the very basic beginner level, quite often with limited language beyond being able to say their name and 'yes/no' and 'thank you'. At Entry 3, learners have basic language skills but are not consistent in the use of e.g., the past tense 'I worked', often slipping into the present 'I work'. While officially Level 1 ESOL equates to

Functional Skills English Level 1 and GCSE English Grade 4, in reality the language skills of ESOL Level 1 are well below. Similarly, ESOL Level 2 is far below the GCSE high grades to which it is officially equated. The recent Ofqual 2022 study Understanding ESOL Skills for Life qualifications supports the finding that the skills levels from Entry 3 onwards are out of line.

### **FE/FES: Further Education/Further Education and Skills**

Further Education (and Skills) is the term used to describe provision for adult learners, i.e., those who are 16 or older. Learners attend from pre-Entry to mostly Level 3 provision, e.g., functional skills and GCSE English and maths, hairdressing, FES providers consist of further education, adult education, independent training and third sector providers. There are four provision types: education programmes for young people (formerly known as study programmes), adult learning programmes, apprenticeships and provision for learners with high needs. People with non-English speaking backgrounds are found on all provision types.

### **FS English: Functional Skills English**

The aim of the functional skills qualifications is to help learners develop essential English which equips them with the practical skills and knowledge required in their working and personal lives. Functional Skills English is designed to develop the skills of learners whose first language is English. It covers three modes: reading, writing, and speaking, listening and communicating; and exams are offered at five levels: Entry 1-3 and Levels 1 and 2.

### **IfATE: Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education**

IfATE is a government-funded department which develops, reviews and updates standards and qualifications for apprenticeships and technical qualifications. The aim is for development to be employer-led, high quality, well-assessed and responsive to employer needs.

### **ILR: Individualised Learner Record**

Further Education and Skills providers are required to collect annual Individualised Learner Records for all state-funded adult learners. The ILR charts information on learners, their starting points and learning outcomes. Providers and the ESFA use ILR information on learner outcomes to monitor the quality of the provision and progress against government targets, as well as to monitor and calculate funding earned.

### **LSIP: Local Skills Improvement Plan**

An employer-led plan which matches employer needs and training provision, with a view to identifying and maximising employment and training opportunities. Employer representative bodies are responsible for developing the plan for a specified area, drawing on the views of employers and identifying actions that providers can take to deliver technical education and training to meet local regional and national skills needs.

### **Mainstream provision**

The term used to describe vocational and educational courses which form the main learning aim for learners, e.g., GCSEs, engineering, IT, customer service, etc.

### **Ofqual: Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation**

Ofqual is a non-ministerial department which regulates qualifications, examinations, and assessments in England.

### **Ofsted: Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills.**

Government department which inspects schools and providers offering education and skills training.

**Ofsted EIF: Education Inspection Framework**

The Education Inspection Framework sets out Ofsted's inspection principles and the main judgements that inspectors make.

**Skills for Life Strategy**

The Skills for Life Strategy was launched in March 2001, with as its aim to improve adult literacy, language (ESOL), and numeracy skills in England.

**Study programmes**

A full-time FES programme of learning offered to 16–18-year-old learners. The content depends on the skills and aspirations of the young learner and can include A' levels, GCSE resits in English and maths, ESOL, BTECs, Cambridge Technicals, and T-levels.



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