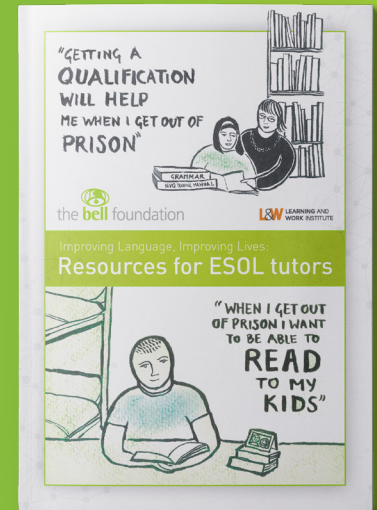


IMPROVING LANGUAGE, IMPROVING LIVES: Supporting ESOL in the Secure Estate



Introduction

The Bell Foundation's Criminal Justice Programme launched in 2015. The programme seeks to break down the language barrier to accessing justice and rehabilitation for people in contact with the criminal justice system for whom English is an additional language.

Despite the impact that poor English language proficiency can have on people's experience in prison and on their potential for rehabilitation, *early research*¹ commissioned by The Bell Foundation highlighted the lack of data on this issue in the secure estate. Often, there is little awareness of the needs of prisoners who have English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) needs², or understanding about what additional support should be provided.

In response to these challenges, the Foundation commissioned the *Improving Language, Improving Lives* project to enhance ESOL screening and delivery in prisons across England, under the Foundation's *Language for Change* grants programme. The project ran for three years from 2016 to 2018 and was delivered by Learning and Work Institute (L&W) in partnership with De Montfort University (DMU).

Working with prisons and community organisations, the project aimed to:

- Develop, pilot and evaluate ESOL delivery based on *L&W's Citizens' Curriculum model* in prison learning and community rehabilitation settings, including resources to support this.
- Develop, pilot and evaluate an English language screening tool for use in prisons and probation settings by staff who are not ESOL specialists.

This short report highlights the impact of the resources created as part of the project and makes recommendations for the future delivery of ESOL in the secure estate. The following sections provide further information on:

- Scoping the scale of ESOL need and provision in the secure estate
- The ESOL screening tool
- *Improving Language, Improving Lives: Resources for ESOL tutors*
- Key recommendations for prison education providers, prison staff and policy makers

¹ <https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/language-for-change/language-change-programme/>

² Meaning prisoners whose competency in English is below Level 2

Scoping the scale of ESOL need and provision in the secure estate

In order to develop a more detailed picture of the scale of ESOL needs in prisons, and to understand current practice in prisons, L&W and DMU carried out a scoping exercise in 2016. This included a desk-based evidence review and interviews with Heads of Learning, Skills and Employment (HOLSE), education managers, and three ESOL tutors in prisons.

The scoping exercise concluded that:

- There is very limited information about the nature and scale of ESOL need in prisons, as there are no national figures for the number of people in prison with ESOL needs, making it difficult to plan provision for this group.³
- National data shows that a higher than average proportion of people in prison have relatively low literacy and numeracy skills, compared to the general population. The proportion of adults in the general population who have literacy at Level 1 or Level 2 is 85%, whereas in prison this is only 45.8%⁴. But there is no equivalent data on those people in prison who have limited proficiency in English or no ability to communicate in English.
- Some ESOL learning needs may be met through literacy provision such as Functional Skills English courses. In other cases, specific ESOL needs may not be met by such provision which requires knowledge of grammar and vocabulary that many learners with an ESOL need do not have.



Image: Learning and Work Institute

- There is no consistent approach to ESOL screening⁵, with practitioners reporting a range of practices that were not considered effective. For example, the assessments used to assess literacy skills are often reported to be unsuited to prisoners with an ESOL need.
- There are no estimates for the scale of ESOL need in the prison estate. It cannot be estimated by the number of foreign national prisoners (FNPs) at about 11% of overall population⁶, as it assumes that all FNPs are not English speakers which is not the case. It may also exclude unidentified ESOL need and ESOL need being catered to by alternative literacy courses, due in part to poor screening. Additionally, there may be British citizens in prison who have English as an additional language and have an ESOL need.
- Learners with an ESOL need have wide ranging previous educational experiences and backgrounds. This means that ESOL learners' language proficiency levels and learning needs may vary widely, beyond simply 'no language'.⁷
- HOLSE, education managers and tutors consulted during the scoping review reported a lack of capacity in ESOL provision, with demand often outstripping supply. Therefore, the real scale of ESOL need may, in fact, be greater than indicated.
- Participants in the scoping review also highlighted implications for safety in prisons, for example if prisoners cannot understand instructions or read information given to them. This further highlights the importance of identifying prisoners with ESOL needs, and ensuring that prison staff know which prisoners do not speak or understand English well.

3 Carroll, C., Hurry, J., and Wilson, A. (2015) *A Prison within a Prison: The provision of ESOL education and training for prisoners and ex-prisoners*. The Bell Foundation. https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/A_Prison_within_a_Prison.pdf

4 Source: SFA (2015) *OLASS English and Maths Assessment: Participation 2014/15*. Data for the general adult population taken from the 2011 Skills for Life Survey.

5 Ibid

6 Sturge, G (2019, p. 9) *UK Prison Population Statistics: Briefing Paper*, 23 July 2019. House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN04334#fullreport>

7 Carroll, C., Hurry, J., and Wilson, A. (2015) *A Prison within a Prison: The provision of ESOL education and training for prisoners and ex-prisoners*. The Bell Foundation. https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/A_Prison_within_a_Prison.pdf

The English Language Screening Tool

As highlighted in the scoping exercise conducted by L&W and DMU in 2016, it is clear that more needs to be done to obtain a clear and accurate picture of the scale of ESOL needs across the secure estate. The project partners therefore developed a screening tool to facilitate a consistent, robust approach to identifying people with ESOL needs in prisons, and in community organisations who work with recently released prisoners.

The screening tool has been designed to be used by prison staff who are neither education nor ESOL specialists to identify prisoners who may have ESOL needs. It focuses on speaking and listening skills, and takes the form of a five-minute 'guided interview'. It has been designed to be straightforward to use, with the aim of encouraging people to demonstrate what they can understand and say.

THE TOOL ...

... provides a resource that can be easily embedded within existing systems to support a consistent approach to screening all new arrivals, potentially allowing systematic recording of ESOL needs across the secure estate.

... raises awareness of ESOL needs, and develops skills in identifying them, amongst non-specialist staff such as prison officers working on reception and on the wing.

... is suitable for support staff and volunteers, such as peer learning mentors, to use, supporting referrals into ESOL provision from a range of sources.

Development and Dissemination

The tool has been tested by four prisons and two community organisations, with further feedback obtained from ESOL practitioners. With support from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), it was circulated to all 25 regional Heads of Learning, Skills and Employment in England, and is currently in use in some prisons across the country.

Evaluation activities were conducted following a session that aimed to provide ESOL and education specialists with an introduction to the tool and equip them with materials needed to train non-specialist staff how to use the tool. Findings show that all participants felt 'quite' or 'very confident' in their ability to deliver a training session on language awareness and on using the tool with their colleagues.

HMP Isle of Wight

HMP Isle of Wight was a pilot site for the screening tool. The prison saw the tool as serving a two-fold purpose:

- To reduce the gap between people arriving at the prison and accessing an initial assessment by screening on first arrival
- To include a focus on speaking and listening skills, rather than just reading and writing skills

Having attended a “Train the Trainer” session, the deputy Offender Learning & Skills Service (OLASS) education manager shared the screening tool with reception and induction officers who are now using the tool. They also trained one Peer Learning Mentor (PLM) to use the screening tool, who in turn trained a fellow PLM. The PLMs now use the tool on the wing, prior to induction, with anyone who the induction officer is concerned may not have English as their first language. Based on the screening score, the PLM puts in an application for the individual to access ESOL provision, or wider support, such as from Shannon Trust’s *Turning Pages* programme. Once enrolled in education, the ESOL tutor provides feedback to the PLM on the learner’s identified level and their performance in class which helps the PLMs to screen effectively.

‘It’s been far more useful than I anticipated, because the initial assessments cover reading and writing, and this screening tool is now covering speaking and listening too. So, it’s helping us as a signpost so that the learners can be referred and can receive help much more quickly than they were doing so previously’ (Deputy Education Manager)

The ESOL tutor also uses the tool when learners first arrive at the ESOL class as they find it provides a useful guide to whether they need some preliminary support before they can engage on a course.

PLMs reported that since implementing the tool, approximately 20 more people have been identified as having an ESOL need. They felt that screening potential ESOL learners prior to induction is effective as it prioritises new arrivals’ access to

education. If this is not possible, due to limited places on ESOL courses, it maximises their opportunity to enrol in a workshop, or be placed with a buddy, such as someone who speaks the same language. These activities form part of their progression plan. Overall, it provides them with access to support which encourages their engagement in the prison community more quickly than before.

‘Through the screening tool, we’ve been able to buddy [individuals identified as having an ESOL need] up, mentor them, and make sure that they receive help much sooner than they would have ordinarily... this ‘diagnostic’ will save a lot of time and wasted effort, as so many potential ESOL learners slip through the net in the early stages of arriving in prison’ (Deputy Education Manager)

The PLMs noted that new arrivals may be worried or concerned during the screening. Therefore, taking an informal, friendly approach is important as it puts them at ease. They felt the tool lends itself well to this approach given the relevance and familiarity of the questions to the individual’s own experiences.

The simplicity of the tool also has practical benefits, such as saving time. Having a structured approach to initial screening was also valued, as previous methods tended to involve a general conversation or picture-based activity, which were helpful but not necessarily consistent between learners.

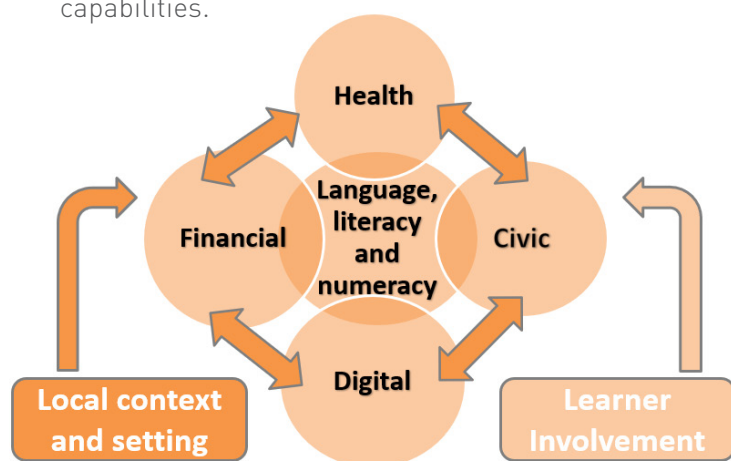
Given its ease of use and the benefits of using the tool for new arrivals, they are planning to roll the tool out at their sister prison.

To hear more about how the tool is being used at HMP Isle of Wight, and how it has helped meet their learners’ needs visit: <http://bit.ly/ESOLscreen>

Improving Language, Improving Lives: Resources for ESOL Tutors

The acute need for ESOL teaching and learning resources, and for ESOL specific professional learning and development for ESOL tutors who work in the secure estate, was identified in the first year of the project. The project decided to use the L&W Citizens' Curriculum to inspire a range of professional development days and training for tutors, and the development of a pack of ESOL teaching and learning materials tailored to the prison context.

L&W's Citizens' Curriculum describes a locally-led model of learning, developed with the active participation of learners, and interlinking the life skills of English language, literacy and numeracy with wider health, financial, digital and civic capabilities.



In community settings, L&W's *Citizens' Curriculum pilots*⁸ found that adopting a Citizens' Curriculum approach to provision resulted in more relevant learning, provided fresh ways to think about and develop curriculum content through co-creation with learners themselves, and contributed to the development of practitioners' skills to work in this way. Most importantly, learners reported improved attitudes to learning, work and increases in self-esteem and confidence which in turn allowed them to access local support services and opportunities. This model was therefore considered relevant in the context of the secure estate, in that these outcomes would also be beneficial to learners' progression into further education, work and resettlement in the community as well as in prison.

Development and dissemination of the Citizens' Curriculum approaches and the ESOL resources

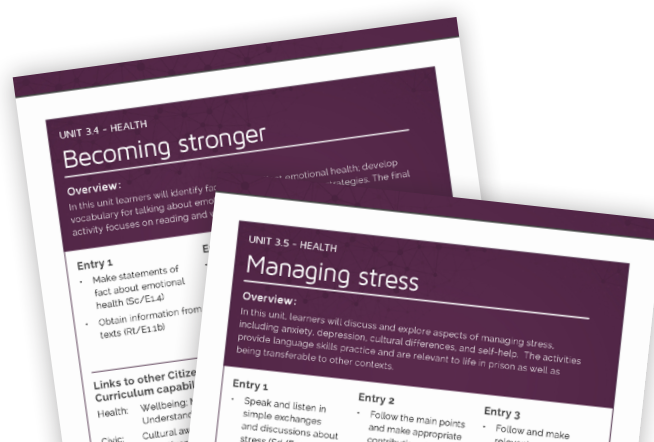
- *Improving Language, Improving Lives: Resources for ESOL Tutors* was produced and can be accessed at <http://bit.ly/ESOLresource>
- Hard copies were sent to 100 prisons across England.
- As of July 2019, 760 unique downloads had been made.

Benefits of the *Improving Language, Improving Lives: Resources for ESOL Tutors*

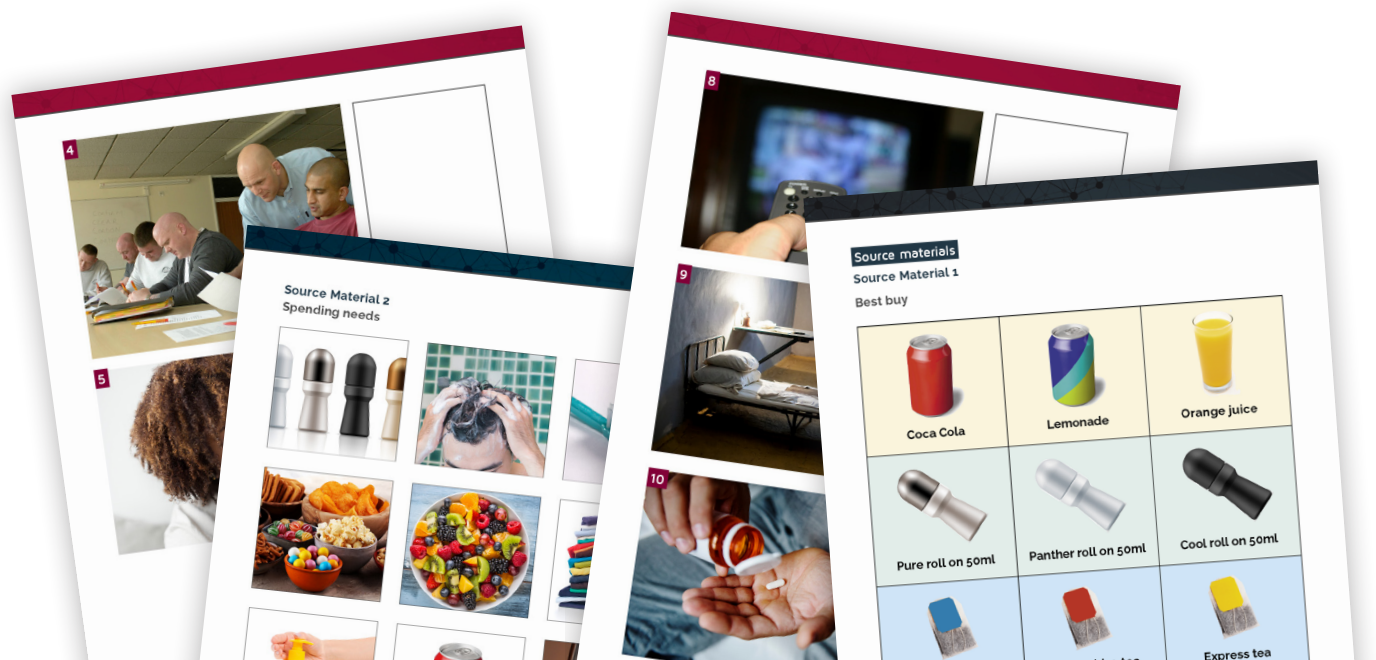
Embedding the different Citizens' Curriculum capabilities in ESOL sessions meant tutors could include relevant and meaningful content which enabled them to deliver more interesting and engaging sessions on a broader range of topics:

'The more information that they can apply to their real life - that's what helps them because it's good and they're actually learning, and it gave opportunities for things that they could apply rather than stuff being so abstract, that's what I liked.'

'[The resources that you've got], they're more society-based, community-based and that's very helpful because our young people have got to learn to get on in the local community and learn how things are. So that's helpful.'



⁸ <https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/resource/citizens-curriculum-phase-2-interim-evaluation-report/>



Health was seen as a useful and important theme to cover, especially discussion of mental health issues. Tutors noted that ESOL learners in prison often experience stress and anxiety about deportation. It was felt that this would foster learner-led lessons as learners could easily relate to the topic, despite the need for sensitive handling in the classroom.

Adopting a participatory approach - a collaborative form of learning that values learners' existing knowledge and experience - helped learners to engage in discussion activities more and gain confidence:

'I think the learners have benefited from it, because it means that they're more open to the idea of working together, they're more open to the idea of talking. It's got them talking a lot more...it's built their confidence up a great deal.'

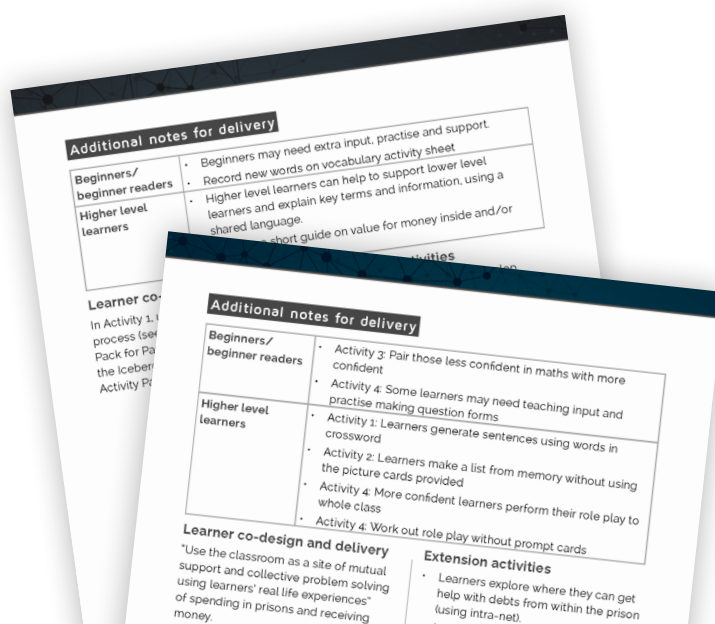
Clear and concise teachers' notes helped tutors who have limited experience in ESOL delivery feel confident when asked to deliver lessons. Overall, this has led to one prison expanding their ESOL provision, resulting in more learners being able to access provision:

'A lot of my colleagues who've covered the classes, I think they found [the tutor notes] invaluable in terms of sort of being given clear guidance as to what to look for and what to be doing, what should

be done, which I think is really helpful. It means that we have an opportunity to put people into classes rather than rely on one person who knows everything.'

Differentiation activities meant the same lesson could be used in a mixed ability class to meet individual learners' needs more effectively:

'I think it's nice to have it differentiated at source, because it means we can adapt as we see fit for each individual class and each individual learner of course.'



Key recommendations for policy makers

- Ensure the effective and consistent collection of ESOL needs across the secure estate. Language information should be consistently collected and stored alongside key biographical information on each prisoner and should be used to support officer interactions, extra support and signposting. The Core Common Curriculum⁹ includes requirements in relation to assessing prisoners' English and maths needs; this should include a specific focus on ESOL.
-

Key recommendations for education providers

- Work with prison staff to embed the screening tool and record outcomes for both learners and for prison staff, to help ensure that new arrivals are signposted to ESOL or other relevant support quickly.
 - Use the 'Train the Trainer' resources to train prison officers in the use of the ESOL screening tool, to help them identify ESOL needs. This could help with the new 'key worker' requirement to contribute to the development of the prisoner's personal learning plan, helping to set and monitor educational outcomes.
 - Download and use the *Improving Language, Improving Lives: Resources for ESOL Tutors*, which link language learning with wider life skills such as health and civic capabilities. This aligns well with the purpose of prison education which recognises a need to build social capital, and to support the wellbeing of prisoners, as well as focus on skills for employment.
 - Work with prison governors, to highlight the ESOL needs in the prison and the resources required to respond to this.
 - Ensure that ESOL tutors have access to professional learning and development opportunities.
-

Recommendations for prisons

- Embed early usage of the screening tool, for example on reception, to identify and record prisoners' language needs in your prison.
- Work with education staff to train wider prison staff on how to identify an ESOL need using the screening tool and 'Train the Trainer' materials. This could be done by the Foreign National Co-ordinator or Equalities Officer for example. This training will support prison officers in their new role contributing to the development of the prisoner's personal learning plan.

⁹ <https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/content/etf1194>

Acknowledgements

The Bell Foundation, Learning and Work Institute and De Montfort University worked with a range of organisations throughout this project, whose contribution is gratefully acknowledged:

British Red Cross	HMP Leeds	Morley College
Cardiff & Vale College	HMP Leicester	NATECLA
Community Learning Milton Keynes	HMP Lewes	Nottingham Trent University
Crossover Resource and Learning Centre	HMP Liverpool	Novus
English for Action	HMP Long Lartin	PeoplePlus
Haringey Adult Learning Service	HMP North Sea Camp	Reading University
Hibiscus Initiatives	HMP Nottingham	RMF Construction Training Academy Ltd
High Trees	HMP Oakwood	Seetec
HMP Belmarsh	HMP Pentonville	Sodexo Justice Services
HMP Berwyn	HMP Peterborough	Solihull College
HMP Birmingham	HMP Rye Hill	St Andrew's Healthcare, Birmingham
HMP Bronzefield	HMP Send	The Education and Training Foundation
HMP Dovegate	HMP Wandsworth	The Reading Agency
HMP Gartree	HMP Welford Road	Unemployment Relief
HMP Glen Parva	HMP Winchester	Upper Norwood Library Trust
HMP Hewell	HMP Woodhill	Workers' Educational Association
HMP Huntercombe	HMPPS	Weston College
HMP Isle of Wight	Kent Refugee Action Network	Wolverhampton Adult Education
	Milton Keynes College	
	Ministry of Justice	

Project Partners

The Bell Foundation aims to change practice, policy and systems for children, adults and communities in the UK disadvantaged by language, working with partners on innovation, research, training and practical interventions.

Learning and Work Institute is an independent policy, research and development organisation dedicated to promoting lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion.

De Montfort University's Division of Community and Criminal Justice undertakes research, evaluation and development activities in relation to people involved in the criminal justice system.

Please get in touch if you would like more information about the screening tool or ESOL resources and how to use them in your institution:

info@bell-foundation.org.uk