

**The Bell Foundation submission to the Education
Select Committee inquiry**

Education: Are prisoners being left behind?

8 January 2021

About 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. The Bell Foundation works with a range of partners to produce robust, evidence-based research. We are submitting evidence to this inquiry to highlight relevant research from the Foundation's Criminal Justice Programme.

Research funded by The Bell Foundation focuses on English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and the experiences of individuals for whom English is a second or additional language across society.

As part of the Criminal Justice Programme, the Foundation has commissioned research into the barriers faced by prisoners who speak languages other than English (ESOL). The Foundation is currently funding research into the experiences of offenders and victims of crime who use ESOL at the Institute for Crime and Justice Policy Research, Victim Support and the Centre for Justice Innovation across the criminal justice system.

Introduction

Prisoners who are speakers of languages other than English face communication barriers in prison and when preparing for rehabilitation and release into society. Within the prison context, prisoners without knowledge of English, may not be able to understand instructions or basic information, putting safety and wellbeing at risk. Offenders may also not be able to access prison education, which supports their rehabilitation. At the moment, whilst prisoners are screened on entry for English and maths there is no routine screening for ESOL needs on entry to the prison. There is also no data on the numbers of prisoners with ESOL needs.

Whilst prison education was a priority for the Government at the time of the [Coates Review](#), the current situation with Covid-19 means that educational opportunities have been very limited. The Bell Foundation has in response to the current situation developed a series of ESOL worksheets for prisoners to work on in their cells.

As stated in the Education and Employment Strategy ([Ministry of Justice, 2018](#)), which followed the Coates Review, when a prisoner enters prison, they should immediately be put on a path to employment on release. This means that "education and training which is responsive to individuals' needs, is properly integrated into prison regimes and delivers what employers are looking for." The fact that there is no data on the numbers of prisoners with ESOL needs is a barrier to achieving this Government vision. Without knowing that a prisoner has ESOL needs, it is not possible to respond to their individual education requirements.

It is important to understand the difference between Foreign National Prisoners (FNPs) and prisoners with ESOL. One term is not a proxy for the other. Some FNPs will have English as their mother tongue, for example they come from an English-speaking country, while, amongst UK nationals in prison, many may not have English as a first language, if, for example, they were brought up speaking another language with their family. Data is collected on the number of FNPs, but there is no official data on the number of prisoners with ESOL.

What is the purpose of education in prisons?

Research commissioned by The Bell Foundation, A Prison within a Prison, ([Carroll et al 2015](#)) stated that the aims of ESOL provision in prison are to:-

- Equip learners with the English they need to operate effectively within the prison
- Allow learners to secure employment both within the prison and once released
- Support in the attainment of formal qualifications
- Develop a deeper understanding of their strengths and areas for development both personal and in terms of employment.

Education in prison must be accessible to all, regardless of a person's language and communication needs. If the main purpose of education in prison is for rehabilitation, and to go into employment on release, a prisoner with ESOL must be able to access the right support to acquire proficiency in English to access prison education services.

Recommendation: Ensure that every prisoner has the right communication and language support to enable access to prison education and rehabilitation.

Employability of offenders upon release

Evidence suggests that offenders with ESOL needs are often not able to access employability or rehabilitation courses upon release ([Carroll, 2015](#)). Courses around re-settlement/housing or rehabilitation programmes in the community are geared to English speakers not to those who need/want ESOL provision, thus barring them from accessing courses and programmes to support rehabilitation.

Recommendation: Ensure prisoners with ESOL needs have access to resettlement and rehabilitation programmes in the community by offering ESOL provision integrated with employability and rehabilitation courses so that offenders can go into employment upon release.

What data exist to demonstrate the effectiveness of education and training in prisons and on prisoner attainment, and what international comparisons are available?

“There is...insufficient current data that identifies how many of this (Foreign Nationals) group have English as a second language. The provision of ESOL could be more effectively strengthened if this wider context was addressed”.
([Carroll, 2015](#))

The evidence shows that no national figures exist for the numbers of offenders/ex-offenders with ESOL needs and this makes it very difficult to plan and provide adequate provision ([Carroll, 2015](#)) or to assess the effectiveness of education and training in prisons on attainment. Although national data exist for the numbers of FNPs this does not provide any indication of ESOL prevalence and need, as many FNPs will have English as their mother tongue. Similarly, amongst UK nationals in prison, many may not have English as a first language, and there is no official data on this number. One is not a proxy for the other.

Recommendation: The Ministry of Justice should introduce mechanisms which will ensure consistent data collection on prisoners with ESOL needs. The data must include ESOL

needs and English proficiency, such as current pre-entry or entry levels as determined in an ESOL assessment. These data must be recorded and used to understand the level of ESOL requirements in prison and to evaluate the impact of ESOL education in prisons.

How well are additional learning needs met by the prison education and youth custody systems, including SEND and language and communication needs?

Given that there is a lack of data on the numbers of prisoners with ESOL, it is difficult to answer how well their learning needs are being met. In the sections below, examples are given of the impact of ESOL needs not being met throughout the criminal justice system, some examples of good practice and recommendations on improving the learning needs of prisoners with ESOL.

In prison

For prisoners with ESOL needs, language can be a barrier to accessing prison education, especially if the ESOL needs are not identified early on. Research demonstrates a need for language screening ([Carroll, 2015](#)). It is important that prisoners are correctly identified as having ESOL needs, as opposed to English literacy needs. This is something which can be difficult for non-language specialist staff to assess, as basic competency, for example, ability to understand basic information, may get mistaken for proficiency, (actively participating in prison education). The prisoner may be able to communicate at a functional level but not have the linguistic ability to access the educational facilities within the prison. Accurate screening at the initial assessment would ensure the appropriate signposting and therefore more accurate figures on ESOL need within prisons. Currently, literacy and numeracy are measured but English language proficiency is not. There is a difference between literacy and proficiency in English. Once a prisoner is identified as requiring some ESOL provision they need to be given the correct level of support. Anecdotal evidence suggests that ESOL learners are sometimes all put into one group with no regard to language abilities. This can be counterproductive for both the lower-level English speaker and the higher-level language speakers, as they could be prevented from going into certain employment if they have not been able to progress to the required level in ESOL.

Prison courses should be made more accessible by embedding English provision within vocational courses by either making tutors more language aware or providing language support assistants to the class, working alongside the tutor to support those with lower-level English.

In response to the need for correct identification of prisoners with ESOL needs, The Bell Foundation commissioned the Learning and Work Institute and De Montfort University to develop an [ESOL screening tool](#). 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.

"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, HMP Isle of Wight)

Recommendations:

- Introduce a consistent approach to ESOL screening in prisons to assess English language proficiency along with literacy and numeracy at the moment an offender enters prison.
- Ensure the effective collection of data on ESOL needs across the secure estate. English language proficiency should be consistently assessed, collected and stored alongside key biographical information on each prisoner and used to provide extra support in prison education and signposting

Innovative approaches to ESOL

[Hurry et al](#) (2012) reported that where good working relationships existed between education and the wider prison staff, and where there was an emphasis on the importance of education across the organisation, education provision and outcomes are strengthened. HMP Bullwood Hall developed a series of language phrase booklets to support the prison officers with communications with prisoners with low proficiency in English. These were subsequently used as supplementary resources in ESOL classes. The English sentences were numbered the same across all language booklets, making easier reference for staff and tutors. The booklets enabled some prisoners with low proficiency in English to feel less isolated ([Carroll, 2015](#)).

An award-winning Language Partners programme in the United States had a successful peer mentoring project in prisons ([Carroll, 2015](#)). At Danville Correctional Centre in Illinois, USA, bilingual offenders were trained to become ESOL teachers for other offenders. These newly TESOL qualified tutors are responsible for teaching classes twice-weekly and performing all the normal functions of teachers. They were supported by volunteer teacher trainers and both tutors and tutees benefitted.

Recommendation: Ensure that prison staff understand the importance of ESOL education and empower offenders to participate in ESOL provision.

The judicial process

The difficulties in meeting the learning needs of prisoners with ESOL is exacerbated by a lack of background information that begins at the start of the judicial process. In preliminary findings from the Institute of Crime and Justice Policy Research, commissioned by The Bell Foundation, the need for language and communication support is often not picked up by the police; subsequently, the offender has no support through the judicial process and then the need for ESOL support may not be determined in prison.

How can successful participation in education be incentivised in prisons?

“The incentive to move from education to work for those still supporting family outside of the prison was strong.” ([Hales, 2015](#))

The following points have been identified as ways to improve participation in education, from our commissioned research and programmes with partners working within the secure estate and upon release.

a) Making education relevant: Evidence points to the need to move away from the 'churning out of qualifications' and to emphasise the more holistic development of the learner with ESOL needs ([Carroll, 2015](#)). For example, the Learning and Work Institute [Citizen's Curriculum](#) ensures all individuals have the core set of skills they need to be able to function in today's society including English, maths, ESOL, digital, civic, health and financial capabilities. Service providers within custody and the community take the view that "the priority in literacy and ESOL delivery should be to enable their students to manage the challenges they face on a day-to-day basis (this being particularly acute for those going through court and/or in custody and whose residential status is being decided by Immigration). As stated in 'The Language Barrier to Rehabilitation', beyond this, it should help prisoners to access key resources, improve their abilities to find legal work and provide effective support for their children within the UK" ([Hales, 2015](#)). There is also a need to adapt standard literacy and ESOL course provision to meet these goals.

b) Improving accessibility: Anecdotally we are aware of prisoners with low level ESOL being excluded from some vocational courses due to their low level of English including being able to take anger management courses, which are often necessary to be considered for early release.

c) Listen to and learn from the learners: Listening to learners' experiences of education is of particular value when considering how that provision might be improved ([Little, 2015](#)) making it worthwhile, relevant and accessible. Ultimately for any learner, be they a child at school, young person, adult or offender or ex-offender there has to be motivation to learn and this will be different for different learners. It is not necessarily possible or desirable to adopt a "one size fits all" approach and listening and learning from learners will give greater insights into why people chose to participate or not participate in learning.

Recommendations:

- Ensure ESOL prison education is relevant to the core skills required today by selecting ESOL curriculum based on day-to-day life.
- Embed English language provision within vocational courses in prisons. This can be achieved by improving language awareness of course tutors or providing language support assistants in the classes.
- Actively seek feedback from prisoners' experiences of education and adapt to insights to ensure good levels of engagement and retention.

Are current resources for prison learning meeting need?

As we do not know the number of prisoners with ESOL and their levels of proficiency in English, it is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of ESOL resources in prisons. The Bell Foundation identified a gap in resources and has collaborated with the Learning and Work Institute to develop an [ESOL Tutor Resources Pack](#) to meet this need.

The [ESOL Tutor Resource Pack](#) supports tutors working in the secure estate and in community rehabilitation/probation settings. The resources combine language learning with

embedded wider capabilities in numeracy, digital, health, financial and civic (including elements of personal and social development), designed to make learning engaging and relevant to life in prison and in the community.

ESOL classes taking place in prison will often contain a wide variety of proficiencies, the ESOL Tutor Resource Pack specifically includes activities for all levels across speaking, reading, listening, and writing competencies.

In 2019 the ESOL Tutor Resource Pack was a Finalist in the Local Innovation category of the British Council's ELTons Awards which recognise excellence in English language teaching globally.

“Excellent resources... I will definitely use these with my learners. I like the fact that they are suitable for Entry 1 to Entry 3 and especially that they give direction on how to use them.” (Practitioner)

Recommendation: The Ministry of Justice conducts a review of all ESOL provision and resources in prisons to ensure that they meet the needs of prisoners.

Summary of recommendations

- The Ministry of Justice should introduce mechanisms which will ensure consistent data collection on prisoners with ESOL needs. The data must include ESOL needs and English proficiency, such as current pre-entry or entry levels as determined in an ESOL assessment. These data must be recorded and used to understand the level of ESOL requirements in prison and to evaluate the impact of ESOL education in prisons.
- Introduce mechanisms to ensure that data on language support follows the offender through the criminal justice system and into prison
- Introduce a consistent approach to ESOL screening in prisons to assess English language proficiency along with literacy and numeracy
- Ensure the effective collection of ESOL needs across the secure estate. English language proficiency should be consistently assessed, collected and stored alongside key biographical information on each prisoner and used to provide extra support in prison education and signposting.
- Ensure that prison staff understand the importance of ESOL education and empower offenders to participate in ESOL provision
- Ensure ESOL prison education is relevant to the core skills required today by selecting ESOL curriculum based on day-to-day life
- Embed English language provision within vocational courses in prisons. This can be achieved by improving language awareness of course tutors or providing language support assistants in the classes.
- Actively seek feedback from prisoners' experiences of education and adapt to insights to ensure good levels of engagement and retention
- Ensure prisoners with ESOL needs have access to resettlement and offence-related programmes in the community by offering ESOL provision alongside employability and rehabilitation courses so that offenders can go into employment upon release

- The Ministry of Justice conducts a review of all ESOL provision and resources in prisons to ensure that they meet the needs of prisoners

References

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For more information

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