



# UCL

A group of diverse young people are sitting on a green lawn, engaged in conversation. Some are wearing lanyards, suggesting they are students or staff. The scene is outdoors, with a building in the background.

## Young people, education, employment and ESOL

Report authors

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**Dr Olga Cara** is a Senior Researcher and Lecturer in Sociology of Education with mixed methods and quantitative methodology expertise and research interests in the relationship between ethnicity, language, and education as well as parental engagement. Olga has more than 15 years of experience in investigating EAL and ESOL related issues involving primary data as well as secondary analysis of large administrative datasets.

# Executive Summary

## 1. Purpose and scope of the review

1.1 The report, 'Young people, education, employment and ESOL' reviewed 47 studies<sup>1</sup> to examine how current ESOL provision<sup>2</sup> meets the needs of young people aged 16-25 years who use English as an Additional Language (EAL)<sup>3</sup>, and who need time and support to develop their English language skills in order to progress in education, training and employment.

1.2 Young people aged 16-25 years, who have English as an additional language are a heterogeneous group with very different educational backgrounds and trajectories. This group includes young people making the transition from school to further education, training and employment, as well as migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers with ESOL needs<sup>4</sup> who enter the English educational system as older children or young adults.

1.3 This age group also encompasses young people with a wide spectrum of educational backgrounds and experience, including young people with limited or no literacy in their expert language(s), identified as 'Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA) learners (Naeb and Young Scholten, 2017)<sup>5</sup>.

1.4 Although national policy in England has emphasised the need to provide funded opportunities for further education and training to young people post 16, there is limited information on provision for young people aged 16-25 years who are at an early or intermediate stage of developing their English language skills.

1.5 In examining ESOL progression pathways for this diverse group of learners who have English as an Additional Language, the review took account of young people accessing ESOL provision as well as those working towards generic English qualifications such as Functional Skills English and GCSE English Language.

1.6 The review analysed UK and international research literature to identify patterns and trends with respect to opportunities and barriers facing young people (16-25 years) with English language support needs.

1. The inclusion criteria for the literature review included peer-reviewed empirical studies and published reports; studies relating to young people with EAL in the age group 16-25 years; and research which offered further insights into ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision and transition processes affecting young people with EAL. Almost half of these studies (23) are located within the English context, whilst a further 4 studies are based within the UK as a whole or in one of the home countries of the UK (2 studies based in Scotland, and 1 study in Wales). There are 5 European studies, including 3 studies based in specific countries: Spain, Austria and Germany. Nine research studies originate in the US. Five Canadian and two Australian studies are also included.
2. The term English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) generally refers to English language provision for young people and adults within the post school sector in England, and in other English-dominant countries.
3. English as an Additional Language (EAL) is the term used within the school system in England to identify children who speak one or more languages other than English.
4. The term 'ESOL needs' refers to any learners with EAL whose English needs further development.
5. Note that LESLLA has changed its name to 'Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults'.

1.7 There is an established education offer in England for post-16 learners, from entry levels to Level 4 and above, on the National Qualification Framework (NQF). As part of that offer, discrete ESOL provision is funded in a range of institutions, from Pre-Entry ESOL<sup>6</sup>, and Entry level ESOL up to ESOL Level 2. In policy terms, post-16 provision for the two age bands 16-18; and adults 19+, is generally funded and managed separately from each other<sup>7</sup>. Since 2020, Adult Education Budget has been devolved to Local Authorities.

1.8 In this Executive Summary we first present the key findings of the review before providing more detail on issues related to current ESOL provision; transitions into, within, and beyond Post 16 education; barriers in accessing and progressing in ESOL; and lessons learnt from successful interventions in this area. The Executive Summary concludes with a set of recommendations.

## 2. Key Findings

**2.1 The ESOL sector<sup>8</sup> has been challenged by high demand and fragmentation of provision,** making it difficult for some young people (16-25 years) to access the most appropriate provision. Whilst ESOL provision is crucial to support educational and employment outcomes for young people, the literature highlights a patchwork of provision for this diverse group of young adults within the Post-16 further education and training sector in England, with most provision at Pre-Entry and Entry levels.

2.2 The Association of Colleges and the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) noted that **having English as an Additional Language was one of many risk factors** cited by teachers and providers **affecting some young people's lack of participation in education and training** (Ofsted, 2014)<sup>9</sup>.

**2.3 A lack of strategic planning from Government is a key barrier to provision for young people with ESOL needs.** The Government committed to a national ESOL strategy for England in its 2019 election manifesto. The strategy has not yet been delivered.

**2.4 The absence of a national ESOL strategy has hindered the provision of a co-ordinated approach to provision,** which needs to include national and local government as well as co-ordination between government departments such as the Department for Education, the Department for Work and Pensions, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. The development of skills strategies in some devolved English regions may begin to offer joined-up policy in some areas.

6. At ESOL pre-entry, learners are beginners, working towards ESOL Entry Level 1 (Entry level 1 is equivalent to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) A1).
7. ESOL courses are fully funded for young people 16-19 years old, and for unemployed adults. There is a system of co-funding for other young adults who must pay a fee for the ESOL course and assessment.
8. The ESOL sector includes providers such as further education colleges, local authority and third sector organisations, as well as ESOL provision in prisons and workplaces.

2.5 **There is a scarcity of information and research about the educational and employment trajectories and transitions of young people who were identified as EAL in schools and their outcomes.** This is linked to **the loss of the EAL identifier when young people move out of the compulsory school system** and continue into further education and training or higher education as their EAL identifier is currently only included in the National Pupil Database (NPD). There is no EAL marker in the further education and training Individualised Learner Record (ILR) or Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) datasets.

2.6 Without data on language proficiency in compulsory education or post-compulsory education, there is **limited information on the scale of need for young people aged 16-25 years who speak languages other than English.** This includes learners with very complex and diverse needs, such as learners with limited prior education in any language.

2.7 There is a **paucity of research studies that examine education and training for young people (16-25 years) with EAL.** Much of the available research literature focusses on discrete 16-18 programmes for young refugees and asylum-seekers rather than on the wider group of young people with ESOL needs. Research with young people 19+ is subsumed within the general literature on adult education.

2.8 There is a **lack of independent information, advice and guidance (IAG) for young people aged 16-25 years who need to identify future education and training pathways that will provide a route to employment.** Whilst some learning providers have incorporated IAG into their individual programmes, and enrolment processes, five studies highlighted a lack of independent advice and guidance about progression pathways that lead to opportunities for employment.

2.9 There is a **general lack of information, advice and guidance aimed at refugees and asylum-seekers** in a context where young people need information about the English education system as well as advice and clear information about available choices leading to education, training and employment (Mishan, 2019).

2.10 There are **limited options for progression on academic or vocational pathways for young adults with qualifications below level 2** (Hupkau et al, 2017).

### 3. Issues related to current ESOL provision

3.1 There is a lack of data on 19-25 year old young adults with EAL in Post-16 educational and training provision. Much ESOL provision for young people over 19 years is described as “adult” and it is difficult to disaggregate data for 19-25 year old learners. The majority of learners 19+ study ESOL part-time in further education colleges, adult and community learning, and in third sector organisations.

3.2 ESOL for 16-19 learners is generally organised as discrete provision at Entry level for new migrants in further education colleges or in third sector providers. ESOL programmes for 16-19 learners require a holistic and multi-agency approach to support learners, many of whom are identified as ‘separated children’ or ‘unaccompanied minors’, who have to deal with financial, legal and psychological problems at the same time as they study.

3.3 Some young people with EAL have experienced limited or disrupted education and require substantial literacy support in ESOL classes.

#### **4. Transitions into, within, and beyond Post-16 education**

4.1 The Association of Colleges (AOC) and the Office for Standards in Education, Children's services and Skills (OFSTED, 2014) reviewed successful interventions and barriers for young people in London, aged 16-18 who were designated as 'vulnerable' or 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET), noting that having English as an additional language may be one of many risk factors affecting the participation of some young people. However, there is a lack of research literature on post-16 transitions and destinations for young people with limited English language proficiency. There is no EAL identifier in the Individual Learner Record (ILR) data held by Post-16 institutions and so it is difficult to track progression for school leavers.

4.2 For young people seeking asylum, age on arrival in the UK is a critical factor in relation to access to education. This is particularly the case in Years 10 and 11 when the focus on GCSE examinations means that there is a disincentive for schools to enrol young people (Gladwell, 2019). For Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children (UASC) the start of formal education may also be delayed if young people are dispersed around the UK under the National Transfer Scheme or if subject to an age assessment process (ADCS, 2018).

4.3 GCSE English Language (alongside GCSE Mathematics) operate as high stakes examinations within the English school system. Young people who speak languages other than English are disadvantaged in achieving high grades in GCSE English Language because they are still developing their proficiency in English. Young people who do not achieve a Grade 4 or above in GCSE English Language (and GCSE Mathematics) at school are required to undertake re-sits, or Functional Skills examinations, depending on the GCSE grade achieved. The probability of grade improvement decreases with the number of GCSE re-sits, leading to disaffection (Vidal Rodeiro, 2018). The GCSE qualification acts as a benchmark and so young people with EAL who do not achieve a high grade are at a disadvantage when applying to Higher Education or for highly-skilled jobs.

4.4 Transitions from ESOL classes to Functional Skills English, and from Functional Skills English to GCSE English Language reflect substantial differences in curricular content and forms of assessment. Recent research carried out by NATECLA highlights how young people (16-19 years) with EAL are more likely than adults to be enrolled for Functional Skills English once they have reached ESOL Entry 3 (intermediate level). The researchers argue that this transition may disadvantage young people with EAL who still need to develop their language learning (Roden and Osmaston, 2021).

4.5 There is a lack of research on how young people with EAL are accessing vocational education that may lead to employment. Young people in general appear less likely to gain an apprenticeship than older adults and transitions to vocational education and training (VET) do not appear straightforward in the English context, where there is a weak articulation between VET and the labour market (Hupkau and Ventura, 2017)

4.6 Two European studies highlighted how factors such as migrant background, gender, race and class may impact on young people's opportunities to transition into vocational education and training.

## **5. Barriers in accessing and progressing in ESOL**

5.1 Young people depending on their migrant, refugees or asylum-seeker status and where in the UK they live, face various barriers in accessing ESOL classes (see below). Foremost among these is the lack of ESOL provision, as evidenced through long waiting lists, learners being placed in unsuitable classes (e.g. level or age group), and/or being offered limited class hours per week. Other barriers include work commitments, the location and timing of classes, a lack of childcare, and cultural barriers.

5.2 ESOL providers are often dependant on short funding streams (such as the Home Office Controlling Migration Fund, and the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme) in order to maintain or increase ESOL provision, and so provision may cease when the funding is no longer available (Higton et al, 2019)

5.3 Eight UK studies noted how education was intertwined with issues of citizenship, including how eligibility restrictions may affect access to ESOL classes. Migrants, including young women on spousal visas, were eligible for fee remission on ESOL courses only if they could prove they were on 'active benefits' or had been in the UK for three years (Oliver and Hughes, 2018).

5.4 In England, asylum seekers do not have the right to attend publicly funded ESOL classes until 6 months after making their claim for asylum. In contrast to England, asylum seekers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland can attend free ESOL classes immediately after making a claim for asylum (Refugee Action, 2016).

5.5 Some students with limited or disrupted prior education require substantial literacy support in ESOL classes. The pace of learning is an issue for some learners, particularly in mixed level classes.

## **6. Interventions**

6.1 The review identified some UK and international examples of successful educational interventions for young people with EAL who were in the process of developing their proficiency in English or in the language of the country in which they were settled. Summaries of these interventions are set out in the paragraphs below, but longer versions of these case studies are available in the full literature review.

6.2 A number of studies highlighted the role of ESOL practitioners in offering multi-agency support, particularly for new migrants with limited prior education. The research literature on 16-19 ESOL provision underlines the enhanced role of ESOL programmes where tutors may mediate between young migrants and state policies, using their agency to 'translate' policies as a form of 'cultural brokerage' (Cooke and Peutrell, 2019:9).

6.3 Classroom approaches that value the linguistic repertoires of young people are motivating to young people and support their engagement. The importance of multilingualism as a pedagogical resource was

highlighted by four studies in the review. This chimes with an assets-based approach to ESOL learners, acknowledging and building on the resources they bring to the classroom.

6.4 Six studies highlighted the need for curricula which enable young people with EAL to access higher level courses, both academic and vocational. This may include academic written English as well as English language for vocational subjects. Qualified and specialist ESOL tutors have a key role in advancing professional learning between ESOL and vocational specialists to support the learning of both academic English and content knowledge.

6.5 ESOL and content-based classroom materials should be research-based and reflect the broad needs and interests of different communities of young people. A number of studies emphasise the importance of authentic materials for ESOL learning reflecting the formal and informal learning contexts of different groups of young adults, for example, the use of informal online networks, and the engagement of learners in 'acts of citizenship' (Vollmer, 2019; Callaghan et al, 2019).

## **7. Recommendations arising from the literature review**

7.1 When the Government publishes its national ESOL strategy for England, it needs to take account of the education and training needs of young people aged 16-25 years. The strategy needs to be underpinned by an understanding of young people's lives, including how they develop English language skills, and how they access further opportunities in education, training and employment in the age bands, e.g. 16-18, 19-23, and 24+.

7.2 There is a need for demographic and other data to help identify young people with EAL in Post-16 education and training. An EAL identifier in the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) would enable Government and ESOL providers to plan and monitor provision for young people aged 16-25 years who need to develop English language proficiency<sup>10</sup>.

7.3 Government action needs to be taken to ensure the provision of comprehensive and personal information, advice and guidance for young people (16-25 years) with EAL. This should include targeted careers support for Post-16 institutions to help them in signposting young people to appropriate programmes of study, including apprenticeships.

9. The new Ofsted (2020) Initial Teacher Education inspection Framework and Handbook also emphasises the importance of supporting EAL learners.
10. This recommendation has also been endorsed in a recent research report undertaken by the National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA) and commissioned by the Education and Training Foundation on behalf of the Department for Education (see Roden, J. and Osmaston, M. (2021) ESOL Learners and Functional Skills English).

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