

**How Do We Create and Protect Jobs for Young
People?
House of Lords Inquiry on Youth Unemployment**

10 May 2021

About The Bell Foundation

The Bell Foundation is a charity which aims to overcome disadvantage through language education by working with partners on innovation, research, training and practical interventions. The Foundation works with a range of partners to produce robust, evidence-based research and has three programmes of work - English as an Additional Language in Schools, Criminal Justice and the new ESOL Programme. The Foundation is submitting evidence to highlight relevant research from across the three programmes. This submission includes evidence from a [literature review by the UCL Institute of Education](#) into young people, education, employment and ESOL, commissioned by The Bell Foundation, which will be published in 2021. The evidence in this submission relates to young people who speak languages other than English and their employment opportunities. As such, the Foundation has answered the relevant questions.

Introduction

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision is crucial to ensure those young people who are not English speakers, for example recent migrants or refugees, can achieve education and employment outcomes. There is currently no data on the numbers of young people who speak languages other than English who are not in education, employment or training. However, there is evidence that states that having English as an additional language is a risk factor affecting some young people's lack of participation in education and training post-16 ([Association of Colleges and Ofsted, 2014](#)).

What is known is that ethnicity does impact on youth unemployment. Even before the onset of Covid, the unemployment rate among Black young people in 2019 was 25%, increasing to 35% in 2020. Among Asian young people, the unemployment rate in 2020 was 23%. Among White young people, the unemployment rate was 13% in 2020, increasing from 10% in 2019 ([Resolution Foundation, 2021](#)). While this data does not reveal the number of young people who speak languages other than English, there will be a number of young people in these statistics who experience language barriers.

The 2021 Census data and Labour Force Survey have the potential to give an indication of the levels of unemployment of young people who speak languages other than English. This is not a good proxy on the need for ESOL provision; as the census and Labour Force Survey are based on self-perception, they are not an accurate measure of proficiency in English. The Department for Work and Pensions collects data on young clients claiming benefits who are referred to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes.

It is reasonable to assume that the pandemic has had an impact on youth unemployment and, for young people who speak languages other than English, the language barriers are an additional challenge. However, language barriers are not insurmountable. In this submission, The Bell Foundation provides evidence of the impact of language barriers on young people's education and employment outcomes. There is evidence on the impact of school closures on language loss for young people during the pandemic. There is information on the current situation for young people who speak other languages in post-compulsory education and work. There are also research studies from other European countries included. The submission includes recommendations to Government and other organisations.

Different terminology is used in this submission, and it is important to understand these differences. The term 'EAL' refers to pupils in compulsory education who speak English as an Additional Language. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is used as the name of qualifications or provision for people who study English as a second or additional language beyond compulsory education. The term 'people who use ESL' refers to people who speak languages other than English as their first language.

Challenges

1. What are the main challenges facing young people seeking employment today? How do structural factors impact youth unemployment, and how might these be addressed?

Systemic issues with formal ESOL provision mean that some young people who speak languages other than English are at a disadvantage in seeking employment. The current system does not easily allow young people to progress to higher levels of ESOL learning, which would allow them to reach a proficiency in English for the workplace. In England, the current highest level of ESOL qualification is level 2, but this does not equip learners to progress into highly skilled employment or higher education. Department for Education data for 2016/17 shows that 84% of ESOL enrolments were entry levels 1 to 3; 14% were at level 1 and 5% at level 2. As Schellekens ([2019](#)) points out, while a proportion of migrant graduates have sufficient English to find employment, many are unemployed or under-employed because their English proficiency is too low. Language levels at entry levels 1 to 3 do not allow learners to reach a level of proficiency to progress beyond unskilled work.

In the current system, young people often study ESOL to entry level 3 (which is below a level 1 qualification)¹. Experts in ESOL practice say that learners will usually move to vocational training and education when they have achieved entry level 3, before they have sufficient language skills ([Schellekens, 2019](#)). As a result, ESOL learners have to cope with learning new, complex, technical subject content in a language they are still learning.

As Learning and Work Institute research ([2021](#)) highlights, the demand for employees with lower level qualifications is falling in the short, medium and long-term, in part as a result of the pandemic, which raises concerns for young people who lack higher level qualifications. Therefore, young people who have not achieved a level 1 or 2 qualification because of a lack of proficiency in English, face the double disadvantage in finding meaningful employment. This further demonstrates the need for young people who speak ESL to be enabled to achieve a level of proficiency in English which allows them to gain higher qualifications in further and higher education, and to go into employment.

In its recent call for evidence, the Department for Education ([2020](#)) proposed transition programmes. The proposed transition programmes should give a balanced and purposeful curriculum helping accelerate and increase progression from lower levels of study. ESOL transition programmes should be piloted as an integrated transition programme with work experience and preparation, introductory technical skills, pastoral support, and personal

¹ For qualification levels, see: [What qualification levels mean: England, Wales and Northern Ireland - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

development, with a focus on, and more time allowed for, the language learning. These could be, but not limited to:

- ESOL transition programme for employability.
- ESOL for transition to academic study.
- ESOL for transition to vocational study.
- ESOL for daily living.

Funding would need to be commensurate to the level of study due to the intensity and increased volume of study needed for ESOL learners. This funding level is necessary in order for fair access and progression to be achieved for transition programmes for ESOL learners.

Recommendations:

- Department for Education to pilot ESOL transition programmes which are integrated with other transition programmes, such as employability and vocational study.
- Department for Education to consider funding models for ESOL transition programmes which are commensurate to the volume of study required for ESOL learners to achieve the language proficiency required to progress to level 3 qualifications.

4. Is funding for education, training and skills enough to meet the needs of young people and of the labour market? How can we ensure it continues to reach those who need it most?

The current funding of ESOL education does not meet the needs of young people who speak ESL. The current ESOL landscape is fragmented and confusing due to multiple funding streams from various Government departments. As a result of this fragmentation, there is no accurate data on the numbers of young people who need to learn English and their levels of proficiency. This results in long waiting lists and learners waiting a long time for a space in a local ESOL class; learners going to classes which are not suitable for their level of proficiency; or attending a class which is not appropriate. For example, the needs of young ESOL learners (aged 16-24) are different from older learners with a few years of professional experience. It is important that there is a coordinated approach to ESOL provision ensuring that there are no contradictory plans from different Government departments.

Recommendation: There should be an integrated and coordinated approach across Government to the development of an English Language Strategy. Data collection on the needs and levels of proficiency of ESOL learners must be a priority action in the English Language Strategy.

Language learning is a demanding process which takes a long time to master and funding of ESOL needs to reflect this. It can take years to achieve the necessary level of proficiency to access higher education or employment, meaningful to the individual. It takes on average six years to reach proficiency. The reality is that many young ESOL learners will be studying other qualifications at the same time. This reduces the number of hours to focus on language learning per week and slows down progress in achieving the required proficiency

in the language of instruction. Many qualifications in further education, including English and Maths, are currently only fully funded up to the age of 19, while ESOL is not. This creates a systemic barrier for learners from progressing to higher levels of ESOL qualifications, which they may need for higher education or employment. This contributes to broadening the gap for ESOL learners who cannot afford to pay for ESOL lessons, let alone pay for both ESOL and an academic or vocational subject course, even though this can contextualise and accelerate learning overall and enable progression. Current funding arrangements give ESOL learners a double burden. As it stands, plans for the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, as set out in the Skills for Jobs White Paper, will not support funding of qualifications below level 3. This again could exclude some young people from progressing to higher level ESOL qualifications which they require for employment. Consideration should be given to the eligibility criteria of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee so that it would include funding ESOL levels 1 and 2.

Recommendation: Department for Education should consider extending eligibility criteria for the Lifetime Skills Guarantee to allow for young people to have the funds to progress through ESOL levels and achieve a proficiency in English for employment.

Primary and secondary education

5. Does the national curriculum equip young people with the right knowledge and skills to find secure jobs and careers? What changes may be needed to ensure this is the case in future?

Some young people will face additional barriers in the education system which prevent them from achieving their potential, and this is the case for many young people who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL).

Research shows that attainment is affected by English language proficiency ([Hutchinson, 2018](#)). Children with EAL have widely varying levels of English proficiency; some have no English, and some are fluent, multilingual English-speakers; some may have lived in English-speaking countries or have been educated in English throughout their childhood.

The age at which a child or young person arrives in the UK can also affect attainment ([Hutchinson, 2018](#)). For example, at GCSE level, pupils with EAL scored an average grade of a C (or equivalent grade 4 in the new grade scales) if they arrived between reception and Year 7. This decreased to a grade of around a D (or grade 3) if they arrived in Year 8, 9 or 10 – falling further to below an E (or grade 2) if they arrived in Year 11.

This does not mean that a pupil who arrives later in the UK does not have the capability of achieving higher grades, but that the pupil needs additional EAL support in order that they have the proficiency in English to achieve a higher grade. Research ([Strand, 2020](#)) demonstrates that it takes more than six years to progress from the lowest to highest levels of English language proficiency for academic attainment.

Currently, there is no statutory requirement for schools in England to assess and record EAL pupils' proficiency in English. This makes it difficult to track the progress and to know what language support a pupil needs to progress, whether this is in compulsory or post-

compulsory education. The Bell Foundation recommends that schools should be provided with guidance on undertaking robust and consistent assessment, moderation and recording of proficiency in English levels to ensure they can conduct valid and reliable assessments using appropriate tools. If schools can accurately establish a learner's level of proficiency in English during their initial assessment, then they are better able to determine the type of support required to meet their language development needs.

Recommendation: The Government develops and publishes statutory guidance for schools on assessing and recording proficiency in English levels.

Evidence collected by Ofsted in England in [October](#) and [November](#) 2020 demonstrated the learning loss of pupils who speak EAL, particularly in aspects of language and communication skills, and a regression in oral fluency. Evidence ([NFER, 2021](#)) indicates that the language loss has been significant in some cases and this has impacted on learning loss, both at primary and secondary level. For pupils in both primary and secondary, the lack of exposure to models of English at home and the lack of social interaction with peers in English have both had an impact.

This situation continues into further education. In a survey of colleges, 30% stated that English and ESOL (at level 2 and below) were classes where students had the greatest need for catch up ([Association of Colleges, 2021](#)). The same study found that ESOL students found it harder to engage remotely. This could be as a result of digital poverty or from having the least stable home environments in which to carry out effective home learning.

Good verbal and written communication skills are among the most common skills that employers will seek when recruiting. Students who have lost language and communication skills will be at a disadvantage when entering the labour market without interventions which will enable them to catch up on lost language and communication during the college closures. Therefore, The Bell Foundation calls for continued language support in the education system, in particular for those students who have significant language and learning loss during the college closures.

Recommendation: The Government commits to language support in schools and colleges, in particular for those pupils and students who have significant language and learning loss during the school and college closures.

Jobs and employment

11. What lessons can be learned by current and previous youth labour market policy interventions and educational approaches, both in the UK and in other countries?

One study in Austria investigated how multilingualism could be used as a resource for low-educated migrants, aged 15-25 years, where young people are aiming to catch up on missed education and attain an Austrian secondary school leaving certificate ([Laimer and Wurzenrainer, 2017](#)). They created a multilingual learning space with materials and activities to make multilingualism visible in the classroom, using the learners' own linguistic

repertoires. The study found that the young people's interest and motivation to learn increased with the focus on multilingualism, and students were also able to demonstrate their prior knowledge in mathematics when given the opportunity to use their first language.

Some studies have explored the transitions to Vocational Education and Training (VET) for young migrants. One survey of 5000 young people (18-24 years) in Germany found that young migrants were less likely than other young people to progress to company-based training, particularly if they had not acquired a higher education entrance qualification during their schooling ([Beicht and Walden, 2017](#)). In general, young people from higher social classes were more likely to achieve the higher education entrance qualification in Germany and the authors reasoned that the effect of social class is exacerbated in the case of young people with a migrant background. They also identified discriminatory practices by companies, which affected transitions for young migrants leaving school with the lower secondary school leaving qualification. Following this research, they made recommendations for company training and for mentoring support for young migrants.

13. How might future youth labour market interventions best be targeted towards particular groups, sectors or regions? Which ones should be targeted?

Youth labour market interventions could be targeted towards young people with a focus on ESOL. To achieve this, ESOL qualifications should be aligned to the purposes that ESOL learners might have for learning English. The main purposes for language learning are either personal and public (i.e. to participate fully in civic, community and social life, and to get things done in everyday life), occupational (i.e. to enable young adults to perform their duties at work confidently and expertly in and through English), or educational (i.e. to enable ESOL learners to access further and higher education and demonstrate learning through the medium of English). The features of ESOL qualifications need to take account of and reflect these different purposes in the curriculum specifications, course content and contexts for texts and tasks, including assessment tasks.

Evidence demonstrates that a lack of information, advice and guidance on education and training pathways which lead to employment is a key barrier for young people aged 16 to 25 ([Mishan, 2019](#)). For example, a young person who uses a language other than English may face barriers in understanding the nuances of where and how to apply for jobs, CV-writing and interview skills as they have had little or no access to learning the English language specific vocabularies and registers needed, nor the cultural insights and understanding of the selection processes. Roberts describes how the formal British job interview operates as a 'test of belonging' ([2019:223](#)) for migrants undergoing a formal job selection process where they need to demonstrate cultural and linguistic understanding of 'the interview game'. This is an example where ESOL for a specific purpose would be an advantage. In this case, ESOL for employment.

The Government has implemented many initiatives to support young people into employment – for example, the introduction of T Levels, changes to apprenticeships and the introduction of Kickstart – however, the ESOL curriculum has not been updated in nearly 20 years to complement these initiatives. There is currently no evidence to demonstrate

whether ESOL embedded into these youth labour market interventions would be effective; however, this is something that could be explored by Government.

Recommendation: The Government should test and conduct a robust evaluation of ESOL embedded within apprenticeships or T Levels.

Summary of recommendations

- Department for Education to pilot ESOL transition programmes which are integrated with other transition programmes, such as employability and vocational study.
- Department for Education to consider funding models for ESOL transition programmes which are commensurate to the volume of study required for ESOL learners to achieve the language proficiency required to progress to level 3 qualifications.
- There should be an integrated and coordinated approach across Government to the development of an English Language Strategy. Data collection on the needs and levels of proficiency of ESOL learners must be a priority action in the English Language Strategy.
- Department for Education should consider extending eligibility criteria for the Lifetime Skills Guarantee to allow for young people to have the funds to progress through ESOL levels and achieve a proficiency in English for employment.
- The Government develops and publishes statutory guidance for schools on assessing and recording proficiency in English levels.
- The Government commits to language support in schools and colleges, in particular for those pupils and students who have significant language and learning loss during the school and college closures.
- The Government should test and conduct a robust evaluation of ESOL embedded within apprenticeships or T Levels.

References

[Association of Colleges \(2021\), *College Catch-up funding and Remote Education – AOC Survey and Policy Proposal*](#)

[Beicht, U., Walden, G., \(2017\), *Transitions of young migrants to initial vocational education and training in Germany: the significance of social origin and gender. Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 69, 424–449](#)

[Department for Education \(2020\), *Post-16 Level 2 and below study and qualifications in England; Call for evidence*](#)

[Hutchinson, J. \(2018\) *Educational Outcomes of Children with English as an Additional Language*](#)

[Laimer, T. and Wurzenrainer, M. \(2017\) *Multilingualism as a resource for basic education with young migrants*, in: Beacco, J.-C., Krumm, H.-J., Little, D., Thalgot, P. \(Eds.\), *The Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants / L'intégration Linguistique Des Migrants Adultes: Some Lessons from Research / Les Enseignements de La Recherche*. De Gruyter, Berlin/Munich/Boston, pp. 117-122.](#)

[Learning and Work Institute \(2021\) *Facing the Future: Employment Prospects for Young People after Coronavirus*, Leicester: Learning and Work Institute](#)

[Mishan, F. \(2019\) 'Introduction: The ESOL landscape of the UK and Ireland', in *ESOL provision in the UK and Ireland: Challenges and Opportunities*, Oxford: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers](#)

[NFER \(2021\) *Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey*](#)

[Ofsted \(2014\) *Supporting young people to participate in education and training*. Ofsted, Manchester.](#)

[Ofsted \(2020\) *Covid-19 series: Briefing on School, October 2020 briefing*](#)

[Ofsted \(2020\) *Covid-19 series: Briefing on schools, November 2020 briefing*](#)

[Resolution Foundation \(2021\) *Uneven Steps: Changes in Youth Unemployment and Study since the Onset of Covid-19*](#)

[Roberts, C. \(2019\) From the Outside in: Gatekeeping the Workplace, in M. Cooke and R. Peutrell \(Eds.\) \(2019\) *Brokering Britain, Educating Citizens. Exploring ESOL and Citizenship*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters](#)

[Schellekens, P. \(2019\), *The UK is missing out on a huge skills dividend by failing to invest in ESOL*, Association of Colleges](#)

[Strand, S and Lindorff, A. \(2020\) *English as an Additional Language: Proficiency in English, educational achievement and rate of progression in English language learning*](#)

For more information

Please contact:

Laura Cook
ESOL Policy and Programme Manager
T: 01223 278809
E: laura.cook@bell-foundation.org.uk

The Bell Foundation
Red Cross Lane
Cambridge
CB2 0QU
United Kingdom
<https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/>