

Summary

Across England and Wales, there are more than one million people who do not speak English “well” or “at all” – more than one-third of whom are UK citizens.

Many of the people who speak English as their other language (ESOL) have wide-ranging knowledge, skills, and experience. For example, 50% have tertiary qualifications but skills and experience are unrecognised and underutilised because of the language barriers people face.

Language provision can be lifechanging, but all too often, is insufficient, inappropriate, or inaccessible. Currently, the vast majority of learners leave ESOL without the language skills they need to participate in social interaction and to progress to further education and employment, resulting in many being un- or underemployed.

The ESOL core curriculum and qualifications were first introduced more than 20 years ago and are ripe for review. Key changes are needed to bring ESOL methodology and assessment up to date, so that learners have access to effective language teaching, which provides them with the skills they need, not only to survive but to thrive in education, employment, and daily life.

In developing our recommendations for change, we consulted widely with the sector. They expressed strong agreement that reform is essential.

*“This document voices the many concerns of ESOL teachers about the current curriculum, especially in FE colleges. It sets learners up to fail to attain the proficiency they need” - **consultation respondent.***

The full report and recommendations can be accessed [here](#).

The review makes recommendations on the following areas:

Revision of the ESOL language learning framework

*“Language competence has been neglected and students have been short-changed as a result. The level of difficulty of different exam boards’ ESOL exams and assessment varies at the moment” - **consultation respondent.***

- Create an ESOL framework that is aligned with research evidence on adult language learning. This includes introducing major aspects such as vocabulary and listening, which are currently lacking.
- Introduce standards that are specific to ESOL language learning, from which qualifications can be derived and regulated, and from which providers can construct curricula for different types of provision, such as for young learners and apprentices.
- Provide a balance of ESOL learning content which covers both language for day-to-day living *and* language for work and for study, aligned with the priorities of learners.
- Use the findings from the Ofqual study on ESOL¹ to ensure that learning content is evenly distributed across the levels, so that learners do not face an overly heavy learning load when progressing from one level to another.

¹ Ofqual (2022) [Understanding ESOL Skills for Life qualifications - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/104444/Understanding_ESOL_Skills_for_Life_qualifications_-_GOV.UK.pdf)

Appropriate support for learners to progress to further education and employment

“This is the first fully comprehensive report on ESOL that fully addresses all of the deficiencies in current provision. For 20 years I have argued the case for Level 3 ESOL and putting ESOL on an equal footing financially to Functional Skills” - consultation respondent.

- Abandon the de-facto approach to set ESOL Entry 3 as sufficient to transfer to mainstream vocational/educational provision and employment. This level is too low for learners to progress to mainstream provision, resulting in learners struggling with “language overload” and drop-out.
- Establish the minimum levels of English that learners need to progress from ESOL to mainstream courses, such as health and social care, GCSE English, and business administration, as they all have different language requirements.
- Introduce parity of course provision and funding that enables providers to offer provision that best suits ESOL learners and their goals. ESOL provision should typically be the option of choice rather than Functional Skills English (which was created for learners who speak English as their first language).
- Providers should apply the Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) principles and the Gatsby benchmarks (<https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/>) for learners whose first language is not English, ensuring that learners understand the options available to them, including the language levels they will need to achieve their goals.

Data collection on learners of ESOL

- In order to address the almost total lack of data on ESOL learners, add a field marker to the Individualised Learning Record (ILR).
- Use this data to monitor and evaluate the impact of provision on learning and learners’ progress, and to inform course planning and quality improvement.

The capacity of the sector to assess and teach effectively

- Provide training to ensure teachers are able to assess and teach learners effectively. This should include subject knowledge of the English language system and the principles of language teaching, as well as the ability to assess learners’ language skills and needs from the beginning to the end of the course.

The need for a national policy and strategy

- Produce and implement an ESOL policy which sets out strategic plans and targets for the delivery of ESOL in England.
- Establish criteria to assess and monitor the impact of ESOL provision on learning, achievement, and progression to mainstream provision and employment. At a national and regional level, review the effectiveness of delivery at regular intervals and make improvements where necessary.

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