

May 2024

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# ESOL Qualifications and Curriculum Review

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## Foreword

For many speakers of English as a second or additional language in the UK, effective language provision can be lifechanging – the key to unlocking education, employment, and social opportunities.

There are more than one million people in England and Wales who do not speak English “well” or “at all” – more than one-third of whom are UK citizens, with skills, knowledge, and experience that are going unrecognised and underutilised because of the language barriers they face.

All too often this potential remains untapped because of language provision that is insufficient or inappropriate, leaving learners without the skills they need. This report explores what needs to change, to ensure learners receive the appropriate learning opportunities to not only survive, but to thrive in education, employment and daily life.

At The Bell Foundation, our work aims to overcome exclusion through language education by working with partners on innovation, research, training and practical interventions. Through generating and applying evidence, we aim to change practice, policy and systems for children, adults, and communities in the UK disadvantaged through language.

This report is driven by our commitment to collaboration and evidence. Following a consultation with practitioners and experts from across the sector, we explore the current delivery of ESOL qualifications, core curriculum, and classroom practice. Respondents to the consultation expressed wide agreement that reform is essential to promote effective language learning, exams, and regulation. We provide recommendations for improvement, so that ESOL reflects the evidence of what works, as well as the needs and priorities of learners.

The review of the curriculum announced by the Department for Education (DfE) in October 2022, and of the corresponding qualifications by Ofqual, offer an important opportunity to make these changes a reality. We hope that our recommendations will be valuable and insightful to policymakers, regulators and standards setters working for DfE, Ofqual, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), and funding bodies\* alike.

Finally, I would like to express our sincere thanks to the individuals and organisations who responded to the consultation, sharing their expertise, experience and time with us, as together we seek to shape a vision for the future of effective ESOL.

**Diana Sutton**  
**Director, The Bell Foundation**

\* The abbreviations used in the text are explained in the glossary at the end of the document.

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is threefold:

- To provide an overview of current English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) qualifications and the curriculum, and their impact on ESOL delivery, learners' progress and progression to further study and employment.
- To set out practical proposals, informed by research evidence, to improve ESOL standards, qualifications and methodology. This need has arisen because the Skills for Life ESOL curriculum and qualifications are 20 years old and in need of reform.
- To shed light on the extent to which ESOL provision meets the needs of migrants, refugees and employers. Evidence shows that migrants and refugees can make a significant contribution to the economy and the UK labour market, provided they have sufficient language skills.

In December 2023, The Bell Foundation consulted the sector on a draft version of this paper. Over 130 individuals and groups of experts and practitioners responded, ranging from adult education providers, further education (FE) colleges, local authorities, awarding bodies, Government departments, charities, and mayoral combined authorities (MCAs). Agreement with the analysis and recommendations was very high indeed, ranging from 85-97%. Two roundtables were held subsequently with ESOL teachers, managers, and policymakers to present the analysis of the responses received and explore arising themes further. Pie charts recording approval ratings and an overview of comments on the recommendations are available in Appendix 1. The outcomes of the consultation have informed the contents of this paper.

The structure of the paper is as follows:

- Section 2 sets out key facts on ESOL learners and provision.
- Sections 3-9 provide an analysis of ESOL provision and evaluation of its impact on learners' progress and achievement as well as recommendations for improvement.
- Appendix 1 records respondents' comments on important aspects beyond the direct scope of this paper, e.g. funding and access to ESOL classes.

## 2. Key information on migrants and refugees, ESOL qualifications, and delivery

This section sets out key facts and data on migrants and refugees as well as on ESOL delivery. The information given in the box below underpins the content of the rest of this document.

### The profile of migrants and refugees

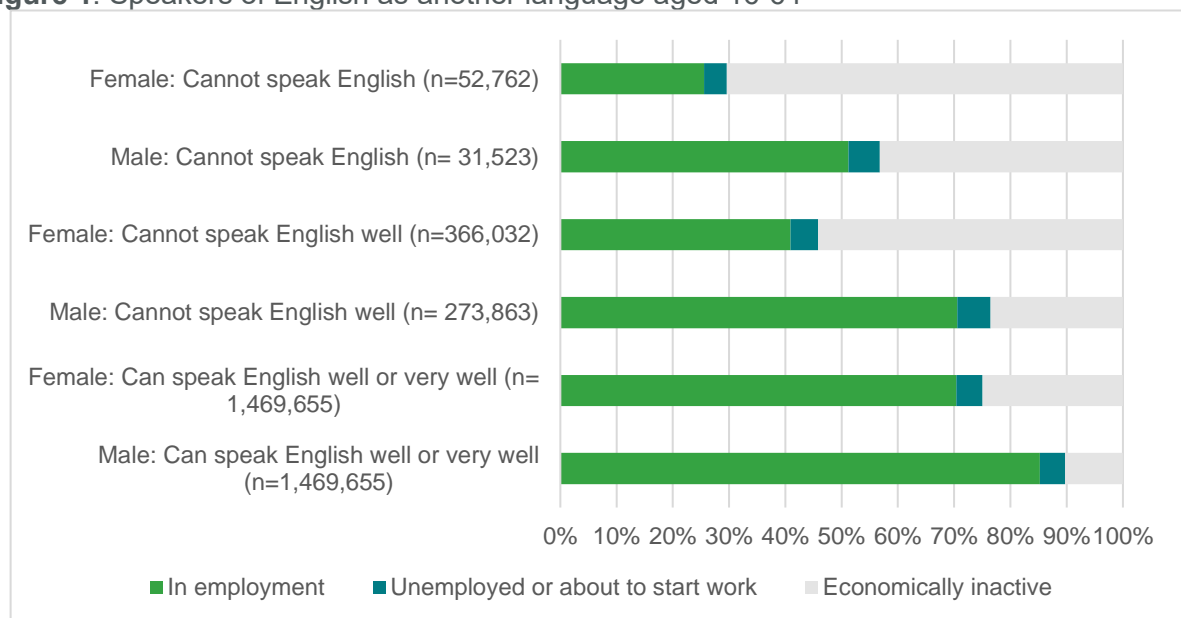
- Migrants' and refugees' language skills vary enormously, from no English to complete proficiency in professional domains. Their education, skills, and experience also vary, from no or little prior education in their home country to very high expertise indeed. The proportion of migrants with tertiary education is high and rising: in 2021, 50% were educated at tertiary level (compared to 39% of UK-born citizens)<sup>1</sup>; and the percentage of migrants with degrees increased by 8% in the decade leading up to 2020.

- According to the 2021 Census data for England and Wales<sup>2</sup>, 5.1 million people across all age groups self-reported as not having English as their first language: 2.7 million females and 2.4 million males. Of these, 77% of females and 83% of males indicate that they speak English well or very well; 19% of females and 15% of males that they do not speak English well; and 4% of females and 2% of males that they do not speak English at all.

This indicates that **over 1 million, 621,000 females and 414,000 males, could not speak English well or at all**, a substantial increase from the 726,000 recorded in 2011. The Census data are self-reported and the number of adults needing English language provision in England and Wales may in fact be much higher. There is also evidence that second and third generations born in the UK may lack sufficient English language skills to handle day-to-day communication and find employment beyond casual work<sup>3</sup>. The 2021 Census data show that 23,000 people who were born in the UK did not speak English at all or did not speak it well.

- This chart shows a clear link between employment and self-declared ability to speak English (please note that the figures given exclude those who are students).

**Figure 1: Speakers of English as another language aged 16-64**



- The high level of skills and experience that migrants and refugees bring with them provides a huge economic dividend. But **without sufficient English language skills, individuals are unable to unlock their considerable potential**. Adult learners attending ESOL provision know this: the vast majority have as their priority to learn English for work and study<sup>4</sup>.
- The vast majority of learners currently leave ESOL provision with language skills of a level too low to make a successful transition to further and higher education, and to function fully in society and employment. Anecdotal evidence indicates that many learners end up underemployed, working in jobs that are substantially below their educational levels, skills, and experience.
- Learners who did not have access to education in their country of origin need extra time to learn English. With adequate time to learn, many are able to gain qualifications and overcome educational disadvantage. For this group of learners, with long language learning trajectories ahead, evidence-based teaching and appropriate sequencing of content are especially key.

## ESOL provision, data on participation and funding

- ESOL provision has been very negatively affected by cuts in funding from 2010, both in terms of funding per learner and the number of places available. As a result, the number of enrolments fell dramatically by 36% from 179,000 to 114,000 between 2009/10 and 2017/18<sup>5</sup>. As the table below indicates, 2021/22 and 2022/23 have seen a major increase in enrolments. However, this is against an increase in the number of new arrivals and continued low funding rates for ESOL provision. Yet the need for a skilled labour force with proficiency in the English language is greater than ever, as high demand in the labour market shows.
- The DfE data table below shows ESOL enrolment and achievement for 2017/18 to 2022/23 (the glossary at the end of this document provides an overview of the ESOL levels and a comparison to literacy and GCSE qualifications).

**Figure 2:** ESOL enrolment and achievement, 2017/18 – 2022/23

		17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23
<b>Adults</b>	Enrolment	114,330	120,490	116,070	97,260	123,730	151,510
	Level 2	5,610	6,560	6,510	6,300	6,450	7,260
		5%	5%	6%	6%	5%	5%
	Level 1	16,650	18,230	18,050	16,830	18,210	21,230
		15%	15%	16%	17%	15%	14%
	Entry	96,190	100,130	95,580	78,920	104,130	123,020
		84%	83%	82%	81%	84%	81%
	Achievement	100,150	106,170	99,410	84,770	107,030*	126,789
<b>16-18</b>	Enrolment	No data collected					
	Achievement	No data collected					

\* Please note that the sum of adult participation at Entry, Level 1 and Level 2 is greater than the overall total of enrolments. This is because learners who attend provision at more than one level - most likely because they completed their course mid-year - are counted separately for each of the levels that they take.

- Two aspects stand out. First, the vast majority of adult ESOL learners enrol on Entry 1-3 provision, after which numbers taper off markedly to 15% for Level 1 and 5% for Level 2. In funding terms, pre-Entry and Entry 1-3 provision attracts the vast majority of the Adult Education Budget (AEB). Entry levels also draw most of the short-term Government project funding that is periodically released.

Second, it is not possible to report on the number of ESOL enrolments and achievements for 16–18-year-old learners because **DfE data tables do not provide information on the number of young ESOL learners on study programmes**<sup>6</sup>. We know anecdotally that many FE colleges have significant numbers of young learners on full-time ESOL provision. From a policy point of view, it is of concern that the lack of enrolment and achievement data affects thematic reviews, research, and inspection activity. The invisibility of young ESOL learners also has a negative impact on the planning for new initiatives e.g. most recently, the Advanced British Standard.

- The lack of available and published data on ESOL learners affects not just 16-18 study programmes provision. The same problem arises with other further education and skills (FES) programmes: adult non-ESOL courses, vocational training/apprenticeships, functional skills qualifications, and provision for learners with high needs. This means that neither Government departments, providers nor Ofsted have information on the vast majority of second language learners, their numbers, progress, retention, and achievement.

- The funding, tools, qualifications, and the hours of tuition are not sufficient to enable learners to make the progress required to function in society and work. Canberra Technical and Further Education (TAFE) College data, subsequently verified by the Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade in Australia, found that it takes on average 1765 hours for learners to gain independence and employment<sup>7</sup>. On the basis of **four hours' language lessons a week, the average learner would need 14.5 years to use English well enough** to get a job or manage to attend and complete a vocational course. A study by the National Center for ESL Literacy Education 2003<sup>8</sup> calculates that it takes 500-1000 hours of instruction for adults who are literate in their first language to reach survival level, i.e., to cope with basic daily interaction.
- Provision for learners who need to improve their English and maths skills is free for all; whereas access to ESOL provision is not. This is counterproductive in terms of long-term integration and employment prospects. It also disadvantages ESOL learners who are UK citizens. The 2021 Census data show that, of 759,000 people of working age who reported that they cannot speak English well or at all, 35% have UK nationality.
- Providers are obliged to check the eligibility of all learners who join ESOL classes to make sure that they are in the UK legitimately and are entitled to attend.
- The recently introduced enhanced skills inspections by Ofsted have the potential to identify and monitor the skills development of learners beyond discrete ESOL as well as the contribution they make to meeting local, regional, and national skills needs. Similarly, Local Skills Improvement Plans provide an excellent opportunity to plan language provision which makes best use of second language speakers' skills and experience.

### 3. Revision of the ESOL core curriculum and role of the National Standards for Adult Literacy

*“...the curriculum is 20 years old, its linguistic framework is out of date, and it is no longer in line with research evidence on second language acquisition.”*

The DfE announced in October 2022 that the adult ESOL curriculum is to be reviewed. This is welcome as the curriculum is 20 years old, its linguistic framework is out of date, and it is no longer in line with research evidence on second language acquisition. Instances abound of inaccurate sequencing of language development, one of the key tenets of the Ofsted Education Inspection Framework<sup>9</sup>, and well-attested aspects of language learning are missing, for example vocabulary and listening skills. This misalignment has resulted in a negative impact on the quality of teaching and learning, and the progress that learners make. As a result, funds for ESOL provision are not spent as effectively as they could be.

**Figure 3:** Language competence and the four language skills



A second barrier to effective learning is the decision in 2001 to base the ESOL curriculum on the National Standards for Adult Literacy. This imposes learning objectives designed for first language speakers, who are fluent in English but need help with reading and writing, on ESOL learners who are in the process of developing the underpinning English language competence to understand and communicate in English (see figure 3). They need to learn how the English language works, e.g. in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, as well as how the English language is expressed in the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Schellekens (2011) sets out in detail the differences between the language profiles and learning needs of first and second language speakers<sup>10</sup>.

The imposition of the literacy standards on the ESOL core curriculum and provision has had a detrimental effect on quality. Government spending is not being used effectively because adult literacy learning goals do not align well with the needs of people whose first language is not English. For example, the Functional Skills English reading curriculum has a strong focus on recognising text genre, when second language speakers need help with underpinning skills, such as understanding the meaning of words and tenses, e.g. the present perfect/simple past: “I have lived/lived in the UK”, or the passive voice: “The form should be returned” and that this is an instruction on which the reader is expected to act.

***“Government spending is not being used effectively because adult literacy learning goals do not align well with the needs of people whose first language is not English.”***

The lack of rigour in standards setting has also allowed too much variability between awarding bodies’ exams. As the recent Ofqual study on ESOL exams<sup>11</sup> indicates, the result has been an insufficiently robust framework to ensure parity of qualifications and levels between awarding bodies. The Ofqual study also provides evidence that the degree of language demand across the ESOL levels is not evenly calibrated. This confirms concerns in the ESOL community that the learning load of the levels and qualifications is inconsistent,

which in turn has a major impact on enrolment and achievement rates. Ofqual is to be commended for undertaking this work and for planning further steps to address inconsistencies in the ESOL qualifications framework.

## Recommendations

The DfE has committed to a review of the National Standards for Adult Literacy and the ESOL core curriculum. The recommendations below set out key research-evidenced priorities for the revision and introduction of language learning priorities. These are currently lacking in the ESOL core curriculum and are critical to achieving effective ESOL delivery, standards, and exams.

- Underpin the revision of ESOL with **evidence-based research on language learning**.
- Ensure that **ESOL qualifications and exams are well-structured, and that outcomes are reliable and valid**. This should include sufficient and representative testing so that judgements made on the knowledge and skills of learners are sound.
- **Work from a true ESOL learner-centred focus**, rather than a blend of first and second language learning criteria, which reflects the learning trajectory from the very beginner level, pre-Entry 1, onwards. This should include both the development of English language skills and the contexts in which learners want and need to communicate. For example, Schellekens (2001) found that beginner learners prioritised language for daily life *and* for work and study, whereas after two years learners prioritised language for work and study alone<sup>12</sup>. Lastly, the outcome of the review should be an effective road map for teachers to plan and deliver relevant learning, and for awarding bodies to set valid and reliable exams.
- Use the outcomes of the 2022 Ofqual ESOL study to **allocate learning content across the ESOL levels equally**, so that learners and providers are not disadvantaged from enrolling and achieving on course levels with overly heavy learning loads.
- **Assess listening and speaking skills separately** rather than through one exam with one joint score. There are significant differences in the development of these two skills. Currently, listening is significantly under-examined, under-assessed and taught, despite being the most significant factor in learning a new language, especially at the early stages.
- Include the **skill of decoding spoken language alongside the teaching of listening as comprehension**. This should include lexical segmentation, i.e. the ability of learners to decode and understand the stream of sound in spoken English. Without explicit instruction on the linking of sounds and words in spoken language, learners struggle to understand spoken English, and many never do so to a functional degree. Listening skills are, in turn, the essential cornerstone from which to develop speaking, reading and writing, vocabulary, and grammar<sup>13</sup>. Once learners can distinguish the sounds of the English language, they are then able to transfer them into speaking skills: e.g. pronunciation, linking words, stress, and intonation.



- The **inclusion and foregrounding of vocabulary development**. While this aspect has risen in importance in linguistics research in the last 40 years<sup>14</sup>, it is lacking both in the ESOL core curriculum and in the national literacy standards. Research indicates that vocabulary development is key to oral communication, reading, and writing for *both* first and second language speakers<sup>15</sup>. Vocabulary size has also proved to be predictive of general levels of language. Vocabulary testing in ESOL exams would hence add a valuable tool to reliable assessment outcomes.
- For most beginner learners, the **development of literacy skills comes too early** at Entry 1 in the core curriculum. Research indicates that linguistic competence, i.e. sufficient listening, vocabulary, speaking and grammar skills, needs to be in place before reading can be meaningfully introduced<sup>16</sup>. And writing can only be developed once learners have mastered word decoding and reading for meaning. The review of the ESOL core curriculum should take these research findings into account when planning the introduction of reading and writing.
- **Reading for gist and skimming text** features heavily in the current ESOL core curriculum from Entry 1 onwards<sup>17</sup>. Yet there is much research evidence that these types of reading skills require high-level vocabulary and reading fluency, typical of fluent first language readers. For example, readers need knowledge of 95% of words to understand text<sup>18</sup>, a finding which applies to first and second language speakers alike. It is clear that reading for gist and skimming text are beyond the capacity of learners at Entry 1-3 and indeed likely at the higher ESOL levels as well.

The application of the linguistic concepts outlined above could bring improved standards and exams, with positive washback into the classroom, i.e. impact on the quality of learning and achievement, rather than is currently the case. This will also result in better use of Government funding and help learners' motivation because they will make better and faster progress.

### 3.1 The need for a reference framework

*“Respondents to the consultation expressed **wide agreement that reform is essential to promote effective language learning, exams, and regulation.**”*

In addition to the priorities for ESOL learning and assessment set out above, there is the question of the most suitable framework to set standards and exams. Respondents to the consultation expressed wide agreement that reform is essential to promote effective language learning, exams, and regulation. In the view of The Bell Foundation, there are three possible approaches, which are set out below.

#### Option one

Revise the ESOL core curriculum and keep it as a base from which to derive ESOL exams and regulation. While the advantage is continuity, it remains an unorthodox approach in the National Qualifications Framework to derive and regulate qualifications from a curriculum rather than standards. A second issue is that the focus of the core curriculum at the time of its design was on the needs of adult learners and their need for communication in their daily lives. Twenty years later, the change in both the Government's and learners' priorities

towards employment and further study create a need for the development of language learning in much wider contexts and age range than that for which the curriculum was designed. Thirdly, the revision of the ESOL core curriculum would need to be extensive. It is 411 pages long and would entail major work, not just on linguistic aspects but also on the sample language activities. Lastly, feedback from respondents to the consultation indicates that the core curriculum has fallen out of use. Teachers and managers hardly use the ESOL core curriculum anymore; but rather rely on awarding bodies' exam specifications.

### **Option two**

Revise the ESOL exams, as some respondents to the questionnaire have suggested, because these have become so key to planning, teaching, and learning. However, it is hard to see how this could be done, as a common reference framework is required from which qualifications can be developed. Ofqual needs standards in order to carry out its regulatory functions to ensure that qualifications reliably reflect learners' knowledge, skills, and understanding. This is crucial as the Ofqual ESOL study (2022) concluded that there currently is significant variation between awarding bodies' qualifications.

### **Option three**

Construct standards which are ESOL language learning-specific, from which qualifications can be derived and regulated, and from which providers can construct curricula for learning. As the focus would be on measuring language development, this is the simplest and most logical step. Its advantage is that learners would learn English in line with attested methodology; and can be expected to create positive washback from accurate descriptive standards onto classroom practice and learning.

In addition, the existence of ESOL standards would make it possible to apply them to any context and type of learning programme, such as adult discrete ESOL, adult non-ESOL courses, study programmes for 16–18-year-olds, vocational training and apprenticeships, A and T levels, and high needs provision for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities.

If the development of ESOL standards is adopted, it may be beneficial to make use of existing language frameworks such as the GCSE MFL specifications and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). While the CEFR was developed to describe European languages initially, the framework is now used all over the world, with many language standards and tests aligned to the CEFR levels. This includes the UK, where the Ofqual 2022 ESOL study used the CEFR levels as a framework to investigate aspects of the Skills for Life exams. In particular, research on language learning in the CEFR context and the English Vocabulary and Grammar Profiles<sup>19</sup> would bring major benefits, with the latter being specific to the learning of English as an other/additional language.

### **Recommendation**

The Bell Foundation has considered the merits of the options set out above. Our analysis indicates that option three is the most appropriate and effective, both in the short and long term. We urge the DfE to consider this as the best way forward to developing the ESOL standards and exams.

### 3.2 The focus on language for work and study

The ESOL core curriculum currently focuses almost exclusively on language for survival, e.g. home and family, shopping, the use of public services, and health care. While this coverage is useful, especially in the early stages of settlement, it is not enough to enable learners to enter the labour market. In more recent years, the focus of Government policy has shifted to adult learners' employment prospects as well as participation in life in modern Britain. Consistency with Government policy is crucial, not least because it aligns well with the aspirations of learners themselves. There is no recent research on the reasons why learners join ESOL provision but Schellekens (2001) showed overwhelmingly that adult learners' priority was to improve language for work and study<sup>20</sup>, and to be financially independent.

#### Recommendations

- Provide a balance of ESOL learning content which covers **both language for day-to-day living and language for work**. This will mean creating content and tasks from scratch for the latter, likely from Entry 3 onwards as it is then that learners begin to have the necessary language skills to tackle language for work. For example, asking for clarification and repetition; the appropriate use of formal and informal language in the workplace, both in speaking and writing; writing a brief report; and understanding health and safety regulations.
- **Incorporate language for study** into the ESOL standards/core curriculum. Many learners aspire to progress to mainstream\* provision, such as health and social care, engineering and construction, IT, and childcare. Others need to take GCSEs to (re)qualify as nurses, social workers, and scientists. Both adults on discrete ESOL provision and 16–19-year-old learners on study programmes need explicit instruction on language for study, so that they are able to make a successful transition out of discrete ESOL onto vocational/educational courses.
- Establish the language levels and types of skills required for entry to mainstream provision (for examples of courses, see the previous bullet point), and feed these into the ESOL standards and curriculum review.
- Build **targeted language development for learners with prior skills and experience** into the ESOL standards and curriculum. For example, Local Skills Development Plans may provide useful information to establish local, national, and regional skills needs and employment trends.
- Ensure that **Ofsted assesses ESOL learners' progression** onto vocational training provision and employment during the enhanced skills part of inspections. This should also include access to specialist course provision set up as joint college-employer initiatives, e.g. for NHS employment, engineering, digital, and health and social care.

\* The term "mainstream" provision is commonly used to refer to general vocational and educational courses.

## 4. Learners' ability to function independently and progress to further education and employment

Since 2001, when the Skills for Life strategy was launched, Government policy has increasingly become focused on the delivery of ESOL provision at beginner levels. As DfE data in section 2 show, most learners leave ESOL provision with Entry 1-3 qualifications.

Currently, learners who have passed Entry 3 are deemed to have sufficient language skills to make the transition to mainstream provision. However, the fact that many learners struggle and drop out indicates that this language level is not sufficient. Entry 3 is too low for learners to make a successful transition to mainstream education and training, e.g. health and social care, GCSE English, engineering, or business administration courses. Learners experience language overload, such as understanding teaching input and course content which, after all, keeps first language English speakers on their toes. Producing written assignments creates even higher demands. The sector lacks data on retention but anecdotal evidence indicates that many ESOL learners drop out at an early stage because they lack the necessary language skills to cope with course content.

Equally, adults who achieve Entry 3 are not able to communicate sufficiently well in day-to-day situations, e.g. talking to their children's teacher or understanding information given during a doctor's appointment.

### Recommendations

- Abandon the de-facto approach to set ESOL Entry 3 as sufficient to transfer to mainstream vocational/educational provision and employment; and raise it to a sufficient level that enables learners to cope with the language load of their vocational and educational course. This will vary from course to course, depending on language demands.
- Awarding bodies, employers and providers – in consultation with Ofqual and IfATE – should assess the language load of mainstream vocational, and education courses, such as catering, IT, and GCSEs. They should use this information to create language profiles which describe the **minimum levels of English required for a successful transition** from ESOL to mainstream provision.
- Since it is likely that the language load of a good proportion of vocational and educational courses have high language demands that exceed Level 2 ESOL, policymakers should consider the need for a Level 3 ESOL qualification. Examples of high language demand courses are childcare, counselling, business administration, teacher training, Access to Higher Education (HE) courses, and T and A levels. In the long term, courses delivered under the Advanced British Standard are particularly likely to also fit into this category.

## 5. Advice and guidance and Functional Skills English

In recent years, the number of ESOL learners who move from ESOL Entry 3 to Functional Skills (FS) English Level 1 has risen dramatically. Providers state that this shift is due to FS English being funded more generously and being free to all learners; whereas many ESOL learners have to pay. Many managers and teachers also perceive FS English to be more appropriate than Levels 1 and 2 ESOL. This view is not necessarily borne out by experience in the classroom, however. Both teachers and learners struggle with FS English content because it was created for learners who speak English as their first language. This puts

pressure on English language teachers who do not have the skills to teach English as an Additional Language, and do not necessarily teach it well as a result. They also lack the focus and time to work on language-specific aspects such as grammar, pronunciation, etc. set out in section 3.

The Education and Training Foundation (ETF) commissioned research on the suitability of FS English for ESOL learners in 2021<sup>21</sup>. Over 110 providers responded, and the key findings were:

1. Learners of ESOL made up more than 60% of learners on FS English courses for over a quarter of providers. This was especially the case for 16–19-year-olds on study programmes. This means that in many colleges there are more learners of ESOL on FS English provision than there are first language speakers.
2. Respondents expressed concern that FS English courses do not meet the needs of people whose first language is not English. This is in line with Schellekens' 2011 study on the needs of ESOL learners and the suitability of the FS English curriculum<sup>22</sup>.
3. Participants reported that FS English teachers do not have the skills to teach learners of ESOL and, as a result, learners do not make the progress of which they are capable.

The ETF study confirms that FS English does not align at all well with the needs of learners whose first language is not English. But this does not just affect ESOL students: FS English delivery to mixed first and second language speaker groups has a negative impact on the learning opportunities for first language speakers as well. This is because teaching classes of mixed first and second language speakers is especially taxing, with a conflict of differing priorities.

## Recommendations

- A **different further education and skills funding model** is needed to ensure that providers offer provision that best suits ESOL learners and their goals. The aim should be to enable learners of ESOL to make good progress in their use and understanding of English, and to progress to further study and employment. Unless there is a clear indication to the contrary, ESOL rather than FS English provision should be the option of choice.
- Providers should apply the Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) principles and the Gatsby benchmarks<sup>23</sup> used in the sector for learners whose first language is not English. They should establish learners' existing skills and experience, and their short and long-term aspirations. They should also provide in-depth advice and guidance on how learners of ESOL might achieve their goals. This should include explicit and realistic guidance on the likely level of language skills needed for their long-term goals, as well as the best course options available. As a result of CEIAG, learners should understand the options available to them, including the levels of language they will need to operate in their chosen sector.
- **Ofsted inspectors should check that providers apply the CEIAG principles and Gatsby benchmarks to learners whose first language is not English;** and that learners have a good understanding of their career options and progression routes.

## 6. Data on learners of ESOL

*“...the sector does not know how many enrol, how they fare once on programme, how many drop out and at what stage, and how well they achieve.”*

As set out above, data on ESOL are limited to the DfE’s annual returns on discrete adult post-19 provision. This means that Government departments, providers, teachers, and their managers – as well as Ofsted – do not know and nor systematically collect data on how many second language speakers are on FES mainstream vocational and educational programmes. This includes study programmes, FS and GCSE English and maths, vocational training, apprenticeships, A and T levels, and high needs provision for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. As a result, the sector does not know how many enrol, how they fare once on a programme, how many drop out and at what stage, and how well they achieve. It also means that it is impossible to demonstrate the impact of public investment in educating learners whose first language is not English.

This is a major issue, as the number of second language speakers on FES provision is considerable. For example, some FE colleges in metropolitan areas have stated that the number of second language speakers on programme is over 50%. But rural areas often also have higher numbers of second language speakers than one might expect, because of dispersal programmes as a result of accommodation scarcity and housing cost in major cities, or because of employment opportunities with local employers, e.g. in hospitality, agriculture, and manufacturing.

There is another longstanding phenomenon for which no data, only anecdotal evidence, are available: men are vastly underrepresented on adult discrete post-19 ESOL provision, with typically 70-80% of adult learners being female. The FES sector needs data to identify and investigate causes and plan improvements, so that provision can be targeted equitably and the impact of initiatives to improve can be monitored.

### Recommendations

- The rationale is clear: the DfE, funding bodies, leaders and managers, and Ofsted need to know how many second language speakers enrol on FES provision and how well they achieve across all provision types. This information is key to understanding the size and nature of the ESOL target group, and progression across different provision types. It is also key to informing course provision and monitoring of impact at sector, provision type, and local provider level.
- The DfE and Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) should **add an additional field marker to the Individualised Learning Record (ILR)** which identifies learners whose first language is not English across the learning journey, from discrete ESOL to vocational/apprenticeships and educational courses.
- Once the ESOL ILR marker has been introduced, providers should use enrolment and outcome data to monitor impact on learning and learners’ progress, and to inform course planning and quality improvement.
- MCAs need data to align ESOL provision and outcomes to local, regional, and national economic priorities.

## 7. The capacity of the sector to assess and teach effectively

An out-of-date ESOL core curriculum – alongside a confined exam focus – have affected teachers' subject-specific knowledge and skills, and the quality of teaching, learning, and assessment. This means that there is work to do to upskill the teaching workforce.

In addition, the long-term funding focus on beginner learners has affected the capacity of many teachers to teach the higher levels of English required to achieve ESOL Levels 1 and 2. Initial and in-service training have lacked focus on the assessment of learners' language skills as key to the planning and monitoring of learning.

### Recommendations

- Ensure that teachers have subject-specific knowledge of the English language system and the principles of language teaching. **Design and implement staff training** that is informed by sound evidence-based research and strategies to promote effective learning across all levels of learning.
- Ensure that teachers have the skills and understanding to assess learners' language skills and needs across the learning cycle – from initial and diagnostic to on-course and final assessment. The latter is especially relevant when learners' progress is internally assessed and validated. The result of assessment activity should be outcomes with sufficient quality and depth to enable effective planning of learning, monitoring of progress, and in-the-moment support during lessons.
- Develop the capacity and focus of teachers to provide appropriate stretch and challenge in lessons, so that learners make the progress which they are capable of.
- Develop appropriate tools to assess and monitor learners' skills development, especially for listening and speaking.
- Develop teachers' capacity to incorporate vocational training, and employability and employment content into discrete ESOL course planning and delivery.

## 8. The economic argument for ESOL provision

Funding for ESOL provision has been a key consideration for both policymakers and ESOL providers. However, it is not the only financial factor to be considered. As stated above, learners need to have sufficient language skills to find employment. Once in work, they can be expected to pay tax and to need fewer or no benefits. Being in work also promotes well-being and integration into society. From an employer point of view, second language speakers are a valuable source of labour, especially considering the high level of prior qualifications and skills that so many have. However, without sufficient English, migrants and refugees are likely to remain un- or under- employed and to require long-term financial support through benefits.

## 9. The need for a national policy and strategy

In the last two decades, political parties, think tanks and a multitude of reports have explored the nature of ESOL support for recent refugee and migrant arrivals as well as those communities which have been resident in the UK for many years<sup>24</sup>. They have called for investment in ESOL and a national strategy. However, the reality has been very different. ESOL policy, strategy, and funding have lacked clarity and direction and have been characterised by stop/start initiatives, cuts in funding, and changes to eligibility criteria and multiple funding streams. This has resulted in a lack of coherence and direction. While responsibility for the delivery of ESOL is increasingly decided at a local and regional level, a need remains for an overarching strategy and plan for the future of ESOL provision.

### Recommendations

- Produce and implement **an ESOL policy which sets out strategic plans and targets for the delivery of ESOL in England**. Cross-government coordination is key, considering the very many departments and organisations involved with aspects such as policy, standards, qualifications, delivery, funding, examinations, teacher training, audit, inspection and, lately, the mayoral combined authorities.
- Ensure that the funding for ESOL and the conditions for funding are clear and sufficient for learners to achieve independence and employability; and that instruments provided enable effective language learning. Of primary importance is the need for the policy and implementation to be **informed by research evidence on adult second language acquisition**.
- Establish **criteria to assess and monitor the impact of ESOL provision on learning, achievement, and progression to mainstream provision and employment**. Review the effectiveness of delivery at regular intervals and make improvements where necessary.



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## Appendix 1: Aspects raised beyond the scope of the consultation

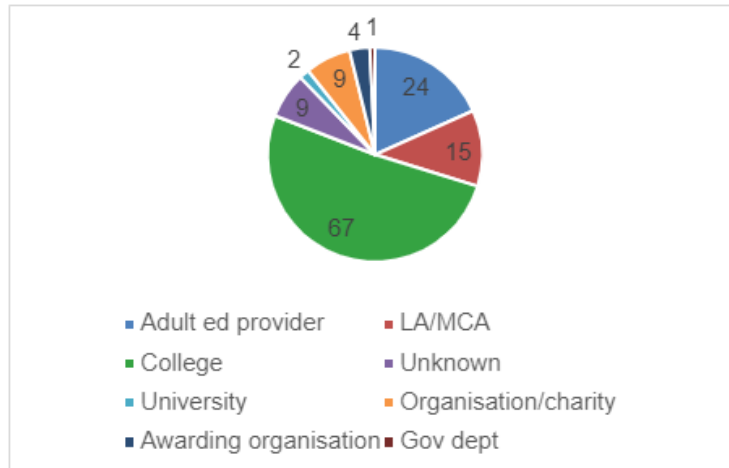
In addition to feedback about the content of the consultation document, respondents also provided comments on aspects that are beyond the direct scope of this paper. The summary below is a record of key sector concerns.

- Multiple calls for adequate funding, sufficient provision, and hours for learners to learn.
- Funding rules distort provision and are punitive, e.g. the loss of 20% of funding when learners fail their exam.
- The postcode lottery of ESOL provision, e.g. major variation in classes, levels, and the number of hours' learning per week.
- Unequal access to ESOL courses, e.g. Ukrainians have immediate access, many other nationalities have not. Learners who have been residents for less than three years miss out on vital language learning because of a block on funding. (N.B.: In some MCA areas the rule on three-year residency has been lifted).
- The need for proper pay and full-time contracts for teachers. Pay is a decisive factor in attracting suitable teachers.
- Recognition of the unique skill set that ESOL teachers need to have and their role as specialist teachers.
- Reflections on the merits of types of pedagogy, e.g. participatory practice, Dogme, TEFL.
- The impact of trauma on learning and the need for teacher training on this aspect.
- Negative washback effect of the curriculum and exams on teaching and learning, with too much teaching-to-the-test.
- The need for free and high-quality continuing professional development (CPD) and teacher training for all; and for teaching resources which are up-to-date and of high quality.
- Ofsted have neither the training nor the experience to be involved with ESOL provision. Experienced and qualified inspectors are needed.

## Appendix 2: Responses to the consultation

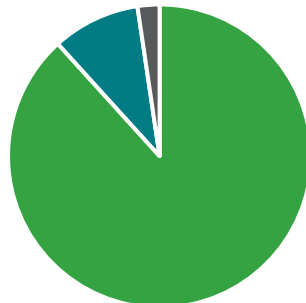
The Bell Foundation received 131 responses to the consultation from individuals and groups of respondents. The pie charts below show respondents' types of organisations, and give an overview of the proportions of (dis)agreement and did not reply.

### Overview of consultation respondents



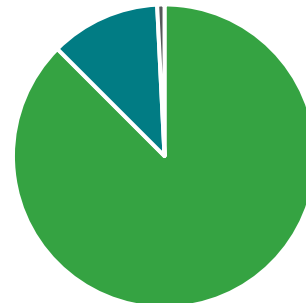
### Proportion of respondents who agreed, disagreed or did not respond

#### Key information on learners, ESOL qualifications and delivery



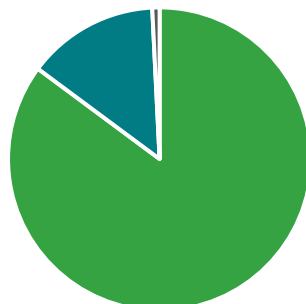
■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Did not respond

#### The revision of the ESOL core curriculum and link with National Literacy Standards



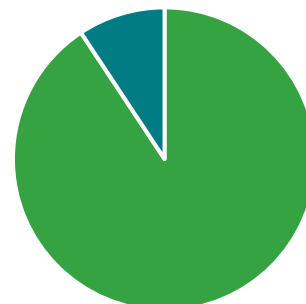
■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Did not respond

#### The inclusion of language for work and study as well as for daily life



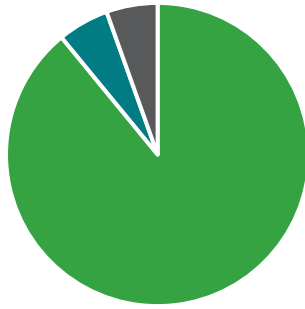
■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Did not respond

#### Progress to further education and employment



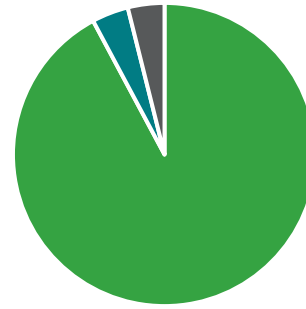
■ Agree ■ Disagree

**The appropriateness of referral to Functional Skills English**



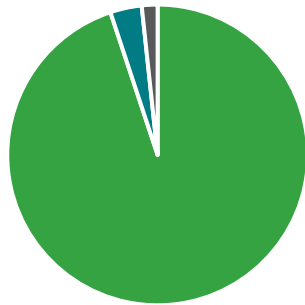
■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Did not respond

**Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance for learners of ESOL**



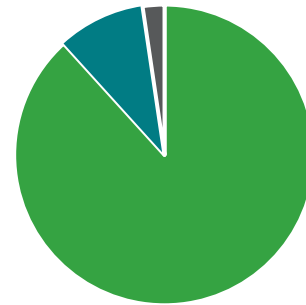
■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Did not respond

**The need for data on ESOL learners in FES**



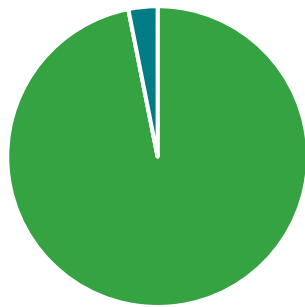
■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Did not answer

**The capacity of the sector to teach and assess ESOL**



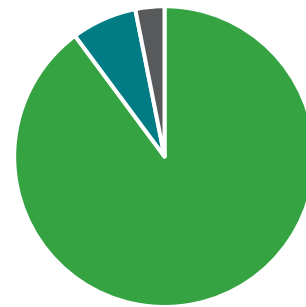
■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Did not answer

**The need for national policy/strategy**



■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Did not answer

**Agreement that the document as a whole identifies appropriate areas for the development of ESOL**



■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Did not answer

## Summary of feedback on the document as a whole

*“We support the consultation proposals, its rationale and ways forward in this long overdue ESOL review”.*

*“We agree in the main with the development areas in the document, but the focus on revising the curriculum is too strong and on revising qualifications too weak”.*

*“We think it would be a missed opportunity not to align the new curriculum with CEFR”.*

*“Fully endorse this document because it has clearly identified the main issues we face and has made practical, achievable suggestions that would benefit all stakeholders”.*

*“I am very excited by this consultation and the push for the review of ESOL. I hope that it is successful, it is much needed for the future development of our country”.*

*“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”.*

*“I would like to see more commitment to ensure the needs of low-level learners are met so they are able to progress”.*

*“More emphasis should be given to 16–18-year-old provision”.*

*“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”.*

*“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”.*

*“Thank you for taking the time to do this important work”.*

## Abbreviations and glossary

### **AEB: Adult Education Budget**

The aim of the Adult Education Budget is to provide learners aged 19+ with the skills and learning they need to progress into work or to improve their skills while at work. Currently the AEB budget funds the vast majority of ESOL provision.

### **CEIAG: Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance**

The aim of CEIAG is to provide learners with the knowledge, understanding, and skills that they need to make informed choices and plan for their future learning and career. Appropriate advice and guidance are especially relevant for learners who have settled in the UK, as they may not be familiar with education and training systems and choices, the process of applying for jobs and job interviews, and how best to present prior qualifications and experience when applying for jobs. The Gatsby benchmarks provide a useful framework to underpin quality CEIAG: <https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk>.

### **CEFR: The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages**

The CEFR was launched in 2001. Its original aim was to describe the achievements of learners of other/foreign languages across Europe. The framework is now used all over the world, and many language standards and tests are aligned to the CEFR levels. For example, the Ofqual 2022 study used the CEFR levels as a framework to investigate aspects of the Skills for Life exams. The CEFR has six levels, from A1 at beginner level, up to C2 for users who are proficient in the language. For each level, the CEFR describes what a learner can do when speaking, reading, listening, and writing in English.

### **DfE: Department for Education**

Government department in England responsible for children's and learners' education and services, including early years, schools, further and higher education, apprenticeships, and wider skills.

### **ESFA: Education and Skills Funding Agency**

The ESFA is an executive agency sponsored by the DfE. It allocates and monitors the use of funding to academy trusts, local authorities, colleges, and training providers for the education and training of children, young people, and adults.

### **ESOL: English for Speakers of Other Languages**

The term ESOL refers to the teaching of English to young (16-18) and adult (19+) learners whose first language is not English. By contrast, English as an Additional Language (EAL) is used for pupils who are in primary or secondary school education. This means that if 16-18 provision is delivered by schools it is classified as EAL; whereas when delivered in FES, it is referred to as ESOL.

### **Discrete ESOL**

Provision where ESOL and the development of English language skills forms the main learning aim for learners. This is distinct from language learning which is embedded into another subject, such as plumbing, childcare, or GCSE.

### **ESOL core curriculum**

When the Skills for Life strategy project was conceived in 2001, the National Standards for Adult Literacy were used as the blueprint for ESOL as well. This means that standards designed for learners who have English as their first language are applied to learners who use English as their other language. As a result, aspects in the core curriculum do not reflect ESOL priorities and sequencing of learning well. In turn, the core curriculum underpinning of the ESOL qualifications and exams has had a negative impact on the quality of the exams, and negative washback on the quality of teaching and learning.

## **ESOL levels**

There are five levels of ESOL Skills for Life qualifications. The text below sets out key aspects and brief examples of language use which are typical of these levels:

- Entry 1 is for learners who are at a very basic beginner level, quite often with limited language beyond being able to say their name and “yes/no” and “thank you”.
- At Entry 2, learners understand basic, familiar information and are able to give simple information about their family and the area where they live: “I am married and have two children”.
- At Entry 3, learners have basic language skills but are not consistent in the use of it, e.g. often using the present “I work” instead of the past tense “I worked” to talk about events in the past.
- Level 1 officially equates to Functional Skills English Level 1 and GCSE English Grade 4, yet the language skills of ESOL learners are well below these levels. For example, the understanding and use of conjunctions consists mostly of the words “and”, “but” and “because”. Learners frequently encounter unknown vocabulary which hampers their understanding of spoken English and written text.
- Level 2 officially equates to Functional Skills English Level 2 and GCSE high grades of 4-9, yet the language skills of learners at this level are well below these levels.

The recent Ofqual 2022 study, *Understanding ESOL Skills for Life qualifications*<sup>1</sup>, supports the finding that the language levels from Entry 3 onwards are not in line with equivalent CEFR levels.

## **FE/FES: Further education/further education and skills**

Further education (and skills) is the term used to describe provision for young people and adult learners, i.e., those who are 16-18 or 19+. FES provision consists of further education, sixth form, adult education, independent training, and third sector providers. There are four provision types: education programmes for young people (also known as study programmes), adult learning programmes, apprenticeships, and provision for learners with high needs. Learners attend from pre-Entry to mostly Level 3 provision, e.g. Functional Skills and GCSE English and maths, hairdressing, and construction. People with non-English speaking backgrounds are found on all provision types.

## **FS English: Functional Skills English**

The aim of the Functional Skills English qualifications is to help learners develop essential English which equips them with the practical skills and knowledge required in their working and personal lives. Functional Skills English is designed to develop the skills of learners whose first language is English. It covers three modes: reading, writing and speaking, listening, and communicating. Exams are offered at five levels: Entry 1-3 and Level 1 and 2.

## **IfATE: Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education**

IfATE is a government-funded department which develops, reviews, and updates standards and qualifications for apprenticeships and technical qualifications. The aim is for development to be high quality, well-assessed, and responsive to employer needs.

## **ILR: Individualised Learner Record**

FES providers are required to collect annual Individualised Learner Records for all state-funded adult learners. The ILR records information on learners, their starting points, and learning outcomes. Providers and the ESFA use ILR information on learner outcomes to monitor the quality of the provision and progress against Government targets, as well as to calculate funding earned.

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<sup>1</sup> Ofqual (2022) *Understanding ESOL Skills for Life qualifications* - GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk))

**LSIP: Local Skills Improvement Plan**

An employer-led plan which matches employer needs and training provision, with a view to identifying and maximising employment and training opportunities. Employer representative bodies are responsible for developing the plan for a specified area, drawing on the views of employers and identifying actions that providers can take to deliver technical education and training to meet local, regional, and national skills needs.

**Mainstream provision**

The term used to describe vocational and educational courses which form the main learning aim for learners, e.g. GCSEs, engineering, IT, customer service, etc.

**MCA: Mayoral Combined Authority**

Mayoral combined authorities are legal bodies that enable collaboration across council boundaries on aspects such as transport, housing, and skills provision.

**National Standards for Adult Literacy**

See under ESOL core curriculum.

**Ofqual: Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation**

Ofqual is a non-ministerial department which regulates qualifications, examinations, and assessments in England.

**Ofsted: Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills.**

Government department which inspects schools and providers offering education and skills training.

**Ofsted EIF: Education Inspection Framework**

The Education Inspection Framework sets out Ofsted's inspection principles and the main judgements that inspectors make.

**Skills for Life Strategy**

The Skills for Life Strategy was launched in March 2001, with the aim to improve adult literacy, language (ESOL), and numeracy skills in England.

**Study programmes**

A full-time FES programme of learning offered to 16–18-year-old learners. The content depends on the skills and aspirations of the young learner and can include A levels, GCSE resits in English and maths, ESOL, BTECs, Cambridge Technicals, and T levels.

**Washback effect**

The term “washback effect” refers to the impact of testing, whether positive or negative, on curriculum design, teaching, and learning.



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