

October 2024

Skills England Submission from The Bell Foundation

For further information, please contact:

Alastair Feeney
Policy and Public Affairs Officer
01223 275518
Alastair.feeney@bell-foundation.org.uk

www.bell-foundation.org.uk



Skills England Submission from The Bell Foundation

The Bell Foundation welcomes the Government's intent to bring together the forecasting and delivery of skills in the context of 'Skills for Growth'. The Bell Foundation is a charitable, evidence-led foundation that aims to improve education and employment outcomes for people who speak English as an Additional Language in primary and secondary schools, and further education and skills (FES) provision.

The purpose of this briefing is to highlight the significant contribution that people whose first language is not English can make, to the nation's economic growth, with the right language training. English language proficiency has been forecast as one of the most essential skills for the future labour market, with the National Foundation for Education Research placing it third among the skills which demand the highest increase in utilisation between 2020 and 2035.¹ For the UK to meet the skills needs of the future, it is important that everybody is equipped with the tools to succeed. For those individuals with low proficiency in English – many of whom are UK citizens – English language provision is essential to ensure that everyone can fully participate as part of a skilled workforce.

This briefing makes recommendations that Skills England should consider to incorporate second language speakers in its planning for economic growth.

In this briefing the term “second language speakers” is used to describe people who are legally resident in the UK and/or have settled status, who do not have English as their first language; and who need to learn or improve their English in order to find employment and fully participate in UK society. The term “adult” refers to learners who are 16 or older and who participate in 16-19 study programmes, adult learning, apprenticeships, and provision for learners with high needs.

Many second language speakers already have work-related skills and experience which are of value to the UK economy. They need appropriate English language provision to unlock their capacity to work and to contribute to meet industrial labour targets. Key recommendations in this briefing include the delivery of the English language provision required to get second language speakers into jobs and enhanced data collection across FES provision. A focus on English, mathematics and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in FES is equally important, especially for those who have not yet achieved 4+ GCSE grades.²

¹ 'An analysis of the demand for skills in the labour market in 2035', Dickerson et al. (NFER, 2023).

² English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is the term used to describe discrete language provision for 16-19 and 19+ learners who need to learn English as their second or other language.

1. The Census data: 35% of people with no or low levels of English have UK nationality (2021 Census)

The 2021 Census shows that good English language skills are a significant indicator of employment. Second language speakers who self-assess that they have good English skills have similar employment levels to the UK-born population.³

In the most recent Census over one million people self-reported that they could not speak English well or at all. According to the 2021 Census, 35% of the people who had no, or low levels of English had UK nationality. Of the 5.1 million second language speakers in England and Wales, half had been in this country for ten years or more; and 1.6 million had UK passports.⁴ People with low levels of English are unable to unlock their skills and experience. They are un- or under-employed and hence more likely to be reliant on state benefits.

2. Employers, the labour market and language skills

The recent report *Skills England: Driving growth and widening opportunities* states: “UK employers report that over a third of UK vacancies in 2022 were due to skills-shortages, a relatively large increase from the period 2013 to 2017, where skills-shortage vacancies remained stable at around 22%”.⁵ The Confederation of British Industry reported in October 2023 that 71% of UK businesses had been affected by labour shortages in the previous 12 months; and that this was stifling growth.⁶

Second language speakers with existing skills and experience can be instrumental to filling jobs. However, learners on ESOL provision currently get too little training in language for work and study at the right level. The focus of the current ESOL core curriculum is too narrowly focused on language for family and home which, while of course relevant and important for certain learners, does not assist in upskilling otherwise skilled workers in the relevant language needed to fill skills gaps. As a result, language teaching is too narrow to cater for learners’ and employers’ needs. The case study below illustrates this.

2.1 Recommendations

Skills England and its partners should:

- Extend the focus on basic skills to include a focus on the delivery of ESOL alongside literacy and maths.
- Consult with employers and employer networks on the levels and types of language and communication skills that their workforce needs both now and, in the future, to function effectively in the workplace.
- Work with Ofqual to develop Entry Level to Level 2 ESOL standards which incorporate language for work and further study.
- Work with providers to construct curricula which enable learners to acquire domain-specific language in specific sectors and/or jobs. This should include both technical vocabulary and how to communicate effectively with clients and colleagues, as well as sector-specific preparation for the job application process and employment.
- Pilot the domain-specific provision in a sector such as construction; and evaluate its impact on the development of language skills and employment outcomes. Use lessons

³ Office for National Statistics (2021) *UK Census* <https://www.ons.gov.uk>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ ‘Skills England: Driving growth and widening opportunities’, September 2024

⁶ Employment Trends Survey, Confederation of British Industry, October 2023: <https://www.cbi.org.uk/articles/labour-shortages-remain-a-blocker-for-business-potential/>

learnt to roll out into other sectors with labour shortages, such as health and social care and medicine.

Case study: English in the construction sector

This case study outlines how employers, providers and the workforce can work together to develop workers' language required in the construction workplace.

A provider approached their local college with a request for support with English for a group of drywallers who had problems communicating in English. Their job is to apply plasterboard to ceilings or interior walls of buildings. A discussion with their managers identified workers' ability to follow instructions as a major issue, as well as understanding the sequence in which tasks needed to be carried out. Learners themselves identified as a key priority learning the prepositions of space, such as *above*, *below*, and *underneath*. The group had an 8-week course to teach them the language required, progress was good and both managers and workers commented on how much easier communication became and how the quality of the work improved. The lower-level learners, who had relied on their peers to communicate with English speakers, became more confident and started to use English in their own right.

This is an example of how low-level language users can improve their language skills in a short time because of sound needs analysis and a well-planned curriculum.

Courses for learners with more complex development needs will require a more complex curriculum with coherent planning and building up of skills in a logical fashion. However, the cycle of establishing needs, communicating with employer and employees, planning a coherent curriculum, and evaluating progress is key to successful domain-specific provision.

For example, learners doing a Level 7 management qualification will need to prepare for and deliver a presentation on the basis of a slide presentation. Teachers will need to give feedback on content and the language used on the slides as well as during the oral presentation. This may include feedback on the intelligibility of the spoken language and whether the slides have the appropriate degree of formality for the intended audience. The focus, flow and coherence of the presentation may also need attention as these may differ from culture to culture and it is important for employees to reflect on and understand these principles.

Further information on the process and strategies to improve communication can be found in *Language in the Construction Industry* by the Schellekens Consultancy published by CITB (2004).

3. The economic value of language learning

Because many adult learners do not need access to mainstream FES and higher education courses, such as catering, hospitality, IT and medicine and are already qualified professionals or skilled tradespeople, ESOL provision is a sound financial investment. What these workers need is English language training as well as familiarisation with the world of work and recruitment practices. This is comparatively low cost and can be expected to pay for itself over time once people are in employment and pay taxes. In addition, people in work are less likely to need state benefits. Conversely, second language speakers without sufficient English are likely to remain un- or under-employed.

3.1 Recommendation

- Skills England should include second language speakers as an important source of labour and view ESOL provision as central to upskilling the labour force.

4. The levels of English required to enter employment

The ESOL provision currently on offer does not enable second language speakers to become sufficiently fluent in English to move on: **85% of learners leave ESOL provision with ESOL Entry Level 1-3 qualifications (up to an intermediate level of proficiency in the equivalent Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). The exit levels are far too low to make a successful transition to mainstream vocational and educational provision and employment.**

ESOL course leavers who achieve Entry Level qualifications may be unable to communicate effectively in speaking and writing; for example, understand explanations and follow instructions; or understand language such as for health and safety in the workplace. The sector lacks data on progression but anecdotal evidence indicates that many drop out because they are unable to handle the language load of vocational training, GCSEs and apprenticeships.⁷

The Bell Foundation's recent publication, [The Qualifications and Curriculum Review](#), published in May 2024, provides more information on the need for pedagogic reform and evidence-informed research to underpin the quality of teaching, learning and assessment; ESOL standards and exams; and to improve the capacity of the sector to teach and assess. The FES sector overwhelmingly endorsed the proposals made in this document.

4.1 Recommendation

- Put in place ESOL provision that enables learners to achieve language levels which are high enough for them to find employment and/or progress to further education provision.

5. Careers advice and guidance

Job recruitment can vary considerably from country to country. Second language speakers need specific advice on the recruitment process, what UK employers look for and how they can best market their skills in the UK labour market. The Gatsby Foundation's Good Career Guidance Benchmarks provide a good starting point to create effective advice and guidance to the target group of second language speakers.

The further education sector does not yet have a system where ESOL learners' prior skills and experience are documented. Moreover, many ESOL teachers and managers have experience of recruitment practice in the state but not the private sector. They need training so that they can advise on both.

5.1 Recommendations

- Ensure that providers take active steps to identify learners' professional and work backgrounds, and that they use this information to inform the content of discrete ESOL provision as well as sector-specific course provision.

⁷ For further detail on the delivery of ESOL provision in the FES context, see the *ESOL Qualifications and Curriculum Review*, published by the Bell Foundation in May 2024.

- Ensure that providers offer careers advice and guidance which is tailored to second language speakers, especially where recruitment and job cultures differ considerably from the UK.

6. Data

The data collection on second language speakers attending FES provision is inadequate. The Department for Education's Statistics Unit only provides annual data on participation in discrete adult provision (i.e. on 19+ learners who have ESOL as their main learning aim). They do not collect data on learners on 16-19 study programmes, on vocational training, apprenticeships or non-ESOL adult provision. Yet we know anecdotally that second language speakers make up a substantial proportion of learners across all FES provision types. Many FE colleges, adult education, and apprenticeship providers report that as many as 50% of their enrolled learners do not have English as their first language.

The lack of baseline data on the number of second language speakers enrolled, their retention and achievement has a major negative impact on the monitoring of the provision and its impact on learners' progress and progression. Government departments, Ofsted, FES providers, funding bodies and the combined authorities do not know on what courses second language speakers enrol, whether they stay or leave prematurely, and what their destinations are. For example, as a direct result of the partial data collection, Ofsted is able to inspect and report on adult discrete ESOL provision, but not on 16-19 ESOL study programmes or the support and language training that learners receive on mainstream vocational training courses, apprenticeships and non-ESOL adult learning.

A second area for development is the recording of second language speakers' prior qualifications, skills and experience and the use that providers make of this information to plan work-specific language content. Anecdotal evidence indicates that few providers identify and record learners' work history and skills, such as for medical doctors and nurses, health care workers, engineers, and carpenters and joiners. This is an area that needs to be addressed, considering the high skills levels and qualifications that many second language speakers have.

6.1 Recommendations

Skills England and its partners, such as the Industry Strategy Council, the combined authorities, and the DfE should:

- Introduce a marker in the individualised learning record to collect information across all FES provision types on learners who do not speak English as their first language and who are identified as needing help with their English. The Bell Foundation has developed a separate briefing on this, available here: [The Need for ILR Data on Learners of ESOL in Further Education and Skills - The Bell Foundation \(bell-foundation.org.uk\)](https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/the-need-for-ilr-data-on-learners-of-esol-in-further-education-and-skills)
- Make baseline data available nationally, regionally, and locally, on learner numbers, progress, retention, achievement and progression to other provision and employment; so that Skills England, Government departments, Ofsted and funding bodies can monitor the quality and impact of ESOL provision and put in place sector-specific language training.
- Work with Ofsted to ensure that it inspects and reports on the quality of both discrete ESOL provision and language support across all provision types: 16-19 provision, adult vocational training, apprenticeships, and high needs; and the transition from discrete ESOL provision to mainstream vocational/apprenticeship provision and employment.
- Work with partners to create effective careers advice for ESOL learners.

7. The need for a national approach

In the last two decades, political parties, think tanks and a multitude of reports have called for investment in ESOL and a national strategy.⁸ The reality has been very different. ESOL policy has lacked clarity and direction, particularly in the lack of a work-related language training focus. The funding has been characterised by stop/start initiatives, cuts in funding, and changes to eligibility criteria and multiple funding streams.

While responsibility for the delivery of ESOL is increasingly devolved to local and regional level, there remains a need for an overarching vision, strategy and plan for the future of ESOL provision. The quality of local/regional information and the planning of provision for second language speakers is currently too inconsistent. While some mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) have made real progress, in general local skills improvement plans (LSIPs) and accountability agreements pay scant attention to the collection of data on second language speakers' existing knowledge and skills, and how to upskill them so that they can enter the workforce.

7.1 Recommendations

- Work with partners to design data gathering processes which create consistent and comparable information on second language speakers across local and regional areas.
- Produce and implement an ESOL policy which sets out strategic plans and targets for the delivery of ESOL in terms of work-related content. Cross-government coordination will be key, considering the many departments and organisations involved with aspects such as policy, standards, qualifications, delivery, funding, examinations, teacher training, audit, inspection and lately the MCAs.
- 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.

About The Bell Foundation

This briefing has been developed by The Bell Foundation, a charitable, evidence-led foundation that aims to improve educational, employment and justice outcomes for people who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL). The Foundation collaborates with leading universities and think tanks to develop an evidence base and works with a network of schools to develop and deliver practical solutions to help improve the attainment of pupils who are at risk of underachieving. In 2022, the Foundation supported over 26,000 teachers and educational professionals to support children who use English as an Additional Language through the training of teachers and webinars.

A series of policy briefings about our three programmes, EAL education in schools, ESOL and post-16 English education, and overcoming language barriers in the criminal justice system, is available on our website here: [Policy - The Bell Foundation \(bell-foundation.org.uk\)](https://bell-foundation.org.uk/policy)

⁸ For example, Kone, Z. et. al (2019) *Refugees and the UK Labour Market*. Oxford: Compas. <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2019/refugees-and-the-uk-labour-market>; Pager, A and Stevenson N. (2014) *On Speaking Terms* London: Demos <https://demos.co.uk/research/on-speaking-terms>

