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Briefing Paper: The Need for Individualised Learner Record Data on Learners of ESOL in Further Education and Skills

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The need for individualised learner record data on learners of ESOL¹ in further education and skills provision

Recommendation

The Department for Education (DfE) should add an additional yes/no field marker to the individualised learning record. Its aim would be to identify learners whose first language is not English across the learning journey, from discrete ESOL to vocational/apprenticeships and educational courses, up to A and T levels.

Why is this needed?

- **It would enable providers to plan:** Further education and skills providers anecdotally report that half of their intake are English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) learners. A marker would enable better data and assist providers with planning for this cohort.
- **It would result in accurate national data:** Data are only available on only one type of ESOL provision: discrete 19+. Providers, the DfE, funding bodies, and Ofsted lack data on ESOL enrolments, retention, and outcomes for **all** types of provision (i.e., study programmes, adult provision, and apprenticeships). This information is key to understanding the size and nature of the ESOL cohort and progression across different provision types. It would also inform course provision and help monitor impact at various levels: from sector and provision type to local providers.
- **Providers, mayoral combined authorities (MCAs), and other stakeholders agree with the need for it:** 95% of respondents to The Bell Foundation's recent consultation with sector stakeholders, agreed with the rationale and recommendations on the need for ESOL data collection.
- **It would enable providers to track enrolment and outcome data:** Once the ESOL individualised learner record 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 improvements.
- **Ensuring value for public expenditure:** A response received from an MCA lead in response to our recent consultation on ESOL qualifications expresses this well:

"Allied to our feedback on data currency, we believe it is imperative to demonstrate impact of public investment. To this end, completion of the [individualised learner record data] field should be mandatory. By extension, given central government's commitment towards increasing devolution – demonstrated through the recent Trailblazing Deals with the West Midlands Combined Authority and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority – this requirement should be extended to MCAs as a minimum. Failure to do so would undermine policy coherence and risk lessening the return on investment for the public purse in any national/regional intervention."

¹ The term ESOL stands for English for Speakers of Other Languages and is used to describe adult/16+ learners who have a language other than English as their first language.

1 Underpinning evidence for the need for ESOL data

In response to the outcomes of the [Ofqual report](#) on ESOL exams and the [DfE below-level-2 qualifications review](#), The Bell Foundation carried out their ESOL Qualifications and Curriculum Review, published in May 2024². It makes recommendations for improvement on aspects such as the ESOL core curriculum, language for employment and study, and progression from discrete adult ESOL courses to mainstream vocational and educational provision.

The review findings also demonstrate how little data the DfE, Ofsted, and providers have on the number of learners who speak languages other than English. Apart from DfE-published data on 19+ discrete ESOL provision, no data are collected on ESOL learners on further education provision (e.g., the enrolment, retention, achievement, and progress of learners on 16-18 discrete ESOL and mainstream study programmes and T levels; adult provision such as vocational training, employability provision, and access to higher education provision; apprenticeships; and programmes for learners with high needs). This means that Government departments, funding bodies, providers, and Ofsted do not know what provision ESOL learners attend. They are also not able to review the planning and delivery of programmes or to monitor and inspect their quality of delivery, and how well learners progress to other types of provision and find employment. **In a nutshell, policymakers are unable to consider the skills and needs of people whose first language is not English.**

1.1 The number of ESOL learners on further education and skills provision

The lack of data is a major issue as the number of second language speakers on further education and skills provision is considerable. For example, further education colleges in metropolitan areas have stated that the number of second language speakers on programmes is over 50%. But rural areas often also have higher numbers of second language speakers than one might expect, because of resettlement programmes, accommodation scarcity, and cost in major cities, or because second language speakers work for local employers (e.g., in hospitality, agriculture, or manufacturing).

According to the 2021 Census data for England and Wales, 5.1 million people identified as not having English as their first language: 2.7 million females and 2.4 million males. Of these, 77% of women and 83% of men 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. Importantly, **35% of people who are new to English or at the early stages of English language acquisition are UK nationals**. The Census data are self-reported and the number of adults needing 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 work³.

² <https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/what-we-do/esol-programme/research/qualifications-and-curriculum-review/>

³ Schellekens, P. (2005) *Full on English*. Birmingham & Solihull LSC.

1.2 The potential economic dividend

In May 2025, the Government published the ‘Restoring Control over the Immigration System’ White Paper. Government policy explicitly recognised that people with better English language skills are more likely to gain work and be economically active and that people with better English language skills tend to work in jobs requiring a higher level of skills. Proficiency in English is central to the White Paper’s aim to ensure that individuals can integrate into life in the UK, enter employment, and contribute to society.

The Government indicated its intent to implement a range of measures to increase language requirements for skilled workers and their dependents. The White Paper also contains an explicit commitment to **‘make it easier for those already in the UK ... to access classes for English language lessons’**.

The vast majority of learners currently leave ESOL provision with language skills of a level that is too low to make a successful transition to further education, and to function in society and in employment. We know anecdotally that many are unemployed and underemployed, working in jobs that are substantially below their educational levels, skills, and experience.

The high level of skills and experience possessed by people who do not have English as a first language (including UK nationals, migrants, and refugees) provides a potentially huge economic dividend. But without sufficient English language skills, individuals are unable to unlock their considerable potential. Adult learners attending ESOL provision know this: their priority is language for work and study⁴.

The economic potential of developing proficiency in English has been identified by the current Government in a number of recent policy documents. The November 2024 ‘Get Britain Working’ White Paper classed the 880,000 people who cannot speak English well or at all as a group which ‘could benefit from further developing their essential skills’ in order to gain work alongside individuals lacking in digital skills or with low literacy and numeracy.⁵

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

2 Information by provision type

2.1 Young learners on study programmes

Although the DfE does not collect data on 16-18 ESOL learners, we know anecdotally that many FE colleges have significant numbers of young learners on discrete ESOL provision. For example, the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) commissioned research in 2021 on the suitability of Functional Skills (FS) English for ESOL learners⁶. Over 110 providers responded, and one of the key findings was that learners of ESOL made up more than 60%

⁴ Schellekens, P. (2001) *English as a Barrier to Employment, Education and Training*. Sheffield, DWP 2001.

⁵ The figure of 880,000 people referenced in the ‘Get Britain Working’ White Paper counts only individuals who self-identify in the Census as not being able to speak English well. 161,000 people are also recorded in the Census as being unable to speak English at all.

⁶ Participation of ESOL learners on Functional Skills (FS) English courses

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. The ETF responses confirmed that FS English did not align at all well with the needs of ESOL learners. The lack of data, however, allows the suitability of provision for second language speakers to go unquestioned.

Using secondary and primary school data⁷ as a proxy can provide an indication of the learner flow into post-16 provision. This is on the basis that many learners of ESOL transfer to FE provision, not least because they have access to discrete ESOL provision.

	Primary school	Secondary school
2016-18	21%	17%
2021/22	21%	17.5%
2022/23	22%	18%

The table above shows that the number of EAL primary and secondary pupils can be expected to rise for the foreseeable future. This is an exploratory estimate, but further education and skills provision needs to have actual rather than proxy data on young learners' entry to its programmes so that their progress and progression to mainstream provision can be monitored and improvement measures can be put in place if necessary.

The need for development across the range of language skills

The sector has focused primarily on the needs of beginner learners of English. However, a second category also deserves attention: pupils/learners who may not be recent arrivals, are ostensibly fluent in English but struggle with subject-specific language and course content.

Jim Cummins' research clarifies language development of young learners by identifying two major stages of second language acquisition: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)⁸. BICS refers to learners' ability to talk face-to-face about familiar objects, events, and experiences. CALP, by contrast, describes the oral and written subject-specific language required in secondary education (e.g., for subjects such as geography, history, maths, and engineering). Aspects such as the understanding and use of complex and formal language and vocabulary, often hold these learners back and affect achievement negatively. According to Cummins, BICS can take one to two years of language learning to reach the level needed, whereas CALP can take up to seven years with English language support.

The implication of Cummins' findings is that learners who do not have English as their first language need to be assessed, as they may need language teaching and support. This applies right up to A and T levels, and for apprentices up to Level 7 standard.

2.2 Apprenticeships

There is no information on the number of second language speakers on apprenticeships, yet they can be found across all standards (e.g., hotels and catering, engineering, and management). Anecdotal evidence suggests that on standards such as health and social care, most apprentices do not have English as their first language. Although the accurate use of language is critical (e.g., to provide medication, understand spoken and written instructions, and produce logs of activity), in many cases learners do not get the language teaching that they need to be safe practitioners.

⁷ DfE data tables for young learners: [Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18 and A level and other 16 to 18 results](#) Last accessed 26 Oct 2023.

⁸ Cummins, J (1981) 'Empirical and theoretical underpinnings of bilingual education', *Journal of Education* 163-1

Cummins, J (2000) *Language, power and pedagogy*, Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters

2.3 Adult provision

As previously stated, there are no data available on second language speakers who take employability and vocational courses. Data are only collected on ESOL 19+ provision.

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.

