The Bell Foundation

**Position Paper:**

# Digital Learning Technologies for ESOL Learners

**Research**
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## Introduction

The question of how digital technologies can best support English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners arises at a crucial moment in adult education policy reform, specifically as the Government is currently undertaking a review of ESOL qualifications and provision.

The May 2025 *Restoring Control over the Immigration System* Home Office paper and the April 2026 *Protecting What Matters* strategy produced by the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) both highlighted the importance of ESOL for integration. The respective papers commit to making it easier for people already in the UK to access English classes, and to review English language provision with a focus on digital delivery. While recognising the foundational importance of English language proficiency for social cohesion and economic participation, these statements of intent are situated against a backdrop of decimated funding, with expenditure on classroom-based adult education having fallen by two-thirds, from £5.3 billion in the early 2000s to £1.8 billion in 2024/25 (ISF, 2025). This decline is compounded by a further 6 per cent cut in 2025/26, while demand for ESOL education has continued to rise by 17% since 2021 (DfE, 2026).

The main consequence of this misalignment between policy intent and actual resourcing is that current provision is not reaching many of those who need it. For learners in some areas, sufficient or suitable ESOL provision is often out of reach, with college courses often full, having long waiting lists and limited enrolment dates throughout the year, which leave those who arrive in-year facing long periods out of education (Ashlee, 2024). Recent changes in the funding landscape driven by devolution have compounded and accelerated reductions in ESOL funding in some regions. A case in point is Greater Lincolnshire's proposed shift in funding priorities, which will defund general ESOL provision from August 2027. The Government has responded to these planned cuts with a positive statement for ESOL provision with the Skills Minister Baroness Smith outlining an ambition to 'ensure [ESOL] is available everywhere' (Camden, 2026).

It is in this context of escalating demand, diminishing resources, and a policy environment that mandates integration whilst defunding the means to achieve it that digital technologies have come to appear as an attractive solution. This is also taking place precisely at a time of rapid technological advancements in education, when the use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping language learning by making it more accessible and personalised. One example that illustrates this type of thinking is the suggestion by Kent County Council's leader that free language apps could serve as a primary substitute for professional ESOL teaching.

In this paper we set out why a more nuanced approach – that is pedagogically-informed, and thought-out – is needed for the use of digital tools to teach ESOL to adult learners. The purpose of the paper is to present an evidence-informed approach to frame The Bell Foundation's roundtable discussion focused on examining the role of digital tools, including AI, in ESOL provision. The paper will also look at the capabilities and potential of digital tools for supporting English language learning in the context of adult education, and what is genuinely gained and may be lost when digital tools are positioned as a substitute rather

than a supplement to college and community ESOL classes. Detailed analysis of specific tools is beyond the scope of this position paper.

## Educational technologies in the context of ESOL

This section identifies four fundamental factors for policymakers, leaders, and practitioners to integrate digital technologies into ESOL design and analyses the role of technology through the lens of these dimensions.

### 1. The exceptional heterogeneity of ESOL learners

ESOL learners constitute one of the most diverse cohorts of learners within adult education, and their capacity to engage with digital provision varies widely. There is no single 'typical ESOL learner.' Instead, learners differ substantially across multiple, intersecting dimensions (Cooke and Simpson, 2008), including:

- English proficiency (from pre-entry to Level 2 and beyond);
- literacy in their primary language;
- educational history (ranging from no formal or interrupted schooling to postgraduate qualifications);
- migration route (such as refugees, those on family visas: partner, workers, or international students);
- length of residence in the UK; settlement intentions (temporary versus permanent);
- employment history and current labour market status;
- socio-economic security;
- digital literacy and access to devices;
- caring responsibilities;
- experience of trauma or ongoing health needs;
- learning goals (for example, integration, employment, qualifications, or wellbeing).

These differences have significant implications for participation in ESOL provision either supported or mediated via digital learning technologies, including AI. For example, online learning necessitates digital literacy, confidence, and sufficient English language skills to be able to access learning digitally. Learners also require access to a device and data to be able to attend online classes (Cox, Phipps and Hirsu, 2022).

Some learners are highly-educated professionals with strong literacy in their primary language (and often in additional languages), regular access to computers, and confidence using online platforms. For these individuals, remote or blended digital learning can increase flexibility and access, offering convenience and, in some cases, faster progression (OECD, 2025; Jisc, 2025).

By contrast, other learners may have experienced disrupted or minimal education, possess limited literacy in any language, and have little or no prior experience of digital tools such as keyboards, passwords, or virtual classrooms. For these learners, digital learning may be inaccessible and can introduce new barriers or exacerbate existing forms of exclusion unless substantial, ongoing support is provided (Learning and Work Institute, 2021).

Access to technology is also uneven. Many ESOL learners experience barriers and vulnerabilities that impact their digital inclusion. For example, they may not have access to a device that connects to the internet, or to an internet connection (Good Things Foundation, n.d.). Many are smartphone-only users, attempting to complete reading, writing, or form-filling tasks on small screens with limited data allowances. While some learners benefit from translation apps and AI-enabled language support, others may be confused or misled by inaccurate or inappropriate automated assistance, particularly at beginner levels of language and digital literacy (UNESCO, 2023).

Adult learners' day-to-day circumstances further shape their ability to engage. For example, a settled office worker may be able to study online in a quiet home environment, whereas a care worker on rotating shifts, a parent with childcare responsibilities, or an asylum seeker living in shared accommodation may have neither predictable study time nor suitable space (Lewis et al., 2020).

However, the case for online provision in these contexts is not without foundation. A 2025 Home Office evaluation of the STEP Ahead pilot, a twelve-week digital English and employment support programme for marginalised groups of refugees found that online ESOL provision can successfully engage adult learners who face genuine barriers to attending in person – including those with childcare or caring responsibilities, those in remote locations, and those moving between temporary accommodation. By removing travel and childcare barriers and offering continuity for learners facing housing insecurity or limited mobility, digital provision can reach people that face-to-face models may not.

However, the same evaluation offers an important corrective to any assumption that online provision is a straightforwardly equitable solution. Participation and progress were significantly constrained by participants' lack or low digital literacy, limited access to suitable digital devices, poor connectivity and other technical issues – barriers that were most acute for learners who were new to English and those without literacy in their primary language. For example, despite some participants being given laptops, most attended ESOL classes on their phone, which limited their engagement. Their poor digital literacy also created multiple operational barriers, from being unable to turn their camera on during classes, to being unable to use the laptops provided and to access resources provided by teachers. Participants asked for more support on IT issues, as they sometimes struggled to navigate tasks both during and outside classes, and there were accounts of difficulty accessing lessons when their internet connection was down.

The result was a digital attainment gap: outcomes and progress were different based on the starting English language proficiency and digital skills of the participants. Learners at levels B1 and A2 reported making greater progress compared with A1 and A0 students (48% and 42%, versus 28% and 23%, respectively). Likewise, learners who arrived with pre-existing digital skills made substantially more progress, while those most in need faced exclusion from the very provision designed to support them (43% versus 25% respectively).

In addition, service providers struggled with workload, especially in the early stages, because they needed to assist participants in how to use digital devices.

The evaluation's recommendations are instructive: blended models[1] incorporating in-person sessions at the start and end of programmes; structured pre-course and ongoing digital literacy support; accessible verbal guidance for learners with low literacy; and investment in devices and stable connectivity for all participants. **These are not minor enhancements – they are the preconditions for online provision to function equitably at all.**

Taken together, these factors underline why **digital ESOL provision cannot be designed as a one size fits all solution or treated as a universal substitute for face-to-face learning. Effective policy and practice require a flexible and responsive mix of in-person, blended, and supported online models, carefully matched to learners' literacy and proficiency in English levels, digital confidence, living conditions, and goals for learning English.**

## 2. Goals for learning English

Broadly speaking, for many ESOL learners who have settled in the UK, language learning is not only about employment or formal study; it is also central to integration, empowering them to develop social networks, access services independently, support their children, and feel a sense of belonging in their local community and new country of residence.

Those intending to remain permanently often need opportunities to build confidence in everyday interaction, understand healthcare, civic systems and schools, form friendships beyond their own language group, and participate fully in neighbourhood life. For these learners, face-to-face community classes, conversation groups, family learning, volunteering-linked provision, and trusted local settings can be especially valuable because they provide both language development and social integration, including the kind of exposure to local accents and informal registers that generic digital platforms with tutors based in different parts of the world cannot always fully replicate.

By contrast, learners who are in work may have different priorities. While they are likely to also seek a degree of cultural integration or long-term community connection, many are often more focused on immediate functional English for employment, workplace communication, tenancy matters, and day-to-day transactions, rather than deeper long-term settlement needs.

A 2025 report that explores the barriers that prevent migrant and refugee working adults in work in London from improving their English language skills (High Trees and The Bell Foundation, 2025) found that accessing ESOL is difficult for many of them, as they cannot attend lessons due to their working hours and changing shift patterns. Without support, people with lower levels of English language proficiency find various tasks at work difficult and need flexible support to learn English.

The report makes clear that standard face-to-face provision – fixed-timetable, weekday, morning/afternoon classes – is structurally misaligned with the lives of working ESOL learners. ESOL providers reported trying to accommodate working learners by adapting

[1] A blended model is an approach that combines digital/online tools with in-person (face-to-face) support.

timetables, blending in-person and online provision, and offering self-study resources as workarounds, though these are described as adaptive responses to constraint rather than systematically designed alternatives. Although online provision could support people in work with long hours and other commitments to learn more flexibly, both ESOL providers and employers in the study pointed out that literacy and digital skills could be a barrier for a significant proportion of learners, and this approach would not be as accessible as in-person provision. Providers highlighted that they are constrained by attendance and participation thresholds required by funders and commissioners in order to claim funding.

The report does not make strong claims about the effectiveness of online-only provision for this group. Its implication is rather that online or digital elements are most useful when embedded within a wider model – supporting access outside class hours – than as a standalone replacement for face-to-face teaching. It suggests that face-to-face delivery needs to move to where learners are – into workplaces and community settings – and operating on more flexible scheduling terms, including evenings and weekends, rather than expecting learners to come to providers during standard hours. It also points to prior pilots which provided workplace-embedded, face-to-face provision as a viable alternative model. The report's main recommendation is to develop flexible and bespoke models of ESOL delivery, co-designed with learners and employers, with ESOL commissioners and policymakers needing to recognise barriers to access so that providers have greater capacity to respond.

Some workers and professionals may already have strong professional or vocational qualifications and a competent level of proficiency in English, only requiring sector-specific English or flexible classes that fit around work schedules. For this group, online, evening, workplace-based or intensive short courses may be highly effective.

That said, in practice, these two distinct goals for learning ESOL – learning for permanent settlement and for work purposes (however short or long the employment period might be) – can sometimes blur, as many settlement learners do prioritise employment English. This is why flexible provision matters: a range of pathways or types of ESOL courses are needed to address learners' specific goals and purposes for learning English as well as their diverse starting points, using distinct delivery methods and tools, and with options around arrangements for participation.

Challenges emerge, however, when rising demand collides with shrinking budgets. We hear firsthand the agonising choices that devolved authorities and college leaders face – choices that lead to difficult and often imperfect compromises. Financial pressure often leads to a situation where one type of provision is stripped back, often sacrificing the flexible, lifelong learning routes that most effectively support the most vulnerable adults. An example would be Strategic Authorities and providers focusing on provision leading to measurable outcomes, which can be demonstrated through accredited courses leading to formal ESOL and Functional Skills English qualifications, deprioritising non-accredited provision, which is often delivered face-to-face in community settings. Another example is when resource-intensive face-to-face provision is scaled back to subsidise an expanded digital-first model.

While shifting to online platforms can appear to offer broader reach, at times the shift can be motivated by cutting costs rather than by pedagogical considerations. In this trade-off, the

physical classrooms and personalised support that many learners depend on are sidelined, leaving those with the greatest barriers to learning on the wrong side of a widening participation gap and with less satisfactory outcomes, as shown by the STEP Ahead pilot evaluation. This leaves the sector managing a zero-sum game, where the success of one learner group is bought at the direct expense of another's opportunity to progress.

The 2025 Home Office evaluation makes clear that digital provision without adequate infrastructure and literacy support does not reduce the gap between those with higher digital skills and levels of proficiency in English, and those who experience barriers to digital provision and who are new to English – it widens it. A "one size fits all" approach does not apply to ESOL, and the Government should be cautious of adopting a mass roll out of a digital approach with the idea that it will address demand and ESOL learners' needs. A remote, transactional course may meet the needs of a time-limited worker but do little for a parent or refugee seeking connection and long-term integration. Equally, a slow-paced community model may not suit a skilled worker needing rapid occupational language progression.

**Effective ESOL policy requires genuinely differentiated pathways: some learners need efficient functional provision or targeted digital solutions that address their need to learn highly specialised technical vocabulary; others need socially rich, place-based provision that supports building a life in the UK over time. The evidence does not support a hierarchy between these models – it supports resourcing both adequately, and designing each with the specific learner in mind.**

Also, when designing online courses and resources, it is important to consider the need for face-to-face components in the blend to ensure that those learners most at risk of digital exclusion are given the support they need to participate and thrive.

### 3. The role of the physical and social contexts

Before any digital technology can be meaningfully deployed in ESOL provision, the conditions that make learning possible must first be met. For many ESOL learners in Further Education and Skills (FES) settings, access to education is inseparable from access to basic material resources. Support staff and tutors in college and community settings frequently act as first-responders to needs that sit well below the threshold of language learning, such as signposting learners to food banks, facilitating access to devices and mobile data through loan or grant schemes, helping to arrange bus passes or transport support, assisting with legal/asylum documentation, and responding to safeguarding concerns, amongst others.

In terms of meeting learners' needs, this is not peripheral pastoral activity — it is the educational mission at its most foundational level. A learner who is food insecure, digitally excluded, or unable to physically reach the college or community centre is not in a position to engage with learning of any kind, however free, accessible or sophisticated. The wraparound role of the FES setting and its ESOL practitioners therefore extends far beyond pedagogy; it constitutes a form of *social safety net* for some of the most marginalised members of local communities.

This structural role is complemented by the tutor's function as *a linguistic and socio-cultural mediator* – a role that digital platforms, however well-designed, cannot straightforwardly replicate. In the context of teaching English to adults who have made their homes in the UK, wish to integrate into their local communities, access services, and pursue education and employment opportunities, learning ESOL must be understood not merely as instruction in an abstract global language, or a disembodied mental phenomenon largely detached from the social context that the person inhabits, but as a socially situated activity (Richardson and Thornbury, 2016). In other words, in this context, learning English means induction leading to full integration into *a specific local variety*, with its own words and turns of phrase, distinct phonological patterns (sounds) and grammatical features. English as spoken in Bradford, for instance, differs significantly from Standard Southern British English, let alone from the variety modelled in internationally-produced learning materials or taught by tutors located outside the United Kingdom.

This raises a question that deserves serious scrutiny in any discussion of digitally-mediated ESOL provision: does an online tutor based, say, in New Zealand – who may be highly qualified and communicatively effective in English – possess the contextual knowledge needed to socialise a learner into the socio-cultural norms, communicative practices, and local linguistic conventions of their new community? This question is not one of professional competence in the abstract, but of situated expertise, and more importantly, about systemic reliance on decontextualised provision.

Language learning in a settlement context is not merely about acquiring grammar and vocabulary; it is about belonging, participation, and intelligibility situated within – and connected with – a particular place. As Cox, Phipps, and Hirsu argue,

> *This physical context is key to integration, particularly during the initial stages of arrival when the context is often one of disorientation, loss and recovery from trauma.*
>
> Cox, Phipps, and Hirsu (2022: 02)

While their study offers insights from refugee women's experiences during the pandemic, it nevertheless provides useful guidance for language education more broadly, conceptualising ESOL as a restorative practice that repairs disrupted relationships – to land, community, self, and language – and that ensures that newly arrived people who may feel out of place live experiences that make them 'be(come) of the place,' rather than as a purely instrumental route to integration (ibid).

Vulnerability to decontextualised English, however, is not limited to beginners but affects even confident speakers newly arrived in unfamiliar speech communities. Piller et al. (2024) highlight that many individuals who have learnt English before migrating – and can speak it fluently – often experience that the English they bring with them is quite different from the English they encounter. The formal, test-oriented English many learners had acquired prior

to arrival frequently proves inadequate for the realities of everyday interaction. Piller et al.'s findings show that migrants who arrived with strong paper qualifications found themselves positioned at the margins of intelligibility, with their linguistic competence rendered invisible by institutional and social expectations they had not been prepared for. Whilst the empirical base for this work is Australian, the dynamics it describes – the gap between the English previously learnt and the English of the workplace, the street, and the neighbourhood – are directly applicable to the UK context and to the specific challenges facing ESOL learners in distinctive local speech communities.

While it could be argued that this type of localised knowledge can be acquired over time through immersion, community-based ESOL classes that deliberately 'bring the outside in' – drawing on local texts, interlocutors, and cultural reference points – can provide effective and reassuring shortcuts to participation. This is not incidental enrichment. For learners navigating an unfamiliar city or town while separated from established social networks, it may be the primary mechanism through which a sense of belonging begins to form. Piller et al. (ibid) are clear that social isolation compounds linguistic disadvantage: when family and friends have been left behind, the classroom and the college or community centre become critical sites of social connection, not simply a venue for language learning; for many ESOL learners, it is one of the few places where belonging – tentative, provisional, but real – begins.

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**This dimension of ESOL provision is precisely what purely asynchronous, *app-based digital learning cannot successfully supply if positioned as a replacement rather than a supplement or support.* The concept of Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) – self-directed, self-guided engagement with English through digital devices and online resources outside formal learning contexts (Lee, 2019) – has attracted growing interest as an alternative 'site' to classroom learning. Tools such as Duolingo exemplify this mode: accessible, gamified, available at any hour, and requiring no social presence. A range of benefits for learners engaging with IDLE powered by AI-assisted tools have been identified (Crompton, 2024; Lee, 2026). Because learning takes place in a low-stakes environment without formal assessment, learners often experience lower levels of anxiety; and they are able to engage with content they actually enjoy (e.g., social media, gaming, or streaming platforms), which fosters motivation.**

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It is claimed that IDLE promotes autonomy, allowing learners to take control of their own learning pace, style, and content. In addition, one of the most significant advantages of informal digital engagement for ESOL learners is that it exposes them to everyday expressions, slang and a range of accents and regional varieties rather than the simplified or idealised language often found in textbooks. Research suggests that activities such as watching videos, listening to podcasts or following social media content can build vocabulary naturally and incidentally, while participation – for example, by joining online discussions, posting comments or using messaging platforms – help learners consolidate and practise the language they have encountered and supports them in developing an understanding of different cultures and ways of communicating. Online communities, such as interest-based

forums, gaming platforms or social networks offer spaces where English functions as a tool for connection and participation rather than simply a subject to be studied.

But IDLE, by definition, cannot replicate the experience of physically sitting with others who are navigating similar transitions, of being known by a tutor who understands both the learner's linguistic starting point and their social circumstances, or of building the friendships and informal support networks that further education colleges, at their best, make possible. Nor is it a universally accessible or uniformly beneficial solution.

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**The role of digital learning technologies in *extending* learning beyond the formal ESOL classroom is an important finding in Hulford Wood's 2024 research on the use of mobile phones for motivating and promoting language learning outside the classroom. The study found that mobile phone-supported blended learning can meaningfully amplify ESOL learning beyond the classroom, directly addressing chronic shortages in guided learning hours. For adult ESOL learners constrained by caring responsibilities, work and limited classroom hours, mobile blended learning functioned as a practical compensatory mechanism, enabling continued practice and exposure to English in everyday contexts.**

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However, Hulford Wood concluded that her initial ambitions to prove the effectiveness or acceleration of learning through mobile technologies needed to be reconsidered, and its impact reframed in terms of *extending and promoting learning* rather than speeding progress, which better reflected learners' lived realities. She also argued that pedagogical design is critical to success, with effective mobile blended learning depending on clear teacher guidance and ongoing supervision, user-friendly digital platforms, and purposeful integration with classroom teaching rather than standalone digital tasks. These elements ensured that mobile learning complemented, rather than replaced, formal teaching.

Mobile blended learning is a viable and context sensitive strategy for extending ESOL learning beyond the classroom, provided it is pedagogically guided, well designed, and embedded in teacher-learner relationships. Its value lies not in accelerating learning, but in making learning possible where time and access are constrained. As AI-powered tools increasingly enter this space, the design principles identified by Hulford Wood – pedagogical guidance, teacher oversight, and purposeful integration – offer a critical framework for evaluating whether emerging technologies genuinely serve ESOL learners or simply add another layer of inaccessible complexity.

## 4. Levels of proficiency in English and digital technologies

Overall, there is reasonable evidence that digital technologies can support English language learning across proficiency levels, but the nature, degree and conditions of benefit vary significantly. The assumption that digital provision is equally effective regardless of starting point is not well supported by the available evidence base. It should be noted, however, that much of the published research on technology-enhanced language learning focuses on

English as a Foreign Language contexts (for example, university students learning English abroad), learners who are highly proficient in English, or general adult literacy rather than ESOL in community and FE settings in the UK. There is a significant lack of robust, large-scale, UK-specific empirical studies on EdTech effectiveness disaggregated by ESOL proficiency level.

### Learners at Pre-Entry and Entry Levels 1 and 2

Several factors limit benefit at these proficiency levels:

- For many ESOL learners at Pre-Entry and the two lowest Entry levels – particularly for those in vulnerable groups like refugees, asylum seekers, and isolated parents – learning a new language relies heavily on trust, personal connection, and psychological safety. Research on trauma-informed ESOL pedagogy – including Palanac (2022) and Palanac et al. (2023) – indicates that for learners at lower levels who have experienced forced displacement, the relational and psychosocial dimensions of face-to-face provision are integral to learning. Reducing in-person contact risks disengagement and can impede progression for this cohort.
- Most EdTech platforms – including widely used tools such as Google Translate, Duolingo, and AI writing assistants – presuppose a working literacy level and operate primarily through the medium of written English. This disadvantages learners who are not yet reading in English, or who have basic literacy in their primary language.
- Many Pre-Entry and Entry 1 learners face compounded barriers: limited or no prior experience of using digital devices, low or no L1 literacy in some cases, and unfamiliarity with conventions of screen-based interaction. For these learners, the cognitive load of operating a device can compete directly with the cognitive load of English language learning.

These concerns are borne out by recent empirical research in English FE settings. Nash (2025) identifies a clear developmental dimension to the use of digital learning technologies (DLT) in ESOL: learners at lower proficiency levels face particular difficulty engaging with digital tools before they have acquired basic communicative language skills, suggesting that DLT is more appropriately introduced progressively rather than uniformly across all levels.

The evidence is more positive for targeted, well-scaffolded use at these levels, for example, audio and video resources that support listening and speaking with an established evidence base for accessibility and without requiring reading (e.g. BBC Learning English); apps designed specifically for beginner-literacy or beginner ESOL learners (although few have robust independent evaluation); digital tools used alongside a teacher in a blended model, rather than as standalone provision; and mobile-based tools for home practice between classes, where the teacher has introduced and contextualised them (Pegrum, 2014), although this finding on mobile-assisted language learning is not ESOL-specific.

### Learners at Entry Level 3, and Levels 1 and 2

Evidence of benefit is stronger at these levels of proficiency in English, provided learners typically have sufficient literacy and digital familiarity to engage with platforms more independently. However, even at these levels, effectiveness depends heavily on teacher

mediation and existing learners' digital skills, and it is well-documented that AI-generated feedback on writing has known limitations for learner language (Liang et al., 2023).

Nash (op. cit.) found that the use of digital learning technologies carries a risk of exclusion even for higher-level learners when it is mandated as a requirement rather than deployed as a considered pedagogical resource, a distinction that current local funding frameworks do not always make. Compounding this, Nash further notes that funding policies which reduce curriculum time for ESOL – already a pressure across the FE sector – have a cascading negative effect on both language progression and meaningful DLT integration, since effective use of digital tools requires sufficient tuition time to introduce, scaffold, and contextualise them.

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**Taken together, these findings point toward the need for a more flexible, staged approach to digital learning technologies in ESOL provision, one that is sensitive to proficiency level and the pedagogical conditions under which technology can genuinely support rather than impede learning.**

**Digital and AI technologies offer meaningful learning support across ESOL proficiency levels, but benefits are neither uniform nor automatic. At Pre-Entry and Entry 1 levels, digital tools carry significant risks of exclusion unless carefully scaffolded by trained practitioners and combined with face-to-face provision. The evidence base is stronger for learners at Entry 3 and above who have foundational digital literacy.**

**Effective policy must resist one-size-fits-all digital solutions and instead fund teacher-mediated approaches that match technology use to learner need, proficiency and context. Investment in UK-specific research disaggregated by proficiency level is urgently needed.**

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## Emerging and anticipated developments - opportunities and risks

Examination of current uses of digital technologies suggests that ESOL may be one of the areas where AI could be genuinely useful if managed carefully, but the human relationship with a trusted tutor remains irreplaceable. This section focuses on the latest developments in AI, their potential and risks for ESOL learners.

### The rise of Agentic AI

Agentic AI — systems capable of planning, acting and working through a series of steps on their own, making decisions and adapting along the way without needing a human to direct each stage — represents a qualitatively different proposition from generative tools such as basic chatbots. Rather than responding to individual prompts, agentic systems can proactively adapt to learner progress, coordinate actions across platforms, and operate with limited human input over time. In ESOL contexts, the distinction between agentic AI and

basic generative tools matters, as language learning benefits from repetition, adaptive feedback, and continuity between sessions, all of which agentic systems are, in principle, well-placed to support.

## Potential benefits

### Learners

The most frequently cited opportunity is personalised learning at scale. An agentic system could assess a learner's current proficiency across the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing; and identify specific gaps, generate targeted practice materials, and adjust difficulty progressively without requiring constant teacher input. This is particularly relevant to adult ESOL cohorts, which are characterised by fragmented attendance, highly mixed levels within a single class, and widely varying goals ranging from employment and qualifications to parenting, citizenship, and community integration.

Agentic tools could also support adult ESOL learners in navigating real-world language tasks – for example, completing job applications, understanding tenancy agreements, preparing for assessments – working collaboratively with them through a series of attempts, offering feedback at each stage, and helping them improve progressively until they have genuinely developed their understanding, rather than generating a single piece of work and moving on.

A further opportunity lies in out-of-classroom continuity. Mobile-accessible agentic tools could provide meaningful practice between sessions with multilingual scaffolding, such as tools offering translation and explanation capabilities.

Roleplay and simulation scenarios – such as mock GP appointments, job interviews, school meetings, and tenancy conversations, amongst others – are also well suited to agentic delivery, providing low-stakes rehearsal of high-stakes situations that many ESOL learners face.

### Practitioners and providers

For ESOL practitioners, agentic systems could handle first drafts of initial assessments, and adapted resources across multiple levels simultaneously, freeing tutors for the relational and pedagogical work that cannot be automated. For less experienced or non-specialist staff – a real concern given documented ESOL teacher shortages (DfE, 2026) – AI-assisted material development and iterative feedback tools could provide meaningful in-role support.
At provider level, agentic tools could support curriculum mapping by analysing cohort data, local labour market intelligence, and learner goals, helping managers align provision more responsively to need.

## Significant risks

The opportunities afforded by the use of agentic AI must be carefully weighed against risks that are acute for this particular group.

First, is their algorithmic bias in assessment: where agentic systems evaluate spoken or written English, they risk systematically disadvantaging learners whose English diverges from Standard British English norms embedded in training data – a concern with equity implications for communities whose varieties of English are least represented (Weber-Wulff et al., 2023; Liang et al., 2023)

Second, and perhaps most urgent in the current funding climate, is the substitution risk. Efficiency gains from agentic AI may be used to justify reducing qualified ESOL staffing. Given the evidence that Entry-level learners in particular require sustained human support – and Nash's (op. cit.) finding that DLT becomes exclusionary when mandated rather than pedagogically integrated – this risk is real.

Third, digital access and literacy barriers remain significant. Agentic tools are typically more complex to navigate than simpler applications (for example, basic chatbots), yet many ESOL learners have limited digital literacy, restricted data allowances, or no personal device beyond a smartphone. Nash (op. cit.) identifies smartphone dependency as a specific driver of exclusion in FE ESOL digital provision.

Fourth, there is a risk of dependency and deskilling – both for learners, where over-reliance on AI may reduce the productive struggle that is essential to language learning; and for practitioners, where excessive delegation to AI risks eroding specialist pedagogical judgement over time.

Finally, data sensitivity is a particularly critical concern in ESOL. Many learners have complex immigration, legal or safeguarding situations. Agentic systems that log interactions, infer demographics or share data with third parties pose real risks that this population may not be equipped to navigate or meaningfully consent to.

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**The right model for agentic AI deployment in ESOL provision is human-led and AI-assisted, not AI-led. ESOL tutors remain central and the technology should be used to extend reach, reduce administrative burden, and provide practice continuity.**
**Realising this model requires:**

- **disaggregated outcome data by primary language, prior education, and digital access so that equity gaps remain visible;**
- **human oversight built into any deployment;**
- **digital skills integration within ESOL delivery;**
- **explicit funding protection to ensure that AI adoption serves as a pedagogical enhancement rather than a justification for further staffing cuts to an already severely underfunded sector.**

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## Conclusion

The evidence reviewed in this paper points to a clear but conditional case for digital and AI-assisted technologies in ESOL provision. Used well, and under the right conditions – to supplement, rather than replace tutors; driven by evidence-informed pedagogical principles and practices; designed to close, rather than widen the participation gap – such tools have potential to expand access, personalise learning pathways, reduce practitioner workload, and extend meaningful practice beyond the constraints of chronically underfunded contact hours. These are not trivial gains in a sector where waiting lists are long, class sizes are large, and the learners are among the most complex and most underserved in the education system.

Yet despite the pace of AI innovation, the empirical base for its impact on adult language learning remains in its initial stages. Current insights from early adopters are largely exploratory and frequently domain-specific. The risk of acting on incomplete evidence is real, but so is the risk of inaction. What is needed is a commitment to building the evidence base: rigorous, peer-reviewed evaluation embedded in adoption from the outset.

The paper has identified structural conditions without which digital and AI tools cannot function equitably in ESOL contexts. Material preconditions – device access, connectivity, digital literacy, adequate contact hours, and the wraparound pastoral support that characterises effective FES provision – must be in place before any technology can deliver its claimed benefits. Where these preconditions are absent, digital provision does not narrow participation gaps – it widens them. These gaps, however, are not a technical problem; they are the product of systemic inequalities that require structural responses.

The human dimension of ESOL provision must also be protected explicitly in any policy framework. The evidence on situated language learning, social integration, trauma-informed pedagogy, and the irreplaceable role of the trusted practitioner – as linguistic mediator, socio-cultural guide, safeguarding first-responder, and consistent human presence – makes clear that *digital tools are supplements to this relationship, not substitutes for it*. The greatest risk in the current funding environment is not that technology will fail ESOL learners, but that its efficiency gains will be used to justify reducing the qualified human workforce on which effective provision depends. Policy must name and prevent this substitution explicitly.

With these conditions in mind, The Bell Foundation makes the following recommendations:

1. Government and sector bodies should adopt a balanced strategy that actively incentivises innovation while requiring rigorous evaluation as a condition of funded adoption. Disaggregated outcome data – broken down by proficiency level, primary language, digital access, and prior education – should become a standard expectation for any digital programmes operating in ESOL contexts.
2. Existing government guidance on the safe and responsible use of AI provides a necessary but insufficient foundation. Without specific benchmarks for ESOL learning outcomes and learner progression, digital learning technologies integration risks being assessed on efficiency rather than pedagogical impact.

Taken together, these recommendations do not ask the sector to choose between innovation and equity. They ask that both be pursued deliberately, with the most marginalised learners – those at Pre-Entry and Entry level, those with low digital literacy, and those navigating trauma, insecure housing and complex legal situations – kept visibly at the centre of every decision.

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**ESOL may indeed be one of the areas where thoughtfully implemented digital technologies can make a genuine difference. But that difference will only be realised if the human relationships and the material conditions are treated as preconditions for technology, not as luxuries that technology might eventually replace**.

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